

CONSTRUCTED IDENTITIES: LIVED EXPERIENCE AND THE STRUGGLE
TO INTEGRATE SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AMONG
LESBIANS, GAYS, AND BISEXUALS

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A
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Abstract

Most, if not all, Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals struggle at one point of their lives to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. This struggle can be either helped or hindered within the interpersonal communicative acts that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals encounter on a daily basis throughout their lives. This study uses narrative interviews to examine the impact and affect that various interpersonal communicative acts have had on five people, some of whom identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Though there is much research available regarding the struggle of this population to integrate these two identities, none was available to this researcher from a communication perspective. This study is grounded in social construction, assumed an interpretivist perspective, utilized a phenomenological lens, and analyzed the data via a thematic method. The major themes that emerged from this analysis demonstrated that interpersonal communicative events with family members, friends, religious leaders, church members, partners and acquaintances do indeed impact and affect the religious and sexual identity formation and maintenance as well as the potential of identity integration for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.

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Introduction

I remember as a youth, looking upward to a being that for me resembled a loving, elderly man who sat on an oversized regal chair that rested in an expanse of blue hovering within the glow of the earth. The white hair, both on His head and beard, floats lazily in an eternal breeze that strangely reminds me of what Triton must look like while he keeps watch over and protects all that is under his care in the deep blue sea. He looks down with an understanding that pierces deeply through me. He sees things within me that I don't even see myself. We communicate through eyes of understanding and emotional outpouring. I know that He loves me. I feel it as He wraps me in his emotive rays. Yet there is a well-guarded secret kept hidden within an encased darkness which I try desperately to keep from being exposed. He knows, of course, He knows everything.

I lower my gaze.

Looking back, thirty years later, I realize that I have continued to keep my eyes hidden. There were times when I have felt a pressing need for help and understanding. So I would reach and call out to what has now become an intellectually realized picture of immense outer-space. More often than not though, such reaching and calling was not a plea for answers, but rather to relate my deep joy for having found such a peaceful inner acceptance of self and an abiding love of my close family and friends. Yet, with all of the mentally challenging academic training, deeply moving spiritual conversations and what has been a rich, fulfilling and abundantly realized life that even now continues to be full of adventure, I still find myself wondering. Is He still looking? Are His embracing rays

of caring emotion still reaching out for me? Is there a place for me there? Do I dare tilt my gaze upward?

No, not just yet.

A. F.

The construction of an individual's identity through communication, whether interpersonal, intrapersonal, or with society at large, is a varied and multi-layered process that has the potential of affecting both the individual as well as the whole of humanity. Co-creating and co-maintaining personal identity is dependent on our relationships with others and is intrinsically linked to the systematic flow of meaning creation that emerges throughout the communication process which one encounters within his or her various interpersonal relationships. Only by growing in understanding how identity's meanings and realities are co-created and co-maintained will it be possible to help one another in the struggle to gain a true and well-adjusted sense of self.

In his song titled *Dial-A-Cliché* Morrissey (2002) addresses the struggles faced by people when they attempt to process issues of sexual identity. The protagonist of the song internally wrestles with familial and societal pressures to "scrap his fey ways", a term that refers to fairy-like or feminine characteristics. Describing the protagonist's feelings regarding the personal consequence of conforming to his families wishes, Morrissey sings "But the person underneath/Where does he go/ Does he slide by the wayside/or does he just die?" This question is not overly dramatic. Not only is it representative of the personal experiences of co-creating my own sexual identity, it also

mirrors the experiences of many others. One example was uttered by Aaron Fricke when he finally expressed his “authentic personhood” saying it was more than just “coming out of the closet; [He] was [coming] out of the coffin” (Roseborough, 2006, p.52). The emphasis on death and dying should not be lost here. Many who have found themselves at various places of the sexuality continuum have used words and expressions of similar gravity. Miller (1995) when struggling with his sexual identity, especially after the death of his mother, said that “at some deeper level, the image of a retributive God governed my ensuing depression. I was being punished through her death. God was punishing me for being attracted to a man . . . desire of any kind-for a man or a woman-became excruciatingly painful” (p. 137). Additionally, Alfred Corn writes of wrestling with his sexual identity stating that “God made everything, including me: my sexuality then was God’s doing also; but God had declared relationships between persons of the same sex sinful. Therefore, my only choice was to remain celibate or choose sin and damnation” (p. 137).

