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Written in memory and thanksgiving of my parents Jim & Mary  
Hurley

To my dear friend Joy Manning without whose encouragement,  
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To my sister and brothers thank you for 'being', shared experiences  
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thank you for sharing the grief that is Maynooth, my life is better for  
knowing you.

*'If I defer the grief I diminish the gift'* The Pomegranate, Boland (1994)

## **Untangled**

***An auto-ethnographic exploration of my stages  
of life which resulted in an unravelling of  
identity and return to wholeness***

Dear 35 year old me,

It was possible to keep a face on it for a while. The family image and dignity maintained. Yet the cracks got larger. The pain of real life, the pain of life events seeped through the cracks. I moved forward as if on a tight-wire. Potential to fall off at any time. Moving forward with my roots, my feet firmly held in the past. I struggle to say 'stuck' in the past and maybe that was the case. The unearthing, the uprooting was inevitable. I am sorry I did not recognize the structure on which I based my identity had eroded.

I was surviving, clinging to the fading structures. Holding you back from developing, from maturing. The compassion and acceptance I worked to have for you did not acknowledge, did not know of the structures that were eroding. When the knowledge came true compassion and acceptance followed which brought a freedom, which brought my spirit back, supported me to start anew – build new structures on which to build my multitude of identities.

I feel I have become untangled. My mind, my identity, my life all untangled moving forward with strength.

With this learning and knowing I now offer you, although older, the freedom and opportunity to live life to your full potential.

With grace, gratitude and love,

Your renewed spirit 48 year old me

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## Introduction

*“The experience of wholeness is, quite to the contrary, an extremely simple matter of feeling yourself in harmony with the world within and without”.* -

Carl Jung, Letters Vol 11. Page 456

The prom looks different each time I walk it. This evening the purple and sliver hues of the Burren across Galway Bay can be clearly seen as if they are only a finger touch away. The water glistens as the sun starts to go down. The purple and pink hues in all their glory. A shadow of the night sky sneaking through. A beautiful time to walk the prom.

‘I have arrived, I am home,  
In the here and the now,  
I am solid I am free  
In the ultimate I dwell’. Thich Nhat Hanh (2009)

The sound of the tide moving in and out over the shoal mirrors the calmness of my breath. Water over shoal is the most beautiful of sounds, often missed in our busyness. I feel grounded, at peace, inner peace. Life is good. Life in this moment is good. Wearing the wrong shoes for walking, the lightness in my step ignores the burning of my feet, I savour the feeling of beauty and contentment knowing that in a short while I will be home and warmly greeted by my new dog. The joy she brings.....My spirit is back.

It was not always like this when I walked the prom although I will thankfully say hail, rain, or snow I have always acknowledged the changing face and beauty of the prom. It never looks the same twice with the changing colour of the sun going down on Galway Bay. I have dragged my heavy heart down the prom on numerous occasions, my preferred time being early morning or late at night when it was quiet. The soft rain and sea breeze often mixed with the salt tears that streamed down my face. Feeling the

water come around me, down my back and over my head as I walked deeper and deeper into the rising tide was a fantasy that far too often carried me down the prom. A cold shiver goes down my spine as I recall those dark days. A heavy heart, a dull mind and an empty dark gut filled my being in those moments. While water brought solace there was a fear that my fantasy would come to pass. I sought support.

A counsellor, masquerading as a business coach, when paraphrasing my words on where I am at in life calmly said 'dislocated, you sound dislocated'. It was my life summed up in a word. A loaded word.

This autoethnography is an attempt to explore all aspects of my life to understand my dislocation.

For the first time in years I feel I am back, back to myself, back to being interested in life. I feel I am living life, or at least will be when I have this thesis written. Until now I was only surviving. When did this surviving mentality begin is hard to say. The shift is only recent. It is a shift to living that I feel there is no turning back on. This is an exploration of that 'before' and 'after' person that I now feel I have become. I say this literally as I feel we never 'become'. We never arrive. It is always a journey. A journey without a definite destination. I feel the need to go to another level of understanding of me. This is a story of maturing and emerging identity or moreso an emerging understanding of identity.

Chapter 1 outlines the structure and method of the autoethnography. The autoethnography is an account of life events written in stages of childhood 0 -12, adolescence 12- 18, young adulthood 18 – 40 and adulthood 40 – 48 with a reflection on social context, identity and loss after each stage. The following chapters look at transformational processing, my learnings through reflexivity and the power of narrative writing finishing with implications for career guidance professionals and an overall conclusion.

The writing of the autoethnography has been an arduous task with invaluable self development rewards.

## Chapter 1 Structure and Method

*I am confused. I am confused by the sheer irrationality, ambiguity and abundance of things coming into being at all. I am confused by having been born into a world from which I will be ejected at death. I am confused as to who I am and why I am. I am confused by the labyrinth of choices I face. I don't know what to do. (Batchelor 1997 p 67)*

Autoethnography requires sociological introspection about a personal experience. Then the author will retell it with emotions. Finally the author will reinterpret the experience through a self reflective lens . It includes the researchers vulnerable self , body and spirit, producing evocative stories that create the effects of reality , celebrating concrete experience and intimate detail and endowing human experience with meaning. (Ellis 1999) Likewise sharing one's experience may invite others to recognise some point of similarity to their own lives, which in turn, may lead to self reflection and transformative learning (Cranton, 2006)

Sounds possible. Following, however, the experience of writing and rewriting an auto-ethnography in my post graduate programme, the original plan was my masters thesis would be anything but auto-ethnography. I had my fill of auto-ethnography and vowed not to put myself through the emotional turmoil again. Pearce (2010) acknowledges the 'demands researching your own life makes on the emotional wellbeing of the researcher'.

The use of auto-ethnography as the method of research for this thesis was stirred by the perceived 'dynamics' at play in work. My reaction to, what I will now call, politics at work took me by surprise. The intensity of hurt, vulnerability and anger I felt towards work changes and work relationships puzzled me. The intensity of feeling was out of character for me. This came with a deep fear that I would experience another episode of where I crashed out leaving the multinational world. I could not ignore the feelings



stirred in me hence my need for further self exploration through auto-ethnography. It was a turning point for me.

I thought I got a grasp of what I needed to explore in my post graduate thesis where acceptance and compassion for self was a strong theme in my outcomes. Yet I now know I only scratched the surface of something. I hardly touched what needed to be unearthed.

‘Dislocated’ – the words of my business coach landed on me. What is it about me that was feeling lost in the world? Who am I? What am I about? What is life about? A simple perceived breakdown in work relations, trust broken, brought about existential questioning within me. I felt the need to explore my life to understand what it was about. I did not know where to start. Exploring all aspects of any life is a mammoth task.

While I might have left auto-ethnography it had not let me go. Unknown to me there was another layer of self-understanding I needed to explore. As Steve Hoppes (2005) states ‘by placing the writer in dual roles of researcher and research participant, autoethnography is a meaning making tool that facilitates the exploration of identity. ....’as meaning seeking beings, we face rich opportunities and perplexing conundrums in understanding identity. We yearn to understand who we are, what we are doing, why we are doing it and what the future holds.’

To truly explore identity, for me, autoethnography was the only way.

By writing autoethnography ‘autoethnographers are invited to meet and accept their lives in all of their messiness, joy and sorrow.’ Steve Hoppes (2005) . Telling stories and constructing a narrative about experiences can empower individuals by helping them to reclaim control over chaotic events and to build a positive sense of self. Kehily (1995) ‘that is what I hope to achieve.

I worried about the structure and form of the story as my mind jumped from one experience in my life to another. As McAdams (2006) relays 'the entire scenario falls apart if the audience cannot make sense of what the performer conveys'. McAdams further goes on to state that 'a story that depicts events or happenings in a random way, or in a way that defies the audience's expectations regarding how human affairs should unfold in time, may be deemed incoherent' (2006). Stories are typically structured to capture and hold an audience's attention and to elicit from the audience certain emotional responses (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982).

How could I achieve this coherency and draw in the reader in telling my life story.

Pals (2006) in speaking of narrative identity, ignited an idea of gathering my emotional experiences 'Narration of the life story may be understood as how a person connects the self to a series of emotional experiences occurring over the course of his or her life. Pals 2006 Narrative identity construction at the level of the life story may be defined as an interpretative process of forming causal connections between past experiences and how the narrator interprets these experiences as affecting and shaping the self over time (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pals 2006 a; Pals et al., 2006) By identifying all of the causal connections a person makes over the course of telling his or her life story one can then analyse narrative identity in terms of a series of critical moments that together form that person's interpretative story of self-development. (Pals 2006a).

...the person links together different scenes in her or her life to explain who he or she is (Baerger & McAdams, 1999)

My approach therefore is to connect the emotional experiences of my life story while focused on stages of my life development put forward by Erikson, described later when talking of identity. His early stages I brought together and termed childhood up to age 12, then followed

Erikson's grouping for adolescence 12- 18, young adult 18 – 40 and adulthood 40 – 65. I needed to organize my life into 'compartments' to understand what was happening at each stage. My auto ethnography shares aspects of my life at each stage.

Autoethnography *'fluently moves back and forth, first looking inward, then outward, then backward and forward until the distinctions between the individual and social are blurred beyond recognition and the past present and future become continuous'* (Ellis 1997 pp132-133)

McAdams (2006) Living action, like narrative identity, can never hide from the interpretive cultural eye. At the end of the day, culture will judge whether a life is worth living, and whether a life story is worth telling'

As I explore my reaction to workplace dynamics thoughts of my childhood, going to college, early days working in multinationals and the current work transition become entangled. In order to relay the complexity of this entanglement I am drawn to Muncey 2005. Tessa Muncey (2005) in writing autoethnography 'provided a structure, using artifacts, snapshots, the journey and metaphors in combination, which gave me a method to bridge the past and the present of an ordinary life'. Not knowing where to begin with my autoethnographic method I start to weave through the stages of my development with vignettes, snapshots, artifacts (one) , journal entries, and transcripts from sessions with a counsellor, to make links with the present and past, and begin the journey through the stages of my life.

I started. Wrote and rewrote. I am not sure where I am taking this and in a way 'it' is taking me.

To give sense to my structure I first give an explanation, a theoretical view, of identity and loss the interconnectedness of these in grief work.

## **Identity and identity development**

Erikson (1968) describes identity as a subjective experience of one's inner sameness and continuity overtime and as the 'style of one's individuality.

Erik Erikson (1950, 1963) proposed a psychoanalytic theory of psychosocial development comprising eight stages from infancy to adulthood. During each stage, the person experiences a psychosocial crisis which could have a positive or negative outcome for personality development. Erikson emphasized the role of culture and society and the conflicts that can take place within the ego itself, For Erikson (1963), these crises are of a psychosocial nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e. social).

According to the theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises. McLeod, S. A. (2013).

Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self.

Berzonsky (1990) defined identity as 'a self-constructed cognitive representation of oneself that is used to interpret self relevant information and to cope with personal problems and life events' He identified three social cognitive styles of identity namely 'information oriented identity style' 'self explorers' who actively seek out, evaluate, and use self relevant information' (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000, p83); norm- oriented identity style who 'deal with identity questions and decisional situations by conforming to the prescriptions and expectations of significant others; and 'diffuse avoidant identity style those who are 'reluctant to face up to and confront problems and decisions' (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000, p83). Berzonsky suggests individuals favour one style. (1990)

My body winches at the static nature of Berzonsky (1990) identity styles as I associate with his norm oriented style or diffuse avoidant style while wanting to be information oriented identity. The information oriented identity appearing to be in control of their life , fitting the social image of todays' world being 'positively associated with strategic planning, vigilant decision making, and the use of proactive and problem focused coping'((Berzonsky and Ferrari 1996; Berzonsky et al. 1999; Berzonsky and Sullivan 1992; Seaton and Beaumont 2008). This style is also associated with such personality and cognitive attributes as autonomy, openness to experience, introspectiveness, self-reflection, empathy, a need for cognition, and cognitive complexity (e.g., Berzonsky 1993; Berzonsky et al. 1999; Berzonsky and Sullivan 1992; Soenens et al. 2005a). The 'diffuse avoidant identity style' demonstrating traits that are the antitheses of information oriented identity.

I want to be information oriented identity style with structure and focus in my life yet I fear I am closer to the diffuse avoidant style. I want to be the person who has smoothly come through Erikson's stages of identity development well balanced at each stage with hope, will, purpose, competency, fidelity, love, care and going forward wisdom in optimum supply yet I feel the equilibrium may not have been attained

I think there is further exploration needed on Berzonsky identity style structure. In his view of style while one style is preferred individuals may use all three styles. I question, although not for this thesis can the preferred style alter during transitionary periods. Where one is in a stable environment, gainfully employed, their life assumptions materializing could they demonstrate information oriented identity style. While in transitions could diffuse avoidance identity come to the fore.

Moving to the narrative and constructivist theorists I attain assurance that identity is within my control.

Putting forward a narrative definition of identity McAdams 1999 defines identity as 'the internalized and evolving story that results from a person's selective appropriation of past, present and future',

McIntyre (1981) explained that the person narrates the life story yet does not author it alone. Many events and people coauthor the story told by the individual'.

Savickas (2011) Career construction theory states that identity involves how people think of themselves in relation to social roles. 'Identity schematises self by locating it in a social context (Markus, 1977) the schema called identity is a pattern imposed by the individual to mediate and guide his or her response to social realities.'

Career construction theory differentiates self from identity viewing the making of self as a task. 'Individuals construct a self by reflecting on experience using the uniquely human capacity to be conscious of consciousness. Self- consciousness, or awareness of awareness, requires language (Neuman & Nave, 2009). Without language, reflection cannot take place, and it is reflexive thinking that builds the self'

Giddens (1991).... social circumstances are not separate from personal life, nor are they just an external environment to them. In struggling with intimate problems, individuals help actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them.

Identity formation involves the dynamic processes of self -reflection and observation of the meaning of one's life and one's place in relationships and society, the goal of which is increasing differentiation and connection to others. Erikson (1968)

I grew up seeing identity as 'who am I' in a singular view however it is widely known that there are many life domains, e.g. work, family, religion and politics. Taking the approach that identity is how one sees themselves in relation to their social context there are multiple identities.

There is shared agreement that identities are multiple and socially constructed (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902; Goffman 1959; Mead , 1934) but coexist within a self that integrates diverse experiences into a unity (Baumeister. 1988; Gecas, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987) Narrative identity work refer to social efforts to craft a self-narrative that meet a person's identity aims with a narrative being described as a serious of events with the purpose of making a point. (Bruner, 1990; Labov, 1972 Weick, 1995)

Marcia (1966) builds on Erikson's theory of identity development focused on the adolescence years of identity development, ego identity and role confusion. Based on two dimensions of exploration and commitment Marcia identified four different styles/statuses through which individuals form identifying roles and values. The four statuses are identity achieved (high exploration and commitment), foreclosed (low exploration and high commitment), moratorium (high exploration and low commitment), and diffused (low exploration and commitment).

Kroger (2003) highlights how each of the four identity statutes have been linked with qualitatively different forms of intrapsychic object relations (Josselson, 1982, 1987, 1996; Kroger 1990; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986). They suggest the identity foreclosed structure identity based on identification with significant others, moratoriums base identity on self chosen interests and desires, while identity achieved base identity on self chosen values. Diffusion may fail to connect with others in the process of internalizing or identifying.'

Kroger (2003) suggests that to understand ego identity status transitions during adolescent and adult life a differentiation needs to be made between identity structures and identity contents that underlie the ego identity status. Identity structure is the means by which one organizes identity- defining roles and values (Marcia, 1980). Identity structure provides the filter through which one receives, retains, manipulates, and evaluates one's life experiences, the filter through which one comes to

'make sense' of one's life circumstances and experiences. Kroger (2006)....identity contents are the 'whats' that one selects to express meaningful values and roles within a social context. Identity contents or commitments identified by Erikson (1968) as meaningful to most adolescents are those of vocation, ideological values, and satisfying forms of sexual expression. Marcia et al 1993 have considered such issues as vocation, religious, political and sex role values, and forms of sexual expression, to be the identity contents of greatest concern to late adolescents in western technologically advanced nations. Kroger (2003).

There are other views on identity stages e.g. Levinson (1978) theory titled "Seasons of a Man's Life" who later differs from others suggesting development continues into adult development. Identity status research has also begun to focus on identity development from adolescence through adulthood (Kroger 2003) however for the purposes of this paper Erikson is more universally accepted and the narrative and constructivist's approach identity and self fits the more contemporary thinking of today.

Taking the various views of identity and identity formation I reflect on identity at various life stage throughout the auto ethnography.

## **Loss**

The other consistent theme emerging in my thought process while writing is loss. There is a suggestion in the theory that loss and identity are closely linked as individuals seek to cope with loss through meaning making and reconstruction of identity., as outlined below in coping strategies. Loss is a part of life and living, as is connection and caring. (Beder, 2005)

Viorst 1986 in writing of loss 'For we lose not only through death but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power , illusions of safety



and the loss of our younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal. She goes on to say how 'throughout life we grow by giving up' .....At any age we would surely agree that losing tends to be difficult and painful.....let us also consider that it is only through losses that we become fully developed human beings.

Doka 1989. Disenfranchised grief is defined as the grief that people experience from a loss that is not, or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.

Loss that is not tangible, through a death, is referred to as symbolic loss. Examples of symbolic loss are divorce, placement in foster care, retirement or losing a job, and diagnosis of a serious disability or chronic illness

Ambiguous loss is a term that is used to describe the grief or distress associated with a loss (usually a person or relationship) in which there is confusion or uncertainty about that person or relationship

“Ambiguous loss, symbolic loss, and chronic sorrow may also be accompanied by shame and self-loathing that further complicates individual authenticity and truthfulness in other relationships, thereby adding to the struggle with coping” (Harris, 2011, pg.7). Ambiguous loss can block coping if it remains traumatic, immobilizing, and incomprehensible (Boss, 2007)

Schlossberg (1992) and a team of researchers conducted studies on transitions in particular non event transitions – events individuals expected should have occurred in their life and 'they are woefully behind'. Examples of nonevents included relationships that did not materialise, not becoming a parent or a grandparent, not getting a job or promotion, issues related to self in terms of losing weight. The research ( Schlossberg and others 1992) found that people in general dream about love, family, success,

legacy and self image and when these do not occur to plan there may be loss for the non event followed by disenfranchised grief.

Gilles & Neimeyer (2006) “grief work” model laid out by Freud (1917/1953), which held that “working through” grief entails an initial attempt to maintain attachment followed by a gradual withdrawal of emotional energy from the deceased in a process of “decathexis.” Although some contemporary grief theorists (e.g., Attig, 2001; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996) suggest that death requires a transformation rather than relinquishment of emotional bonds with the decedent, the reorganization of one’s “working models” of self and other in the wake of loss can be viewed as one context of meaning reconstruction. Gilles & Neimeyer (2006)

To understand how meaning is reconstructed, one must understand how a sense of meaning can be lost when a loved one dies. Janoff-Bulman (1989, 1992) described how traumatic events and losses can shatter a person’s “assumptive world,” the network of cognitive schemas that bear on the benevolence and meaningfulness of the world and the worthiness of the self.

In dealing with death and loss Beder (2005) describes the assumptive world. The assumptive world as ‘an organised schema reflecting all that a person assumes to be true about the world and the self on the basis of previous experiences; it refers to the assumptions, or beliefs, that ground, secure, and orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning, or purpose to life. As first articulated by Parkes (1988) and built upon by others (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kauffman, 2002a), it helps those who deal with traumatic loss, the bereaved and those who work with the bereaved, to understand the intensity and complexity of responses.

Beder (2005) “At the core of our internal world, we hold basic views of ourselves and our external world that represent our orientation to the push and pull of the cosmos. Our assumptions . . . are guides for our day-to-day

thoughts and behaviors” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 4). Janoff – Bulman( 1992) identifies three core assumptions that shape our worldview:

- The world is benevolent
- The world is meaningful
- The self is worthy

C. M. Parkes (1975) first used the term “assumptive world” to refer to people’s view of reality. It was a “. . . strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning, and acting. . . . Assumptions such as these are learned and confirmed by the experience of many years” (p. 132).

In Beder (2005) Rando (1993) defines complicated mourning as a generic term indicating that, given the amount of time since the death, there is some compromise, distortion, or failure of one or more of the “R” processes of mourning. The “R” processes or phases of mourning are recognition of the loss, reaction to the separation, recollection of the deceased and the relationship, relinquishing old attachments, readjusting to a new world without the deceased, and reinvestment in new relationships.

Beder (2005) outlines that People engage in three major activities by which they reconstruct meaning in response to loss: sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Neimeyer, 2001b; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). Implicit in this view of meaning reconstruction is the proposition that adaptation to loss frequently involves constructing a new reality, in which survivors’ assumptive worlds and their view of themselves are forever changed (O’Connor, 2002–2003).

According to the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2001), a bereaved person faces tasks in two distinct domains. The first, loss-oriented coping, refers to those activities that deal with separation from a lost attachment figure, and includes crying, missing, yearning,

remembering, and all activities dealing with the loss itself—challenges often referred to as “grief work.” Restoration-oriented coping, on the other hand, refers to the activities by which one begins to build a new life and identity in which the lost person may be present in a spiritual and symbolic, but not physical way. Adaptation involves oscillating between these two opposing orientations in a dynamic give-and-take, until a point of satisfaction can be achieved and maintained in both areas. Stroebe and Schut (2001) recognized the central drive that motivates these tasks is the search for meaning, both in the lost relationship and in a newly (re)constructed life.

Before leaving loss it is useful to draw attention to connection of attachment theory (Bowlby 1980) and grief.

With reference to attachment theory Bowlby in Secure base states that if the attachment behaviour between mother and child “*goes well, there is joy and a sense of security. If it is threatened there is jealousy, anxiety and anger. If broken there is grief and depression*”. Bowlby and Ainsworth (date) identified three types of attachment. Securely attached, where the relationship with the primary caregiver is strong and responsive, building trust, confidence and a sense of security for the child to explore the world. Anxious ambivalent attachment, where the child is unsure of the relationship with the primary care giver. The child may develop fear, anxiety and defensiveness. This may follow lack of responsiveness by the primary care giver to the child or have come about through separation from or threats of abandonment from the primary caregiver. The third type is anxious avoidant attachment, where the child fears or mistrusts the primary caregiver and has an expectation that they will be rebuffed when security is needed.

The basis of Bowlby and Ainsworth theory is that these attachments in early life form the basis of internal working models of attachment which we internalize and carry forward into adolescence and adult relationships

where they play an active role in guiding perceptions and behaviours. These working models apply to self and others. Main et al (1985) (Adult attachment P95) refer to internal working models as “terms referring to particular types of internal working models of relationships, models that direct not only feelings and behaviour but also attention, memory and cognition’.

Depending on the depth and nature of the attachments we have formed in our lives (Bowlby, 1980), the violations of the assumptive world can be even more wrenching.