Sexual and religious identities are tightly intertwined within the self. Sexual identity involves deep core issues regarding love and one’s ability to give and receive love, whether it is physical, emotional and/or spiritual (Allen, 2006; Bethmont, 2006; Buchanan, et al., 2001, Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hutchins, 2001; Roseborough, 2006; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). Many times these issues are steeped within a struggle between individual identity and familial, societal and religious cultures (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen, 2006; Bethmont, 2006; Buchanan, et al., 2001; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Grace et al., 2004; Hutchins, 2001; Lease & Schulman, 2003; Moran, et al., 2007;

Roseborough, 2006; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). Throughout the world, viewpoints regarding sexuality are as varied as humans themselves. A diverse set of opinions exists ranging from ultra-conservative voices to ultra-liberal voices. On one hand, in an article for *Christian Bioethics*, Lutz (2004) likens the activity of gay-rights groups to “cunning cultural-guerilla-warfare tactic[s]” (p. 209) and rests much of his argument regarding homosexual participation in the church and in the military on a section from the Second Vatican’s Council on sexual ethics quoting “[t]his judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of” (p.191). On the other hand Creech (1998) stated that “there is no condemnatory biblical reference to same-sex sexual behavior between two people who are in a mutually loving, nurturing, caring and supportive relationship.” Regardless of where one falls in this range of opinions, it becomes increasingly clear that the interpersonal communicative acts performed within familial, societal and religious cultures are thoroughly enmeshed with an individual’s struggle to navigate through these two aspects of self, namely, one’s religious and sexual identity.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

The concept of self, in Western culture, is generally viewed as an inner hidden core of identity which an individual discovers as they progress throughout one's life. This view conceives of the self as having a preexisting life of its own, a life that remains hidden within until one discovers it through the life process. Western movies, books, media, religion and the English language itself perpetuate this view. Movies like *Into the Wild*, *Priest* and the *Star Wars* saga are infused with the idea that the self has a hidden identity that can be found and embraced. These popular stories suggest that when the self is fully realized, the individual will experience a sort of peace, whether an inner peace or actually peaceful environments for both the self and others. Even children's movies like *The Never Ending Story* and the *Harry Potter* saga embrace such concepts. The book *The Souls Code* encourages readers to view themselves as having a hidden purpose at the time of conception that individuals are responsible for discovering if they hope to live a full and happy life. Western religions regard texts such as Jeremiah 1:5 which states "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart, I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" as proof of individuals having a specific identity and purpose prior to birth which will only be revealed as one progresses through the life process (New International Version, 2010). And the English language itself is full of idioms that help to create and maintain this concept of self. For example, many people often say that they want to "find themselves", or go on a sabbatical in order to "discover who they really are", or after a particular event say "I really learned who I was." Much

of the reason for this is the plethora of psychology based theories and research that is so prevalent in our society.

1.1 The Self: Theories and Research

The role of interpersonal communication in creating and forming the internal messages and meanings is inherent in the process of self development, because it is both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication that the self struggles with, shapes, interprets and eventually utilizes in order to develop and form the various aspects of self. Whereas many best-selling books about the self may embrace ideas and terminology that support the view of the self as being ‘hidden’ or ‘undiscovered’; scientists within many fields including Psychology, Philosophy, Education, and Communication have studied the self from a variety of perspectives. Whereas psychological theories and research often focus on the intrapersonal aspects of self, communication theories focuses on the role that interpersonal communicative acts play in the development of self. However, many current psychological theories are beginning to recognize the impact of interpersonal communication and their respective theories are becoming increasingly more compatible.

Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) relational dialectic theory of communication builds on the ideas and research of Mead’s “Social Self” (1982), rejects the idea that the self exists as a unitary, autonomous entity and considers the concept of an individual, inborn, secret, yet-to-be discovered self to be merely a constructed idea. Shotter (1985) describes this process as resulting from the language used during interpersonal communicative acts

while describing our realities, our experiences of those realities and our understandings of the experiences themselves. In other words, as people within Western culture experience the world around them, they discuss those experiences with others. It is within these discussions that cultural, societal, religious, political, and familial messages regarding people's misconceived ability to 'find themselves', 'learn who they really are', and/or 'learn who an other really is' are co-created, co-maintained, and embraced as valid truth (Arundale, 2009; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) view the construction of self, as well as one's construction of more general meanings, realities and truths, to be a dialogic process in which one's self or identity construction is the result of an individual's balancing two contradictory states; the desire to be connected to another person and the desire to be separate from the other. They use Bakhtin's terms of "centrifugal" and "centripetal" to describe these states and define them as one's desire for unity (centripetal) and for difference (centrifugal) (as cited in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 272). The locus of this interplay *and* the resulting meanings, realities, and truths concerning the identity of self, according to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), is found *within* interpersonal communicative acts. The researchers view these states as occurring and as being met at the same time. They state that it is within the continual and constant interplay of these states that the self is constructed (p. 25).

Kegan (1982), a developmental psychologist, noted this potential many years earlier when he stated that "personality development occurs *in* [emphasis added] the context of interactions *between* [emphasis added] the organism and the environment, rather than

through the internal processes of maturation alone” (p. 7). Kegan’s constructive-developmental approach to self recognizes people construct reality and that these realities evolve through a process that is both stable and changing, explores the “evolution of meaning”, and explains that this process includes three components; (a) engaging physically (seeing, touching), (b) engaging socially “it requires another”, and (c) enacting or doing; not “doing which a human does [but] doing which a human is” (pp. 8-15).

A key to understanding the role that communication plays in this interplay is Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotype,” which as cited by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) “capture the notion that every dialogue is enacted in a concrete” temporal-spatial context and suggest it acts as both a constraint and enabling element of interpersonal dialogue (p.26). Additionally, such chronotypes, or temporal-spatial contexts are also largely created and maintained by the individuals within the communicative act. These temporal-spatial contexts then have an influence on the specific meaning creation and maintenance that result within the specific interpersonal communicative act. For example, if a student and instructor are in a classroom filled with books and supplies, then this temporal-spatial context will have an impact on the mood of the individuals in the situation as well the dialogic process employed throughout the experience. Hence both the temporal-spatial context and the resulting interpersonal communicative act will enable new meanings to be created for each individual and/or previously held meanings to be either adapted and/or strengthened for each individual about both one’s self and the other.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain that interpersonal communicative acts are both constrained by and enabled by the centripetal force to unify with the other and the centrifugal force to separate from the other. For example, within the dialogic process people wrestle with being “open” to the self and other and being “closed” to both self and other (pp. 142-145). As a person engages in interpersonal communicative acts, he or she will experience three multivocalities: “said and the unsaid”, “free talk and constrained talk”, and “inner speech and outer speech” (pp. 145-151). The first multivocality, the said the unsaid, takes context into account, in that how much and what is said during the interpersonal communicative act regarding the temporal-spatial context of the situation will, as discussed above, impact and influence the created meanings and realities for each person’s sense of self, the other, and understandings of the world around them (pp. 145-147).

The second multivocality, free talk and constrained talk, involves the Western notion that individuals have the ability to freely choose the words and/or expressions that they use within the dialogic process. Based on Bakhtin’s ideas, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain that the words and/or expressions that individuals use within interpersonal communicative acts are not really of one’s own volition, but rather, are governed by the “genre forms” that have been socially constructed for the given temporal-spatial context (p. 147). For example, consider an instance where two individuals are in a heated disagreement about how one person was treating the other. One person may want to stop arguing. He/she decides to attempt to lighten the mood by making a humorous observance. Does this individual have complete freedom in choosing the words and/or