Whatever the loss occurred be it death loss or not death loss a grieving process and reshaping of identity is required to move forward.

## Chapter 2 Auto-ethnography – Growing up

### (ii) Childhood (0 -12)

*Life was simple and full of love.....*

Old family photos remind me of the happiness of my childhood and strange to look now at the innocence of the child in photos, knowing the personalities and vulnerabilities of each. How unknown the world ahead



lay. Photo1 school photo

‘In early youth we sit before the impending course of life like children at the theater before the curtain is raised, who sit there in happy and excited expectation of the things that are to come’ Schopenhauer.(2010)

Treats, by way of sweets, were not a frequent offering in our house so whenever they were attained elsewhere it was pure delight. Three elderly bachelors living across the road were welcome visitors in this regard. This



photo 2 was taken after one such visit.

Growing up in South Tipperary in the 1970's /1980's three things were central to most 'respectable' families of the time – being good Catholics,

county GAA and being Irish. Summer holidays were filled with the sweet smell of hay and 'making hay while the sun shines' often meant all hands on deck. Whether it was making hay, building the new extension to the 1960's bungalow, or cutting wood down by the river we all had our jobs. The boys did all the jobs outside. My sister and I did all the jobs inside before we could go out and do the fun jobs outside, although those jobs were a bit harder. We were all a help and hindrance to my father at that time. Tripping up, falling over, bangs and bruises were resolved with a quick check and cuddle and 'c'mon you're alright now'.

We were a typical Irish family of five, steps of a stairs in age, growing up at a time where children were seen and not heard. My mother proudly proclaiming 'I can take the five of you anywhere' in recognition of us sitting quietly in any house she brought us to, in comparison to our visiting cousins who often ran riot in every room.

It was a patriarchal house where Dad's word was final and the sense of 'don't upset your father' abounded. My father, a reserved high principled man who, again to recall the words of my mother, 'never left the house without one of you in tow' was the final port of call when it came to discipline. If Dad was giving out you were 'really in trouble'. If Dad or Mam ask you to do something you do it.

Even on the days Mam was annoyed with Dad she was often heard to say 'no matter what I might say of your father he is a great father' or to me she regularly stated 'I can't say a bad word about your father in front of you'. To this day when I think of my father I feel the warmth and softness of his hand in mine, often held after a 'telling off from Mammy', not that he would disagree or question the telling off, as they worked in unison, never one to cross the other, at least in front of us, but just as a reassurance that 'it will be alright'.

My parents love for each other was expressed in simple, subtle gestures – a smile, a card, simply working together to make ends meet.

My mother ran the show. She managed the finances, the house, took the action, and was the ‘center of the universe’ keeping the show on the road always.

When she fell ill with TB, I was six. The only time we were allowed into the hospital to see her, and only because she was being moved from the local hospital to Peamont Sanitorium, she promised ‘I will not leave you until you are grown up’ as each of us stood in tears around her bed. This she promised. Her words embedded in my heart and she stayed true to them. We could not kiss Mammy that day. Daddy held my hand entering and leaving the hospital.

Community was an extended family during that time as we had dinner in Mrs Murphy’s and slept in the Brennans house. Her absence was like an eternity. Being good, as promised, for all that time was hard. My mothers best friends were never Maggie, Nancy or Eileen – it was Mrs Murphy, Mrs Brennan and Mrs Molloy. Mrs Murphy, she worked part time. That’s why her children were a bit wild. She was not there enough for them. My parents were a force to be reckoned with yet they did not compare to Mrs Murphy. She frightened me. It was around this time my sister, a year older, got the ‘authority over your sister’ position. She was a mini Mammy although, a bit crosser at times and definitely not as fair!

Mam returned home for my communion. I knew it was a secret. I was not to tell anybody that Mammy had that sickness.

Three things hung in our kitchen. A picture of the Sacred Heart, with the red lamp always lit, a plaque with the prayer of St Francis of Assisi and a tray with the 1973 Limerick team, the last year they won the All Ireland



Hurling Championship. Naming the team without looking at the tray, was a regular tea time quiz.....'Foley, Bennis, O'Brian, Fitzmaurice, Hartigan, Cregan.....'with eyes clinched shut while the 'quizzer' was only waiting for you to get one wrong.

Religion was never questioned. When finishing my first confession the priest delivered God's penance 'One Our Father, one Hail Mary and help your Mammy with the dishes and dressing the beds tomorrow now the act of contrition Oh my God.....' I could not get to the already packed Renault 16, with Mam in the front passenger seat, fast enough before the tears just burst out. My brothers could not contain themselves laughing. I knew Mammy was also holding back a smile. It was not funny! Should I have told him tomorrow is my birthday? Changing the day of the penance was not an option.

Reverance was always shown to the priest, Father Hanrahan, when he arrived. "Quick turn the television off and sit quiet. Put the kettle on' . Another priest used to call, father Bowen, who squeeze each of our hands in turn, tightly, while he smiled wryly. We still had to smile and be pleasant to him. My parents never enforced religion it just happened. Padre Pio, St Anthony, Our Lady and the Sacred Heart were front of place. Fr Michael Cleary and Fr Eamonn Casey, the living ones, favourites of my mother. We said our prayers every night and going to retreats in Holy Cross Abbey were always fun events. I loved the singing. I really believed it – 'ask and you shall receive'. All religious rituals were fun days, except the stations of the cross and palm Sunday! Photo 3 while a formal photo taken in the same studio all our communion and confirmation photos were taken Bat

Daly's reflects our excitement at the communion of my two brothers.



(photo 3)

My grandmother, Nannan as we called her, 'suffered from her nerves' occasionally yet always had a mischievous glint in her eye. Red Silk cut was her smoke. The 6 stone sinewy body personified a chain smoker. There was no restrictions on smoking in front of children. Screams of laughter erupted when my grandmothers sulfur filled cigarette went up in a blaze, my brothers having scrapped the sulphur off the matches, a trick taught to them by our mad cousin. He was English. That's where he learnt those things. My grandmother was adept at fake shock, as if my brothers antics was for the first time. It was always the boys. My sister and I would never get away with such antics.

I loved my Grandmother but sometimes I was really mad with her. Like the day my brother, her favorite, had no spoon at the table.....turning to me 'Claire get a spoon for Tom from the drawer'. My mouth opened to protest, my brother being equidistance from the drawer, but my mother's eye was too quick – with the glance of an eye I knew 'just do it for a quiet life'. There was a lot of things I had to do for a quiet life. My voice carried no weigh.

A sexual encounter with a boy when I was hardly ten, maybe 11, filled me with shame and guilt. Confused. I knew it was wrong. I told nobody.

We were thought if you are doing something do it well, to get up and get on with things, have faith and all will be well. In short, mine, was a normal, happy upbringing lined with challenges of sibling squabbling, parents making ends meet, devoting their life to their family..... all the ingredients to be self-assured in adulthood.

### **Social context**

The social context in which I grew up was typical of catholic Ireland in the 1980's to early 1990's was a time of recession. The catholic religion was everywhere school, home and wider community. Priests, doctors and people in vocational professionals, or at least men in these professions were viewed as authority figures, with priests' top ranking. Women working outside the home in the 70's was out of necessity rather than encouragement of women to have careers. Sex was a taboo subject with sex education left to the schools in the 1980's. All religious events during this period was full of excitement and reverence.

### **Identity**

*4 of Eriksons (1968) stages of identity development cross the years 0 – 12. From Erikson's stand point these years are focused on the child negotiating their environment rather than identity formation. In the early years focus in on safety , can they trust the primary care giver giving the child balnced sense of hope that the world is a safe place to be. This is followed by autonomy versus shame where the child learns to do basis activites themselves. At this stage it is important that the child is left to try and fail developing the sends of will. Self control without loss of self esteem (Gross 1992). Followed by the stages of initiative vs guilt form 3- 5 which develops the sense of purpose, where there is greater interaction and play with others and industry vs inferiority from 5-12 with greateer activities with school and jobs in the home which develops competency.*

*Throughout these childhood years in terms of adapting to the environment I knew the boundaries, we were encouraged to play, do our jobs within parameters. No screaming, no fighting and jobs not done well were corrected. The community in which I would have interacted, in the early years was only family as childcare or lengthy time in neighbours houses was not common. We were praised and criticised equally during the period. We were a tribe. We had one identity, 'one of the Hurley's' and there were norms and values to be respected. Doing a recent creative writing course the tutor remarked how in sharing childhood memories I always speak in plural 'we' never 'I' and that's how it was. We were a pack. At least from my perspective, we thought and operate as one – we ate together, slept together, played together and my decisions were our decisions.*

In McAdams (2006) as children grow older 'they internalise society's expectations and assumptions about the human life course'..... 'strongly shaped by gender and class' (Stewart & Malley 2004)

As a child I would say that gender or religion were facts of life they did not impinge on identity on a day to day basis however looking with adult eyes religion and gender roles were so strong they became part of my moral make-up.

In the sense of Bowlby (1980) attachment theory my relationship with my mother was secure attachment. While in my postgraduate thesis I suggested that the relationship with my mother, due her absence through illness, may have led to anxious ambivalent attachment I now totally refute that. Childhood provided a very secure base

### **Loss**

*'For our family, our first family, was the setting in which we became a separate self. It was the first social unit in which we lived. And when we walked away we carried along it many central shaping messages' (Viorst*

*1986) Moving away from the mother and developing as an independent is seen as a loss however managed with secure attachment above.*

*Grief in response to childhood sexual abuse has been compared to grief in response to death of a loved one; many similar cognitive, affective, behavioral and physiological symptoms of grief have been noted (Fleming & Belanger, 2001). Some of the common grief reactions exhibited in both situations, include sadness, guilt, loneliness, helplessness, anger, preoccupation/obsessive thoughts relating to the event, disbelief, disassociation, isolation, fears of intimacy, fatigue or restlessness (Fleming & Belanger, 2001)*

*I am slow with my adult eyes to suggest that the sexual encounter as a child had it's impact however even as I write it the shame wells within me for the child. It was behavior above my years and certainly not fit the family morals. I include it here as a loss of innocence that did bring sadness, withdrawal and loneliness.*

Temporary loss of my mother through illness at 6 and the death of my grandfather when I was 8 to whom I was very close were managed with the best side out. Life moved on.

### **Reflection**

I smile when I see my reference to 'Whether it was making hay, building the new extension to the 1960's bungalow, or cutting wood down by the river we all had our jobs' . I thought mixing cement as a child , stacking blocks while cutting wood with my father was what every child did. We were brought up to be hardworking. 'jobs have to be done', 'if you're doing a job don't half do it ' all have to row in'. I loved outside work.

### **(iii) Adolescence (12- 18)**

*I am confused. I am confused by the sheer irrationality, ambiguity and abundance of things coming into being at all. I am confused by having been born into a world from which I will be ejected at death. I am confused as to who I am and why I am. I am confused by the labyrinth of choices I face. I don't know what to do. (Batchlor 1997 p 67)*

*'What do I want to be when I grow up .....no idea. Why does everyone always ask that question.'*

I entered adolescence full of only romantic dreams for the future. 'Always respect yourself', said so often by my mother that I still hear the words in my ear on many occasions.

Arguing with my sister was a daily activity, although I like to say my sister arguing with me was a daily activity up, until about 16. At that point I started to count the days. A whole day without fighting with Ann, then a week, then a month, with the odd skirmish in between, until finally counting the non fighting days became redundant.

Got on the 'B' Hockey team. Ann, my sister, was on the A Hockey team. Average Irish dancer. Ann got a big award for having over 100 medals. Average piano player. Ann flew up through the grades. Told off in school for talking too much. Ann was the class prefect, albeit a year ahead of me – thankfully. Imagine the pain if we were in the same year. My hair was unruly, curly and streeelish. Ann had beautiful smooth long hair. I went to no'debs' in the local high school. ( Graduation ball for the local boys school) Ann was invited to two. I had no idea who to bring to my debs. Ann had a list. All I ever wanted was to be her best friend.

We did share stories and dreams. Ann having befriended an older woman, she was 30, through a summer job, shared the news of her breakup from a long term boyfriend as follows:

'Melissa and Frank have broken up.  
Oh my God  
Yeah, and she is 30 in June!  
Oh my God – imagine being single at 30  
Yeah, I will be married to the love of my life  
If you had to pick someone now who would you marry.....'

Despite the dreams I thought the words of Janis Ian 'Seventeen; were written for me.

.....The valentines I never knew  
The Friday night charades of youth  
Were spent on one more beautiful  
At seventeen I learned the truth.....

Filling in my CAO form at 16 was like putting a pin prick in the national newspaper picking a horse for the Grand National, an annual activity in our house. I was offered and accepted Public Administration in NIHE Limerick, as University of Limerick was then known I did not even know what that was but I was going to college.

About the same time my father got a new job in a multinational pharmaceutical company. They were emerging all over the place. A big job in production.

Going to college was not a given. Financing college was a huge consideration for my family. I was the only of the five to go to college in Limerick. The importance of going to college and my fathers pride in 'my achievement' was reflected in the attention he gave to creating my college file holding all the papers and numbers I needed. The application for the 'Deed of Covenant', which allowed my father to get tax back on the fees, was the most important thing in it. The old manila folder, recycled with masking tape and heavy duty cellotape read 'CLAIRE' in big red bold

writing , was placed carefully in the already over packed drawer under the refrigerator. All Dad's important things were in there.



'Keep it safe' and make sure to put the updated papers in there'. My heart swelled with importance. Dad would be happy that, all of 30 years later, I still have the file intact.

The warmth of a happy christmas at home, during the the first year of college, is embedded in my brain. We were all home. Funny, we were not great for going out when we were all home. We did not need to. It was rare we used the sitting room. Only at Christmas. With the Christmas tree and the fire lit it was so cosy. The furniture was moved and twisted in a semi circle, looking in on the fire. The blaze of the open fire burning brightly. I thought I would burst with contentment. I was squashed, slouched, on the couch between Ann and Tom, cuddled in by accident rather than intent. Each of us too cosy to move yet not acknowledging the closeness at the same time. I wanted this moment to last forever. Pure simple bliss.

### **Social context**

A large percentage of my parents generation would not have received education beyond school years. Guidance at the end of secondary school was limited and my parents would have stood back somewhat from the 'system'. Going to college was a privilege, although there were more



government tax incentives for parents to encourage 3rd level education. There was considerable cost of going to college in terms of fees and accommodation costs. Options for girls in college leaned towards traditional subjects, with STEM subjects not encouraged at secondary level.

## **Identity**

It is at this stage that Erikson (1968) suggests we negotiate ego identity versus role confusion building the virtue of commitment. The initial phase of dealing with identity issues and concerns takes place during adolescence and early adulthood, although identity is not necessarily static (Erikson 1968). When early identity development is not optimal, as in the case of identity diffusion, the individuals will have difficulty with future psychosocial development and general well-being because the ego lacks a coherent synthesis (Erikson 1968)

It is at this stage that Marcia (1966) suggests identity defining roles are formed based on the variables of exploration and commitment. In recalling my CAO application process I suggest I was foreclosed. In my selection for college there was no exploration. The commitment was to going to college and selecting an option that supported a gender identity, teaching, nursing or an office job. Kroger (2005) in reviewing Marcia identity structures 'the foreclosed ego identity status reflects an identity structure based on identification with the values and goals of significant others'. This seems to fit for me. My parents would strongly have encouraged college and would have gone through hoops to support my college education. I believe I was foreclosed in terms of going to college and assuming a gender appropriate role.

I was committed to college and uninterested in the programme. I finished the four years as there was no option to change without disappointing my parents and incurring financial costs.

Erikson (1950) notes that this period of life is marked by efforts toward adult behavior and norms while still having one foot in childhood. Peers and group identity are pressing issues for the age; puberty brings with it hormonal and psychological changes to which the adolescent must adhere. My adolescence was filled with low self esteem, feeling not as good as others. There was often an awkwardness within me where the self image I had did not fit the self image I wished to have.

Narrative theorists also support the development of identity in adolescence. In McAdams (2006) Habermas and Bluck (2000) call casual coherence emerges in adolescence as people become able to link separate events into casual chains. The events themselves become the key episodes to explain a current aspect of self or a future goal.

### **Loss**

Loss during this period was balanced with gain, new beginnings and endings. Leaving primary school to secondary school and subsequently leaving secondary school for college. Sadness and excitement I suggest existed in a healthy balance. Disenfranchised loss was not heard of. Get on with it that's life.

It was as if I was in search of a family in college, accommodating, unable to commit to any one of the many activities while deciding based on what others were doing. Often felt out of place in college. None of my family about. While I loved the freedom. I craved the closeness of family. I was lonely yet surrounded by fun.

*'For our family , our first family, was the setting in which we became a separate self . It was the first social unit in which we lived . And when we walked away we carried along it many central shaping messages' (Viorst 1986)*

### *Loss of school friends*

People create their lives within a web of connections with others.

Relatedness is central to physical health, longevity, a meaningful social life, and to the growth and development of the self (Josselson, 1993).

Within these multiple relationships, people have a tremendous capacity to form significant attachments with others in their environments (Doka, 1989). These attachments or social contexts are used to organize, define, validate, anchor, and provide meaning for life (Rosenblatt, 1988). Where there is attachment, however, there must eventually be loss. Where there is loss, there must be an accompanying grieving process for healthy adaptation and recovery.

### **Reflection**

I do not think doing 'outside' work as a career was in my parents vision of me, although to be fair my parents did not interject in my choices, in any way. It was likely more culturally from a gender perspective that I did not explore career options other than nursing, teaching or an office job. I did not think beyond these three options.

### (iii) Young Adult (18-40)

*I thought it would be simpler.....life.*

#### ***First it was Mam.....***

Walking in the door of the hospital visitor bedroom I am knocked back. Dads feet obstructing the door. How I regretted my haste in that moment. I never saw my father on his knees praying before, other than in a church. I knelt behind him. Hands clenched tight. Praying with all my might.

Two days later stepping down from the alter the priest, spontaneously and unaccompanied by music, leads the congregation in 'Star of the Sea'. "Pray for the wanderer. Pray for me" The only row not singing was our row, heads bent low, silent tears falling. I was incapable of song. Yet he could not have picked a more apt song for my mother who loved the month of May and devotion to our lady.

It was a happy funeral. Upbeat. Just as she would have wanted it. The pain, the sadness, was internal, solitary. We got on with life. We spoke little of Mam. Dad spent many days cultivating the grave, crossing over the field from home to the grave to plant the shrubbery from home. When I was home I joined him. The house was never the same.

Everything about life from that moment felt false. 'Things ' were starting to crumble.

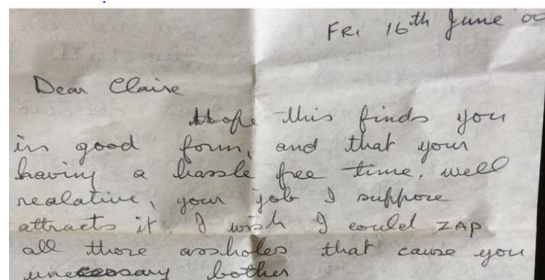
#### ***Getting on with it..... brought a greater closeness to my father***

I regret not putting on sun cream as I sit on the park bench, after Mass, reading the Sunday newspapers. Dad takes up the other half of the bench. Folding the paper I hand it to Dad who carefully gathers them together under his arm as we begin the walk home along the river. "There's one" I laugh, "Eleven now". "Feck you" he cries tipping me on the

side of my arm “Go away you did not see one”. “I did” I confirm laughing. In truth I only say two fish. Dad’s earnest count was well ahead of mine yet I could not resist the thrill of teasing him. It takes us hours to walk the 2 km riverside walk home. Peaceful, contented, sad. Alone together. In that moment there is no work. No falseness. Just pure love. He knew I was joking. I knew he knew. Yet we continued to count. His MRI results were not mentioned.

At this stage I was 2 years working in the multinational world. It was the beginning of over twenty years working in Human Resources in large multinational companies. I still did not know what I wanted to be ‘when I grow up’ and yet I seemed to move from job to job, opportunities falling my way, until I am travelling a lot, working long hours in a Human resources management role on a lucrative salary.

Finding my fathers hand written letters remind me of how it was he I turned to when I found ‘things’ hard at work. In response to a phonecall in which I was particularly upset about ‘bully boy’ tactics at work he wrote “Hope this letter finds you in good form, and that your having a hassle free time, well relative, your job I suppose attracts it. I wish I could zap all those assholes that cause you unnecessary bother.”



Further on, true to form, he reminds me of how good I have it. “there are people all over the world who would love to be you”.

### ***Then it was Dad***

The death rattle, you know there is such a thing. When it stops the silence is unbearable. Standing at the end of my father's bed, in what was my Mam and Dad's bedroom with the typical blue walls of the 1990's, my brothers, sister and I clumsily fumble over prayers. 'Lord make me an instrument of your peace' .....I start with. It was like singing a song and not hitting the right note. 'Oh God think of another one' Ann pleads. With nobody else volunteering I start on the 'Our Father', a safe bet. 'If Mam and Dad taught us anything they taught us about love' my brother softly and awkwardly declares. Almost in unison each of us say 'they did'. Silence ensues.

The silence is broken with the sound of the doctor's car pulling up outside. Shannon doc – a new set up for GP's in the health service. It's 3 a.m. A stranger travels 60 miles to confirm what we already know.

The obituary in the local Nationalist summed up all that was Dad and all that my parents instilled in us – work hard, have faith, keep the best side out, have fun, always be positive, get up and keep going...

### ***The Obituary***

Quiet and reserved.....hardworking familyman of great faith..... his passing has come as a severe blow.....Coming from a rural background he was well used to farm life.....Enjoying a good social life with his wife Mary.....they liked nothing better than a nice social occasion where they could dance together. Sadly Mary died some years ago which was a big shock to him but he courageously kept going... Though he loved Clonmel and often said it was one of the best moves he ever made, he never forgot his roots and always followed the fortunes of Limerick hurling which was a source of much banter.....Suffering from declining health Jim nonetheless

kept the best side out..... possessing a positive attitude to life and a will to live he never complained but kept going , daily Mass helping to sustain him.

‘They are together now.’

*We hold you close within our hearts,  
And there you shall remain,  
To walk with us throughout our lives,  
Until we meet again.  
So rest in peace dear loved one,  
And thanks for all you've done,  
We pray that God has given you,  
The crown you've truly won.*

In June 2001, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Ireland established the Catholic Church Commission on Child Sexual Abuse, also known as the Hussey Commission.....blessing myself passing the church in Salthill I questioned what was it all about. Religion did not keep pain away. I stopped going to Mass. Have faith and all will be well. I really believed that. What do you do when you do not have faith in faith?

### **Getting on with it again.....**

Numbness, the first morning I woke in my own bed, back in Galway less than a week after burying my father – devoid of feeling. The home house was cleared of all that was Mam and Dad. Packed away, memorabilia shared, as if to put a lid on the pain. In the blink of an eye. My input to the clearing process was minimal to none.