expressions made? In general, the socially constructed Western view is that he/she does have free will in choosing a response. However, if his or her desire is to lighten the mood, then he or she will likely use the “preexisting genre forms” that have been socially constructed between and among the individuals throughout their current and past interpersonal communicative acts (p. 139). If these forms are not used, the other will likely only be confused, and though meanings regarding how the two individuals treat each other and how that treatment impacts them as selves and/or as a couple will continue to be made, reinforced and/or adapted, the intent of the speaker will likely not be realized, and any resulting meanings regarding the treatment of one another will influence the meanings that each make about him/herself and the other. However, this is not to suggest that using the expected genre forms will guarantee understanding. Arundale (2009) states that it is the response of the other that is required for meaning to be constructed for the speaker, and this response gives the speaker an indication, correct or not, of the receiver’s understanding of the intended interpretation of the other. So though genre forms may indeed be central to the words that people use within the communicative process, the meanings and interpretations that are formed and maintained require and hinge on the response of the other.

The most complex and fascinating of the three multivocalities is between inner and outer speech which involves intrapersonal language-based thinking (inner speech) and interpersonal language-based vocalizations (outer speech). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain it best when they write “an individual is a discursive repository of all of the prior interaction experiences that he or she has had in life, that is, the distal already-

spoken's" (p. 148). Within the pool of socially constructed meanings, beliefs, realities and truths that one has created and maintained throughout a lifetime of interpersonal communicative acts, are the voices of both the self *and* all the others that one has come into contact with throughout one's lifetime. And the other's pool, in effect, merges with one's own pool within each interpersonal communicative act. We as individuals, selves, or identities, from this standpoint, are really not individuals at all, but rather, one is merely an aspect of the larger collective of voices, meanings, beliefs, realities and truths of the other. Arundale's (2009) Conjoint Co-construction Model of Communication adds to this concept because it considers responses within interpersonal communication to be both sequential and specifically designed both for the person whom one is engaged in dialogue and "in a way that fits" the particular temporal-spatial context of the conversation (p. 11). Arundale (2009) suggests that because of this aspect of interpersonal communication, until one interprets how another understands them, one cannot really understand what he or she is talking about. Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) inner and outer speech multivocality, in effect, implies that one does not really know *who* one is until the other informs him or her.

This concept, that socially constructed pools which contain all the meanings, beliefs, realities and truths that have been created and maintained throughout one's lived experience, or discursive reservoirs (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and accounts (Shotter, 1985). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) go on to describe the implications of this dialogic view of truth upon the concept of self:

From a dialogic view, mental reservoirs such as emotions, memories, desires and predispositions are no more or less than metaphors of talk. They are absolutely essential to understanding how people organize and anchor the indeterminate, continuous flow of their experiences, but they are metaphors nevertheless. For it is in their use in communicating about the self that these metaphors gain meaning and are reinforced (p. 143).

Such a stance implies that though the body may indeed experience biological and physiological effects, there is a clear distinction between the mechanics of how a body works and the way the body is used to create a socially constructed sense of self (p. 144). It is interesting, and in some ways controversial in light of the Western view of an autonomous self, that memories, those past voices of interpersonal communicative acts, are not the only aspect of self that is socially constructed. Emotions, desires and predispositions are also linked to created and maintained meanings and realities. This has major implications for one's sense of self.

Many of the concepts contained in Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) concept of the dialogic self are supported in Richey and Brown's (2007) "social construction model of the emergent self" (p. 147). Both consider the self to be created and maintained within interpersonal communicative acts; both allow for the self to be simultaneously individual (experiential), relational and cultural; and both view the formation and maintenance of self to be fluid, continual and interdependently created and maintained within intrapersonal and interpersonal language-based communicative acts. There are some

differences however, these differences do not imply that the two approaches disagree, but rather, differ in subtleties in concepts.

The Emergent Self model places importance on one's frames of self-perception; visually, the Emergent Self model illustrates the self as emerging or being constructed within communication between the intersections of the experiential, relational, and cultural aspects of self and a person's greater social and physical environment (Richey & Brown, 2007, p. 148). Richey and Brown consider the "experiential self" as the dimension of self that "we take into any interactive moment" which would include our physical body, a consciousness of the self's ability to choose and act on those choices, the ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally, a personality, and an ability to relate to other people (pp. 147-153). Another dimension of self is the "relational self" which "encompasses the notion that every relationship . . . with another human being is a unique, communicative joining of two separate entities," and within these "joining" events, the experiential self of both entities is reformed (p. 154). The "cultural self" is the third dimension, and this dimension "depicts an aspect of self which is nurtured, shaped, and influenced by communicating within a society's parameters of value, social practice, and symbolic interaction" (p. 155).