There was no black cloud. It was a black hole. A deep ravine in my soul. The light within me had quenched.

But I got on with it for everyone's sake. What was the choice? Go down with it or get up and get on with it ? I got up and got on with it. That's what Mam and Dad would have wanted. The black hole remained.

I found a new family in sailing taking up with a crew that I will love till I die. Manic busy at work. Always on the go. The veneer of life was good. I kept the best side out. The busier I got with work and sailing, the more flamboyant and impulsive I became socially, the 'sadder' I became within.

'Beware the barrenness of a busy life.' (Socrates)

### **Social Context**

The economy in Ireland was beginning to turn. Multinational companies were emerging with lucrative jobs and fast progression within organisations. The early 90's brought scandal to the Catholic church with Fr Eamonn Casey fathering a child of Annie Murphy. This began the decline of the Catholic church with sex abuse scandals following. Feminism found its place yet still much debate about glass ceilings on progression for women in industry. There was movement towards more social policy supporting women at work. Boom period in the early to mid 90's.

### **Identity**

Commitment to my college programme was largely due to the financial implications of making a change, what would my parents, and others, think if I dropped out.

Erikson (1968) - expected a reasonable and coherent identity has been established usually happens in the middle or late twenties and sometimes into the thirties - and for some it may be debatable whether such a stable identity formation ever takes place or life continues on the basis of a character dominated by what Erikson termed identity confusion.

I went through these years in an identity foreclosed status. Having attained a vocational identity, working in HR, earning lucrative salary and progressing rapidly in breadth and depth of roles it was almost impossible



to leave although my internal job satisfaction was questionable. I question if my parents had not prematurely passed during this stage would I have continued with foreclosed identity. My guess is I might have except for the normal process of meaning making in mid – life which may have effected a change.

### **Loss**

Loss in this period was the death of both my parents within seven years of each other, loss of college life, life of the childhood home, the last of my siblings single married during this period and had their first child, loss of family as I was now the aunt for all, loss of the dream,

Grief - Acknowledgement, acceptance, and integration of the past are considered to be important for coping with grief, and search for meaning and reconstituting one's world are core challenges of adapting to loss (Fleming & Belanger, 2001). Psychotherapy and support groups can help people express their emotions, gain social support, create meaning, and enhances more positive feelings and appreciation for one's coping abilities (Lamb 1988; Clark & Goldney, 1995).

Tolstikova's (2011) study on emotional functioning in grief adjustment suggests that emotional awareness, expression and adjustment leads to meaning making, which can be an effective coping strategy in working through grief.

Numerous theories are put forward for coping with grief yet I did not seek support to manage grief. I thought it was a normal process of life. The sadness and numbness I felt at the time were buried in my busy life. Disenfranchised grief was not something I recognized or acknowledged, just felt the pain of it.

Janoff-Bulman (1992) explained, “Overwhelming life experiences split open the interior world of victims and shatter their most fundamental assumptions.

In the event of trauma—violent tragedy and death—each of these assumptions is challenged and the loss of the assumptive world can occur (Kaufmann, 2002b). Those assumptions which have kept us steady and have given coherence to our lives are soon discovered to be illusions and an abrupt, terrifying disillusionment occurs (Fleming & Robinson, 2001).

In writing this thesis I was focused on Marcia identity structure and identity content. It was with reference to changing identity structure that I felt that fundamentals on which I built my life were eroding. However on the writing of the thesis the concept of the assumptive world shattering brings and enlightenment and a compassion to self that lifts a weight from me.

The loss of religion, coincided with the death of my father. Religion provided hope and optimism for me. It was a loss at a time I needed it most.

The concept of spiritual health is also of increasing interest to health professionals. It has been argued that the spiritual dimension of health provides the meaning and purpose in life and acts as a unifying force within an individual, which integrates other dimensions of health (Rowling and Gehrig 1998). In this view, spiritual health is seen as the product of connectedness to self, to others and a greater reality. Balance and harmony of these three areas of connectedness create optimal spiritual health and the conditions to achieve one's full potential in life. (Gehrig 1998, 46)

With the loss of religion for me came the loss of hope. The sense of hope lost was as if a 'light was switched off within. Hope can be defined as the expectation of good in the future (Zilberfin & Hurwitz, 2003). In the midst of the darkest times, we tend to lose hope and anticipate that the darkness of

the moment will become the only reality. For those who suffer from assumptive world violation, hope may be in short supply Beder (2005)

### **Reflection**

I wonder on rereading this element of my thesis if life events, in my view the premature deaths of my parents, had not taken place in my early adult life might I have taken the time and had the courage to explore a career, a vocational identity, that might have been more congruent with my personality. It was towards the end of college and early working life that I suspect I entered a moratorium phase of what do I really 'want to be doing' and this process was potentially hindered by the early death of my mother. Who knows?

I still struggle to use the word 'depression', image again, and recall a tutor removing the label suggesting we are all on a continuum between feeling very good on one end of the scale and very low on the other. Each day we are all at different point of the continuum.

#### (iv) Adulthood (40 – 65)

*The past is never dead. It's not even past. William Faulkner (1951, p 80)*

#### **The crash – I was 43**

Internally I struggled to keep it together. I started to 'crash' The following journal entries capture the thought about that time.

*'sometimes I feel the world is closing in around me. I want to do good, be good, help others genuinely and sometimes it all just goes belly up . I really don't know how to get out of the space I am in. Work is the main issue and the stress I am experiencing here'*

and a later entry.....

*'I get blanks – total block unable to remember conversations unable to concentrate/focus on what I am doing'*

Within an hour of writing the above journal entry, on that same day I picked up the phone to my manager suggesting I was going to resign to which in true french style she said

*'on no no Clare. You are just burnt out. Take some time out'.*

Placing the phone on the receiver I gathered my belongings and left the office.

And so ended my working days with the mutinational world.

This was followed by a relationship breakup, the emotional impact of which far outweighed the significance of the relationship. Infidelity - I could not believe somebody could disregard and disrespect me in such a humiliating way. The thought of others knowing killed me.

It was only then I grieved my parents.

I sought support.

### *Conversations with a counsellor*

In exploring my support mechanisms the following conversation took place with respect to my family

*Me: The five of us are very close. We might not see each other too often yet we always know we are there for each other. I know I can call on any one of my family at any time, for anything and vice versa.*

*Counsellor: I hear that you can but would you. Would you call them if you needed them.*

*Me: Well yes, Well not for this episode cos each of them have a lot going on with their respective families and I just need to get on with it.....I mean I have nothing to be complaining about. And no I suppose I would not want to trouble them..... I would not want them worrying.*

And in recalling my way of living to the counsellor the following gives an insight into how I viewed work in my life

*Counsellor .....So at the time life was good*

*Me: I had everything and a very optimist outlook to life. I never planned my life. I felt life would happen as it was meant to happen for me. The jobs I ended up i I just seem to 'fall into them'. Opportunities came my way and I never said 'no' seeing the opportunities as the elements to bring me closer to the life I am meant to have. And when that life came about all would be well. The idealised life was quite simple a house, a partner and family to grow old with. The life I was living was only a 'stop gap ' to the better life that was coming to me!*

*But you said that life was good ?*

*Yes in the eyes of society life was good and it was.....yet it felt empty. It was good in the sense that I had material security, many friends, a 'good'*

*income, a 'good' job. I was able to spend and enjoy spending. I was spending a lot, going out a lot, always busy, no time to think.*

*Counsellor: That does not sound so bad to me ?*

*Me: I know, it was not bad to the objective eye. It was good yet I felt lost in the world. Where was 'I' in all of this? I felt lost to my self if that makes any sense to you. At a surface level life was very good yet underneath that surface I felt I did not know myself. I was very accomodating. Work became everything on which my life hinged. Everything started to pile up. My perfect life was not materialising. I was avoiding any thing that was not pleasant - bills, conflict, time alone. I was living in a bubble that was all go yet lacking meaning.*

*Me: It was as if I was waiting for someone to come into my life to manage and organises those parts of life I found difficult or had no interest in – mainly money and bill management . I was taking up jobs almost as stop gaps and I was identifying with those jobs. Drifting waiting for another to plan my life. I was waiting to plan and start my life with another. I did not know it then yet see it now I was waiting for life to begin.*

*Me: As this did not happen. I became more engrossed with work. Putting things on the 'long finger' until they became another problem to solve.*

## **Return To Education**

Frantically in search of meaning to life I returned to education the following autumn. Education gave me an anchor, a focus. A story to tell. Reskilling to find a job that adds value, helps others and taps into my strengths and potential ,howeve,r I needed support, a safe space, to help explore 'me'. What is the potential? Five turbulent years have passed since that time. Going from full time employment and a lucrative financial situation to social welfare payments was not easy. The following journal entry somewhat

reflects the turmoil I experienced. Anxious, worried, confused, unsure of who I was yet always hopeful .....

*'Caroline (my friend) is right I do need to get me back. I need to get going. I do not want or need anyone to be worried about me. I am worried about me. It will be well- it will I need to go through what I am going through and I will come out the other end. I will. I can do whatever I want to do. It will be okay. I am confused, I am anxious, I am afraid. I want to be loved. I can't pray and maybe I need to. ....I need to find me. I need to know what I want. ....have I wasted life? Have I got to this stage and wasted the last 10 years of my life'*

The return to education gave me a safe haven for all I needed to explore.

The following conversation with a counsellor reflects what I was hoping to achieve in reestablishing myself:

*Me: but I do believe .....That we want to find our way and when I say find our way find the life that is a match for us, I think find a life that taps into (sigh) the potential within us. If we all can find that potential within us and if I think, if I can just 'be', and if I can go with, trust what comes to me, the reason is in support of finding your potential and that match for your potential that is within you to fulfill life, to have a fulfilled life or to find meaning in this life*

*Counsellor: would you have found some of that meaning through your therapy when you look at that did you also get answers around some of that for yourself Claire*

*Me: It's funny as I talk to now Maire what is coming to me in terms of the meaning of life for me. It is almost about tapping into that potential within you and then if you tap into that potential and grow*

*that potential then it makes for a fruitful life for the short period that we are here.*

### **Reestablishing myself**

Through postgraduate studies I felt I transformed in a way of thinking about myself. I felt I gained insight to myself I previously did not have.

As I transitioned, however, from voluntary work, to temporary contracts and finally to a fixed term contract within the public sector I questioned had I achieved what Mosak and Maniacci (corey p117) described as insight 'understanding translated into constructive action' .

### **Transition to full time employment**

The period was very turbulent. I was of the view I had figured out the direction I wanted to go. Build a career in careers education. Taking up temporary roles with the view to build experience and ultimately attain a permanent role I went through a very turbulent period where I felt trust was broken with colleagues. I went through a very sensitive period where positions were coming available that it was obvious other people were pinpointed for. I struggled with this concept. I felt hurt by a change in role 'suggested' to me. A role I was 'encouraged' to take. I was afraid. I felt here I am again taking on roles presented to me, feeling in this case I had no choice but to take the role and subsequently apply for the role on a long term contract basis. I was consumed during this period with hurt feelings. Feeling that those I worked with, that praised me greatly, were the very ones encouraging me to take another role. I questioned if people did not enjoy working with me. It baffled me as that is not how I felt.

I stood back and asked myself 'what is this about'. It was a huge learning for me that this was not personal. This was the political system in which I was operating. This was above me, above personal relationships. This was politics. This was favours owed. This was the political landscape in which I had to operate. There were recruitment elements over which I had



no control. There were dynamics within the organisation over which I had no control. During this period there was a mix of fear and excitement and I have to say anger, about me, over the manoeuvring /positioning of activity about me. Yet this was the system. This was not about me.

I made a decision to rise above this. Potentially this move would be very good for me. I had control over my choice to take this opportunity, not really knowing what it was about and run with it. Take the chance. Make it work for me.

I made a conscious decision to 'grab' this opportunity and see what I could make of it. An energy came about me to move this forward constructively. The only way I could do this was to harness the risk taker within me, as I had done with roles in the past, and see where this would take me. This was particularly difficult as for years I had berated myself for not planning my career. During this period I was feeling particularly vulnerable. Now in reestablishing myself in work I thought I had a plan yet staying to plan was proving difficult because of activities outside my control. And by staying on plan I felt I was closing potential opportunities. I had to take this and drive it and see what I could make of it. In so doing move away from the dynamics that drained my energy.

What was within my control and what was not? Reflecting on this new role there were certainly aspects of it that might suit my style. While I envisioned a career in career guidance this role would certainly, long term, compliment that and support me in building my knowledge in the labour market field.

There was a slight fear about me that here I go again. Taking roles that came before and seeing where they would take me. Yet it was different? I was taking control of something. Of what I don't know. Where it would lead I did not know yet I was prepared to take a chance and see where it would lead me. Yes similar to before but the difference was this is part of my life. My life as it is now. I was not taking this thinking it would lead to something better I was taking it to build my life. Reestablish my life and

find direction for myself within it. I was open to opportunity to building my life. If it works it works if it does not then it is not for me and something else would work.

## **Identity**

In terms of identity Erikson sees this period as the period negotiating generativity vs stagnation. It is a period where we give back to society with a realization that time is short. I found myself wondering what I want to be doing for the rest of my days.

Rando (1984), there are three main tasks of the work: decathexis, development of a new relationship with the deceased, and formation of a new identity. Formation of a new identity happens when the mourner comes to the realization that the major loss of the loved object has changed him/her permanently.

Adults report that their vocation was the most important factor in their identity development and the arena of significant and earliest identity status transitions. (Kroger & Haslett, 1991) In Brown (2015) ' processes of developing occupational identities and narratives are never complete; they are always emergent and transformed in a dynamic and interactive way within the contexts in which they are developed (Brown 1997)

Transitions that depart from established conventions , in contrast , typically require greater justification to both the self and others. Ibarra et al (2010)

During times of significant transition, identity work may move to the front burner of everyday consciousness as the person seeks explicitly to align his or her evolving story with rapidly changing events and self conceptions. During other periods of marked stability in the life course, however, the person may do no more than occassionally tweak and edit the story (McAdams 1999:486)

A socially desirable transition is one that is generally regarded by members of one's role set in terms of positive terms (Ashforth 2001:94) A key

assumption underlying the notion of social desirability is that the role transition should represent progress; any regression – loss of status, title, or prestige, for example – represent a deviation from what is socially valued and expected. McAdams (2006)

Pearce (2010) 'I realized a narrative is never finished, or at least the creation of a new narrative does not necessarily mean past narratives will not re-emerge and entangle themselves in the present'

## **Loss**

In terms of loss during this period I would think I had lost everything. Lost hope, lost identity, lost trust in people, lost confidence, lost dreams, loss of image, lost job and connections with others began to erode. I was dislocated, ungrounded. Loss of ability to keep life together.

Beder (2005) When the assumptive world is shattered through loss, the guidelines with which the self navigates the world are overturned.

"Traumatic loss overwhelms and floods the self with negative assumptions deviant from the protective norm of the good. . . . The terror that shatters the assumptive world is a violent deprivation of safety....What is lost in the traumatic loss of the assumptive world? All is lost. Hope is lost . . ."  
(Kauffman, 2002b, p. 206).

During this period I attribute my resilience, my ability to seek help got help, to return to college all stem from my internalized codes of behavior that stood to me when I most needed them. Had I not had the 'get up and go, hardworking, all will be well attitude instilled in me as a child I may not have had the energy to pull through this period. I did have that resilience and it has taken me out the other side.

Attig (2002) argues that much more rebuilding of the subjective world needs to take place for adequate repair to be achieved Attig suggests that: "Relearning the world or coming to terms with the loss of our assumptive

world is primarily about learning new ways of acting and being in the world. It is a matter of coming to know how to go on in the world where so much of what we have taken for granted in the emotional, psychological, social, soulful, and spiritual dimensions of our lives is no longer supportable or practicable” (p. 64).

Hoppes (2005) rightly says ‘We might add the term identity to the list of constructs that are not what we thought but point to what life really is when things fall apart and we come into the present’

The obvious loss during this period was the loss of vocational identity and the social impact of this – the HR Manager was not more.

Grief in response to the ending of a romantic relationship is poorly understood or validated by society (Kaczmare & Backlund, 1991).

During this period there was also a significant loss to my assumptive world. Believing I was in search of new identity, which would be supported by a new career I thought I was back on track when reestablishing myself and working in an area that I thought was the perfect match for me.

### Reflection

Although there was significant loss during this period I refer to Rando (1984) and stage there is also significant gain. Through the exploration of identity and an understanding of the assumptive world I have gain maturity; a renewed sense of work dynamics - no not everyone can be trusted yet knowing that prevents disappointment and more manageable interaction; we are not all one big happy family in the world – there are boundaries particularly in the work environment between personal and professional relationships; through loss in this stage I have grown developed emotionally, rationally, cognitively and practically.

### Chapter 3 Transformational Processing

*'If there is a way that what I learn need not confront what, for me is real, then the learning will sit at the surface and there will be no engagement'.*  
(Friere 1970/2000)

Illeris (2014) the purpose is in some way to become better or get further; the learning should point forward, lead to improvement and imply that something in some way has to do with identity, an understanding, a way of behaviour, a mode of experience, is changed into something better, more proper, more promising or more rewarding'

Mezirow (1990) states that to make 'meaning' means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision-making or action, then making 'meaning' becomes 'learning'. We learn differently when we are learning to perform than when we are learning to understand what is being communicated to us. Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem-solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built. Learning may be defined as 'the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action'

Jennifer Pals 2006 suggests that research on narrative identity has shown that many qualities of how adults narrate their life stories e.g. coherence integration of meaning , themes of growth and transformation are closely associated with important outcomes in adulthood including life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, emotional maturity and physical health.

Jennifer Pals 2006 Recent studies suggest that positive changes in how adults narrate various aspects of their life stories may cause corresponding improvements in several aspects of wellbeing including physical health (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) , self acceptance and personal growth (Hemovore 2003 and recovery from depression (Watt & Cappeliez, 2000) .

Pals suggests that how by breaking down coherence and meaning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) it is possible for authors of narrative identity to provide their own second chances to grow, to be happy, to love, to achieve, to fully live if they keep the self connected to the negative emotional impact of difficult experiences in the past and use it as a narrative catalyst for possible self transformation in the present (Pals 2006a, 2006b) She calls this narrative identity process transformational processing. Pals looks at transformational processing when life does not go to plan in adulthood. How adults respond to the identity challenge of difficult life experiences may be understood in terms of two independent dimensions of narrative identity processing: exploratory narrative processing which correlates with maturity and coherent positive resolution, which correlates to well-being (Pals, 2006b).

Exploratory narrative processing - pathway to maturity refers to the active, engaged effort of individuals to 'fully acknowledge, to reflect on, and analyse the emotional impact of a difficult experience with an openness to learning from it and incorporating a sense of meaningful change into the life story'. (Pals 2006) On the positive level of emotional narrative processing the individual is 'highly reflective, dynamic and moving toward change and least exploratory being simplistically descriptive, static and focused on maintaining continuity and normalcy within the life story'. (Pals 2006)

Coherent positive resolution – pathway to well-being refers to the construction of a coherent and complete narrative of the difficult experience that ends positively and conveys a sense of emotional resolution to closure the most resolved narratives being very coherently structured and including a positive ending that shows the person has moved on emotionally and restored the positive in her life while the most unresolved narratives being less complete and ending in the midst of ongoing negative emotions, conflicting feelings and lasting wounds or regrets. (Pals 2006)

Pals (2006) and Mezirow both emphasize how the process of reflection gives opportunity to make meaning and transform our way of being with renewed thoughts, beliefs, behaviours. Pals 2006 study involved the on-going study of personality development in adult women (Helson 1967) where they were asked to narrate their most difficult and identity challenging life experiences. Pals 2006 in looking at the integration of the two dimensions of exploratory narrative processing and coherent positive regard identified four possible outcomes depending on the extent to which the narrator was high or low in each of the dimension. The four outcomes are:

- (a) Transformational processing which is high in exploratory processing and high in coherent positive resolution where one has attained meaning for the difficult life experience which they have incorporated positively into their life story
- (b) Self distancing processing where narratives rated low in exploratory processing and high in coherent positive resolution. This resulted in a narrative identity that was 'primarily defined by the continuity of happiness'. 'Self-distancing promotes subjective well-being, but over time, the resistance to interpreting difficult experiences as opportunities for reconstructing identity could limit the development of maturity. (Pals 2006)
- (c) Exploratory- ruminative processing. This refers to narratives that were rated high on exploratory narrative processing but low on coherent positive resolution. Through this process the narrator may be reflective and exploratory in interpreting the difficult experience and hence wisdom and maturity, the capacity to gain a sense of well-being may be hindered.
- (d) Limited/incomplete is where the narrator lacked exploration or resolution and hence the 'narrative processing exhibited appears incomplete and disconnected from a coherent sense of narrative identity, limiting its capacity to contribute to maturity or well-being.' (Pals 2006)

Pals 2006 in drawing this distinction to the narrative of difficult life experiences gave me a knowing and understanding that has impacted on my maturity.

With the family mantra 'keep the best side out, stay positive be happy' following the death of my mother and father I quickly moved to a narrative that was self distancing. 'Get up get on with it, be happy'. The motivation for this largely being external -maintain the family image, be there for my father following the death of my mother and to some extent that's life get on with it. After the death of my father that same self distancing narrative applied however it was getting harder and harder to maintain. The cracks were beginning to seep through. It was only following the exit from work that I began a narrative of exploration, largely driven from an internal force, internal motivation, to be well, and manage and live life to the full which at the point of commencing exploration I was struggling with. I never questioned the impact. Grief without exploration. In many ways unexpressed grief. My zest for life started to crumble. Although I did not know it then my 'assumptive world' had started to fall apart and continued to do so over the following years as the fairytale dream of meeting a partner and building my own family did not materialize. The 'non-event' transitions (Schlossberg 2012) and subsequent disenfranchised grief related to non-events and non-death losses, in particular the erosion of my assumptive world, and, although I am slow to admit it, the loss of youth received no attention, no compassion, no acceptance. As my self distancing narrative processing developed I demonstrated lack of maturity in living.

As disenfranchised grief, unknown to me developed, my narrative became limited/incomplete until my 'crash out', leaving work, created a disorienting dilemma that I needed to explore.

The new assumptive world knows that life is short.

Through transformation learning and processing I have gained an insight into my assumptive world and how it has guided my life. While I attributed



'depression' or feeling low to the death of my parents, this was only partly the case. As my assumptive world was eroding I internalised the actions of others which did not fit my assumptive world and wondered what was wrong with me which resulted in losing confidence, self esteem and at times a will to live. I feel lighter with this writing.

## Chapter 4 Reflexivity & Power of the Narrative

*Life is as tedious as a twice told tale vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man.*

Shakespeare

Auto ethnography starts with personal life and requires paying attention to physical feelings and emotions, by actively encouraging emotional recall (Ellis, 1999). I worry that the hours, the toil, the process is not adequately reflected in the product.

Yet whether the thesis has captured the emotion or brought the reader in to the extent I hoped it would ,and autoethnography would expect it to do ,what I have gained from this writing is a renewed 'self'.

I entered this process building on my postgrad thesis where in questioning what is it about me that I had an unhealthy relationship with time – I suggested I was not assertive, over accommodating etc and assumed the absence of my mother through illness when I was young or the over protection of my older sister were the cause. I needed to accept and have compassion for how I was. In writing I initially felt everything in my postgraduate thesis was 'wrong'. Through the writing I became more and more aware that it was not wrong, but in this writing I had gone to another layer of understanding of the self. The postgraduate programme brought to one level of understanding however the writing of this thesis brought me to a deeper level , to the unconsciousness level of the assumptive world and the structures on which I based my identity.

*As recounted in 'Till We Have Faces' (Lewis 1956) What began the change was the very writing itself. Let no one lightly set about such a work. Memory once waked will play the tyrant. I found I must set down, (for I was speaking as before judges and must not lie) passions and thoughts of my own which I had clean forgotten. The past which I wrote down was not the past that I thought I had (all these years) been remembering. I did not, even when I had finished the book, see many things that I see now. The change which the writing wrought in me (and of which I did not write)*

*was only a beginning – only to prepare me for the gods’ surgery. They used my own pen to probe my wound. (p 146)*

The wounds I opened through writing- recognition of the my eroding assumptive world which all influenced how I managed the premature death of my parents at an influential and developing stage of my life, how I managed my being within the multinational world and how I viewed people. No, the world is not perfect, and no, everybody is not perfect within it, not everyone can be trusted, people live people die. My coping mechanisms were only set up for the perfect world.

I wrote the numerous drafts, starting in childhood, starting with particular transitions and even as I am coming a close my internal voice is saying I could have started this thesis in young adult stage and it might equally have been effective in bringing about a change of perspective on life. While academically it may have been beneficial to ‘cut’ the childhood stage in autoethnography from a personal perspective I wanted, and needed to, go back to that grounded place to move me forward. There was a draw back to my childhood. Possibly mirroring how I live my life, always wanting to revert back to the ‘happy’ way things were. In some ways this is possibly what challenged my writing I wanted to keep the ‘happy’ picture in everything, hide the mess.

McAdams (2005) a life story is more than a mere literary production. It is a story of the self told by a living person whose actions affect others. How I live my life impacts on others and by telling my story there is opportunity to build better relationships with others.

My sister was on my mind throughout and in seeking permission to have her mentioned in the thesis I called her. The powerfulness of reading excerpts of my thesis to my sister ..... I have always had a sense, maybe it is projection, that my sister feels this thesis and my earlier thesis were written about her. Seeking her permission to include her, giving context of her inclusion and reading an excerpt from adolescence to her, brought a lightness to my heart and shoulders. Something in my gut feels

a connection tightened. The relationship no longer hangs on a thread. Note permission, to mention my Supervisor and relay transcripts from counselling, was attained from both my supervisor and counsellor.

In the writing of this thesis I thought to bail out on numerous times, right up to the last few hours of writing this thesis. Stuck, not being able to move, jumping from one section to the other, from one article to another. Months and months of what appeared to be time wasting.

*The self that appears to others is a performed character, a public self, attending to standardized social obligations while concealing its true desires( Goffman 1959, cited in Hastrup 1995)*

Throughout the writing of this thesis and as I am nearing the end I question what is it about me that was not connecting to the extent that I could do to a supportive supervisor. I have no doubt it would have made life far easier. Of numerous drafts scripted I have shared little. It is as if I needed it to be good enough to share and felt it was not. It somehow mirrors how I 'operate' in life. I want to be 'good'. Hold that professional image. Be regarded well by others. Hence I am slow to share vulnerabilities. What I was thinking of the thesis I was projecting outwards to the supervisor. 'She will think this is useless'. This caused me to reflect back to the time in which I 'crashed out'. In seeking support I worked with my doctor and a counsellor, I did not share with my family and friends, until I was comfortable that I could do so in a good mindset. They, without question, would have been supportive. Had I done so the process may have been less lonely and isolating however the exploration may have been limited. More importance given to the 'image' rather than the 'self'. The extent to which I hide my vulnerabilities only became evident in this thought process while writing. I hide the mess maintain the image. A lesson for life. Just because my family now have their respective families it does not mean I go 'it' alone. I made the writing of this thesis very difficult by doing so.

Thank you to my sister, Ann, and my friends 'whose waiting for me to finish mentality' has engulfed me in a supportive cushion that I have underestimated on many occasions. In particular the numerous daily calls from my Maynooth colleague and dear friend Joy, whose simple jovial words 'how are we doing' kept me going. I have achieved what I set out to achieve with the writing of this thesis. I have attained an understanding of the self, of my 'self' and in so doing can go forward with meaning and purpose with a changed assumptive world and live a dynamic an ever changing identity. In the words of my supervisor this has been a 'labour and I have given birth'. My friends and family are now waiting to hear news of the birth. While I have been reclusive in the writing of this thesis I have never felt their presence so strongly throughout. I am not alone. I am not isolated, and have no need for fear of isolation in this world.

'Image' my self image had been active throughout the thesis. A negative self image seeking to portray a positive outward image. In first reading Berzonsky (1990) identity styles I associated with the diffuse avoidant identity style and in my post graduate, I now think, incorrectly associated my self with the anxious ambivalent child. My life, my growing was none other than a secure base. The codes of behaviour that I internalised as a child have stood well for me throughout my life. What I have experienced is a normal growing up process.

As I finish my thesis, it has been laborious, I recall the words of my tutor in the context of encouraging creativity, as I fumbled over my twentieth draft 'there is no need to be so earnest'. To say I recall the word is untrue. For some reason it stayed with me throughout my latter scripts. Raising curiosity I look up a definition of **earnest** : resulting from or showing sincere and intense conviction. "An earnest student"

*synonym* [serious](#), [serious-](#)

s: [minded](#), [solemn](#), [grave](#), [sober](#), [humourless](#), [staid](#), [steady](#), [intense](#)

committed, dedicated, assiduous, keen, diligent, zealous, industrious, hard-working;  
studious, thoughtful, cerebral, deep, profound, bookish, donnish  
"he had a reputation for being dreadfully earnest"

I smile. This is how I have lived my life with work .....too earnest. Reflection on my supervisors use of the word 'earnest' Working hard and being serious about work is in my psyche. Giving full commitment to people I work for, the authority figure, and trusting them to the 'ntd' degree, working with an intensity that at times can be unhealthy. I even approached Maynooth with that same intensity. There is value in recognising this and lightening up a little, while staying committed with a health view on trust, even in authority figures.

I had such energy and enthusiasm for my programme, for the thought process yet I could not seem to put pen to paper. Hours wasted thinking about starting. Pearce (2010) suggests how 'avoiding the research and withdrawing from the world was a way of protecting myself from problematic feelings' Fear of starting. Fear of going back to where I once was, fear of the feeling, from the time I crashed out. Fear of the isolating pain of loss.

Unknown to myself though this thesis I have been doing identity work through narrative. I thought I was just writing a thesis of my learnings which I have, however, in the tortorous process I am changed.

*"in the process of research I came undone by my grief but my ability to come undone also revealed the power of my vulnerability. The journey was one in which I faced a series of crisis of confidence and insecurity in my role as researcher and in my sense of self. Feelings on inadequacy and feeling like a 'fraud' over my choice of research topic at points overwhelmed me to the point of inactivity and withdrawal'(Pearce 2010)*

I had a perfect life. What did I have to write about? A lot.

As suggested by Foote (2015) through narratives we may come to see that the identities that once defined us are no longer true. They may gain 'sudden insight into the very structure of cultural and psychological assumptions which has limited or distorted understanding of self and.... relationships' (Mezirow 1981 p5) narrative writing may provoke 'movement in the same direction (allowing students to revise specific assumptions ....until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed'

I feel I have experienced the power of narrative identity writing and feel thankful for the privilege.

### **Power of the Narrative**

*Illeris (2007) refers to the so called 'life turn' – a mental phenomenon concerning the perception and acknowledgement that the remaining lifetime is not unlimited.' 'time is passing and the last phase of life is approaching'. To many it might sound ludicrous that it is only now as I approach forty nine that I realise I am mid- life. What I am experiencing is normal mid life existential questioning. It is through writing and reading of narrative identity that this dawns. More grief!*

Sooner or later, life has a way of disorienting everyone. Adults need to understand that 'the erosion of meaning in life is a normal process '(Daloz, 1999, p 4) something few consider until it happens. (Foote 2015) . Cognitive theorists claim that these dilemmas are a catalyst to adult development and growth (Perry, 1999)

Until I sat to write this thesis there was block in my mind about exiting the multinational world as I did. A fear that I was 'depressed' or a greater fear that I was similar to my grandmother 'suffering from her nerves'. Both of which my childhood assumptions view negatively. I now know this was a normal process in mid-life. My life is normal. I am normal.

McAdams(2006) puts forward 'the proposition that coherent life stories 1) provide convincing casual explanations for the self, 2) reflect the richness of lived experience, and 3) advance socially- valued living action.' I

struggled with getting the autoethnography to this level – began with personal narrative – paralysed to move beyond to the emotion and pain of what I now know to be ‘growing up’.

McAdams (2015) suggests working in Bruner’s (1996) mode of thought, the person links together different scenes in her or her life to explain who he or she is (Baerger & McAdams, 1999) . In seeking to link events in my life I wrote from different angles, from different start points and in the process of narrating again, and again, and again, the insight and enlightenment became known, never to be unknown. While my scripted narrative may not have captured all that the wished to portray in it the writing of various narratives and the blocks through this process leave me enlightened to a new way of being. Enlightened to a new living identity in the making.

‘Life stories are never value- free’ Narrators make implicit moral claimss when they construct stories to convey their lived experience and to explain who they are (linde, 1993) Furthermore the life stories they construct are grounded in moral assumptions and ideological convictions regarding how the world should work and how human beings should relate to it and to each other( McAdams, 1985) When traumatic events undermine the ontological and moral assumptions upon which a life story is based, the narrator faces the daunting challenge of reworking those assumptions in order to make new meanings in a world that now seems meaningless (Neimeye, 2001: Tedeschi & Calhoun , 1995)

Narrative identity work refer to social efforts to craft a self narrative that meet a person’s identity aims with a narrative being described as a serious of events with the purpose of making a point (Bruner, 1990; Labov, 1972 Weick, 1995)

Self narratives are powerful instruments for constructing a ‘transition bridge’ (Ashforth 2001) across the gaps that arise between old and new roles and across identities claimed and granted in transition- related social interactions. (Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010)



Narrative identity work is useful to.....'make sense of confusing or unanticipated changes (Louise, 1980b) and when they look back on role moves to justify the rationale for the transition to themselves and others. (Ashforth 2001). Unknown to me narrative identity has supported my unexpected transition from the multinational work to a new work identity and filled all the gaps in between. It has been my 'transition bridge'. (Ashforth 2001)

People have many coexisting self narratives that ensure a flexible presentation of self. (Bateson 2004)

Authenticity and validation criteria are related since how others see us matters for how we ultimately see ourselves. Baumesister (1988). This was particular relevant for me among family, friends and ex work colleagues. I found unknown to myself I had a varied 'narrative repertoire' and the narrative used depended on the audience.

The transition process entails 'moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty, and/or ambiguity , and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity that resolves into an altered form. Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010)

Our perspective suggests that the evolution of identity in role transition is matched and evidenced in a parallel evolution of the person's narrative repertoire such that its various components eventually coalesce around new self understandings that result from the transition. Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010)

Narrating the self changes the self. Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010)

Janoff-Bulman and McPherson (1997) theorized that when the bereaved strive to find meaning in loss they

*experience the pain of shattered assumptions and increased awareness of their own vulnerability; they know human outcomes can be random and meaningless. Yet they also experience the*

*pleasure of a newfound appreciation of life and sense of value and meaning in their daily existence. . . . Against the backdrop of a meaningless world, survivors create a life of meaning.* (Janoff-Bulman & McPherson, 1997, p. 103).

In addition to sense making and benefit finding, this description implies the constructive process of identity change, as survivors are changed forever by their newfound wisdom.

## Chapter 5 Implications for Guidance Practice

*'As I live each day may I do my part to make one difference and touch one heart. As I live each day may it be my goal to encourage one mind and inspire one soul ' (anonymous)*

Career guidance implications I approach from two aspects. Career guidance as a profession and from an individual guidance practitioner perspective and how we might approach clients at different life stages.

From the wider career guidance perspective I feel the professionalism of the field needs to be emphasized. If career guidance is viewed in a limited way as information giving and direction towards a new career goal an opportunity may be missed to facilitate or empower a client to become familiar with their 'assumptive world' and the dynamic nature of identity and to explore their ' narrative identity' to truly effect change that is meaningful.

While this certainly may not be the case with all clients, if the practitioner is not equipped with the skill to identify the needs the client may be at a loss and move from one career to another carrying the confusion.

While my information is anecdotal I believe within private practice more and more career guidance practitioner are attaining the skill to holistically work with clients. Organisations that offer career guidance services have an obligation to build a model of support that meets the needs of all clients e.g. more time may be offered to mature students returning to college in midlife. In larger organizations the career guidance metrics tend to focus on number of clients through the service as opposed to quality of interaction. Exploration of assumptive worlds and supporting in coherence of a narrative story requires more than a 15 min or 30 minute session.

I have a sense that this metric driven culture may be more prevalent in the very areas that most need attention. Unemployed or career changes among middle class professionals may have the resources to seek private guidance counselling however unemployed and those from lower socio economic backgrounds may not have the resources to do so. It is a

greater problem therefore if the support institutions do not have a holistic view of career guidance counselling beyond information giving and career direction.

Much debate has taken place among my peers on career guidance and the reference to counselling. While it might be argued that career guidance is not counselling and I agree to a point however having a level of counselling skills is required. The learnings I have achieved through this writing are, I suggest, of a counselling nature in seeking meaning for life, not just the next career move. There is a skill in counselling element of guidance that needs to understand the balance between guidance counselling and deeper psychodynamic counselling. Guidance needs to include an element of counselling to support in deriving meaning in life.

As career guidance practitioners it is important to keep up to date with the changing nature of career guidance, developments in the labour market, and have the skill to explore beyond that professional image of the client.

Career reframing processes can be viewed from three perspectives: reframing as a process of identity development, as a form of relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development and taking place within particular opportunity structures (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). Being skilled to work across these four development areas is key for career guidance practitioners.

From an individual practitioner perspective a few points that have come to mind for my own practice.

Illeris in reference to adults seeking 'self actualization and learning' suggests that 'the new wave of learning and education for mature adults is, for the time being, mainly a middle class phenomenon'. As per my point earlier I suggest the case is similar for guidance practice

I feel privileged to have this opportunity in my middle life. As I meet clients, and again part of my internal psyche suggests that as, no matter how difficult I might find it to make ends meet financially in order to avail of

studies or further self development there are people who are 'worse off' either time poor with family commitments or resources poor to avail of different programmes and supports. In meeting clients there is a heightened awareness of this. It is important for career guidance counsellors to assess what is practical for clients within the resources that they have. This involves guidance counsellors having a knowledge of where to direct clients for free programmes or services.

To truly provide career guidance it is not enough to look at the transition in itself. In my own situation were I to attend to a guidance counsellor my view might have been that I 'foreclosed' on attaining an office job in HR and hence a mismatch and work stress. Let's look at where the match might be. Critical for a client in this scenario is for the guidance practitioner to provide a safe space to explore the transition, the 'disorientating dilemma'.

McAdams (2006) There is a role for the practitioner to facilitate a coherent narrative 'People construct stories to make sense of their lives; therapists and their clients co-construct new narratives to replace disorganised or incoherent stories of self; lives become meaningful and coherent (or not) amidst the welter of social constructions and discourses that comprise contemporary postmodern life. It follows further more that story construction – at the level of individual group and even culture – moves (ideally) in the direction of coherence (1993)

McAdams (2006) 1980's social philosophers and social scientists proposed that people make sense of their own lives in terms of self defining life stories – integrative narratives of self that reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in such a way as to provide life with identity, meaning and coherence'.

Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010) However– most plots share a three part structure consisting of beginning middle and end. A career guidance counsellor can support in the developing of this structure to bring coherence to a client narrative.

McAdams (2010) a therapist empathy and desire to help can often result in 'a rush to coherence' Josselson counsels therapist to hold back when necessary and to be willing to experience with the patient 'the anxiety of sitting with undigested elements of experience until they take meaningful shape, however transitory or provisional the shape may be' ( Josselson, 2004 p 125) Practitioners need to be mindful to take the client at their pace. Allow time for the process to evolve.

Rowling (1999) recommends interviewers maintain an 'emphatic distance' to ward against entangling your own experiences in "hearing" participants stories. The aim is to be neither "out" (too distanced from) or "in" (too overwhelmed by) the research but alongside. Rowling was making this recommendation with reference to interviewing for autoethnography however the same holds true of guidance interviews/sessions. There is a risk that as guidance practitioners, who have and continue to go through a learning process, may attribute our own learnings as relevant for the client . While this may be the case it should not be assumed from the outset. The client needs to narrate their own story.

Illeris in reference to adults seeking 'self actualization and learning' suggests that 'the new wave of learning and education for mature adults is, for the time being, mainly a middle class phenomenon'. I feel privileged to have this opportunity in my middle life. As I meet clients, and again part of my internal psyche suggests that as, no matter how difficult I might find it to make ends meet financially in order to avail of studies or further self development there are people who are 'worse off' either time poor with family commitments or resources poor to avail of different programmes and supports. In meeting clients there is a heightened awareness of this. It is important for career guidance counsellors to assess what is practical for clients within the resources that they have. This involves guidance counsellors having a knowledge of where to direct clients for free programmes or services.

Savickas (2011) proposes that vocational identity is one's vocational 'thesis' which impacts on our experiences as we construct our identities'. This approach recognises that the construction of an identity requires reflection on experience in a process of engaging others in a joint construction of a vocational identity which can be represented as a project or a story. Joint construction of an identity highlights the importance of significant others at different times during key development periods, to validate aspects of a developing identity and in sharing evolving identity stories (Savickas 2011)

The foundation of my own practice will continue to be constructivist and narrative where we story our own lives partnering with Super self concept and life span theory, Krumboltz and others as they emerge. Exploring life development and identity, assumptive worlds, life events and non events, grief and disenfranchised grief in the support of moving forward to a new career while being cognisant 'use the four- fold typology of relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development (Brown & Brimrose, 2014) to understand the best action and strategy for progression.

## Conclusion

What I have experienced in the writing of this thesis is normal 'growing up' leading to maturity. I carried my childlike thinking with me throughout my life – life is perfect, the world is beautiful, everyone is kind and to be trusted, we live in one big happy family, the future is bright. I carried this thinking through a busy and tough multinational world. My sister often said 'you need to toughen up' and she was right! Each slight, each conflict, disagreement within the workplace added another 'dent' to my confidence. I took the views of others on my shoulders. 'What was wrong with me' that work relationships are not developing as all relationships are supposed to develop. I internalized as something wrong with me, not fitting in, not good enough, when a relationship, an outcome is not as it is supposed to be. Life was not matching my 'assumptive world'. People were not thinking, feeling and doing as universally as I imagined they might.

Through my postgrad I searched for meaning for my 'lack of confidence'. I questioned was I an 'anxious ambivalent child' with my mother's absence due to illness as a child. Was I the product of 'the youngest child' syndrome with a strong older sister, protector and critic in one? While these were part of my social world as a child they were not 'the reason I am lacking confidence, lacking self-esteem, dislocated', not as self-assured as I might think I should be in mid-life and throughout my young adult years.

My assumptive world, how I thought life would be was not matching up. I had a beautiful childhood, a normal adolescence and as I went to move out to the 'big bad world of life' my mother died suddenly, although time on a life support machine gave us space to soften the blow fractionally. The eight years between her passing and my father's death working hard in a multinational world were tough. I felt an incongruence between what I now call my 'vocational' identity and my person. As my assumptive world



continued to shatter my father was my rock, my grounding force. All was not lost. My confidence got lower, work got tougher or as I now know, how I internalized work dynamics got tougher and my savior .....fairy-tale prince had still not turned up to bring me to that better life. Then my father passed .....my assumptive world had totally shattered and there was no savior. I was lost.

*The self that appears to others is performed character, a public self, attending to standardized social obligations while concealing its true desires( Goffman 1959, cited in Hastrup 1995)*

*'The truth will out' Shakespeare (1596)*

Keeping 'the best side out' I hid my vulnerabilities and continued to internalize the 'mismatches to my assumptive world'. My 'disorienting dilemma' was building with the death of my mother followed by my father, being on the peripheral of my family, who now all had their families and siblings, and no happy end to the fairytale all meaning fell out of life. I began to feel incompetent, not good enough

This has been my search for identity. The structures on which I based my identity eroded. In my search for identity I was searching for my 'label' in life.

I returned to adult education, specifically Maynooth, with all the earnestness with which I approach life. It may have been easier if I was less earnest, if I let go a little of the professional image. There were times in Maynooth I was too earnest, overexposed myself in my search for 'self', overwhelmed, feeling unable to manage the 'self', yet Maynooth, which does not exist without the people managing the programmes, people providing back up and my colleagues in which I shared my journey, provided a safe holding space through which I have had the privilege to explore 'who I am'! Maynooth has opened the door to the understanding of an ongoing process and provided me the scope to attain and continue to

seek 'transformational processing' as I progress through life with all its 'joys and pleasures, sorrows and sufferings'(Schirmacher).

Savickas (2011) 'identity responds to contexts that evoke different selves what Holstein and Gubrium (1999) referred to as 'geographies of self making'. Identity continuously adapts and changes in negotiating social positions and interpersonal discourses. Accordingly identity development is a lifelong process. An individual must repeatedly revise identity to adaptively integrate significant new experiences into the ongoing life story. And so my journey continues.

Hoppes (2005) 'Autoethnography helps us to see that everything changes and that identity is something one lives, not something one has.'

*Pema Chodron (2000) 'the trick is to keep exploring and not bail out, even when we find out that something is now what we thought. That's what we are going to discover again and again and again. Nothing is what we thought. I can say that with great confidence. Emptiness is not what we thought. Love. Buddha nature. Courage. These are code words for things we don't know in our minds, but any of us could experience them. These are words that point to what life really is when we let things fall apart and let ourselves be nailed to the present moment (p5)*

I finish on a note of thanks. From a life perspective, thank you to my family, my parents for the secure loving environment in which I developed an internal structure that built resilience within and a mindset to explore without which I may have bailed out. For this I am fortunate and for the family I was born into I say thank to the grace of God, whoever that higher order may be.

The beginning....

P.S .....Mid-life. Can you believe it! Thanks for your part in this narrative it is setting the ground work for my new assumptive world. That new structure will have us living to 100 so I have time to make it all up to you and enjoy the freedom of living identity.

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