Discussing the self in relation to the biological truth of one's being diagnosed with cancer, the self, according to Richey and Brown (2007) is influenced by the experiential, relational, and cultural mental frame used in reference to the self in relation to the cancer. If, for example, the self adopts a positive frame of the self as "living with cancer" as opposed to a negative view of the self as "dying of cancer", the biological self will likely

experience positive changes (p. 158-159). This frame, as pointed out in Richey and Brown's (2007) discussion of the model, is created and maintained within interpersonal communicative acts with doctors, family, friends and acquaintances. Additionally, the Emergent Self model labels the individual aspect of self as "experiential" and "existential" which allows for richer nuances of self apart from relational and cultural aspects of self.

However, the idea of a socially-constructed self has implications for those that identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual because it suggests that a person's realities, which could include his or her sexual identity, may then also be socially constructed. Though the concepts presented within Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) view of a Dialogic Self and Richey and Brown's (2007) Model of the Emergent Self may be troubling to some and problematic for others, because of its constructionist approach, such discussion and research is important for all researchers who approach aspects of self and identity. It is within the interplay of both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication that the self forms the various aspects of identity.

1.2 Identity: Sexual Identity

The ontological question of the nature of homosexuality is one that has been battled with and fought in nearly every aspect of Western civilization. There have been political, religious, legal, organizational, familial, communal, societal and cultural discussions from every conceivable perspective and the discussion will in no way end with this report. But the implications of a socially constructed view of one's sexual identity are not lost here. Many, if not most, in Western society who self-identify as something other than heterosexual have likely wrestled with this question both intrapersonally within their own

language-based thinking and interpersonally with friends, family and acquaintances. The sentiment that seems to be repeated more often than any other by those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is “Why would I choose to be gay?” Why indeed. Gay youth are three times as likely to attempt suicide (Soulforce, 2010). Gays and lesbians are twice as likely to seek out mental health services (UCLA, 2010). 41% of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals reported violence against them as increasing, and 74% reported being the recipient of verbal abuse in the form of name-calling and slurs (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), and identifying as gay or lesbian is difficult and socially controversial (Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002), not to mention the familial and intrapersonal struggles associated with coming to terms with one’s sexuality if it is not part of the perceived norm of heterosexuality (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Atkinson, 2001; Ball, 2001; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bond et al., 2008; Burdge, 2007; Eves, 2004; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Grace et al., 2004; Heermann et al., 2007; Hutchins, 2001; Irvine, 2003; Jonathan, 2008; Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002; Nixon, 2003; Oswald, 2001; Phillips & Stewart, 2008; Polk, 2003; Rand, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Currently the answer to the ontological question depends on who is giving the answer. The American Psychological Association (2008) states that though there is no consensus among scientists, “many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation” (p. 2). Nicolosi and Nicolosi (2002), both professional psychoanalysts, state “there is no such thing as a ‘gay child’ or a ‘gay teen’ . . . we are all designed to be heterosexual” (p. 16).

Lutz (2004) cites a declarative document written by The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith which stated:

A distinction is drawn, and it seems with some reason, between homosexuals whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes, and is transitory or at least not incurable; and homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable. . . these homosexuals must certainly be treated with understanding . . . this judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of. (p. 191)

Statements such as these are influential. Lutz (2004), Senior Lecturer at a Catholic University, highlighted such statements in support of his view that homosexual reorientation therapy is “in fact highly ethical” (p. 189). Additionally, consider gay activist White’s (1994) words stating “we didn’t realize that homosexuals were mysteriously imprinted with the need for same-sex intimacy and affiliation in their mothers’ wombs or in the first few years of childhood, and try as they might, their sexuality like heterosexuality, was a permanent condition” (p. 147). So what are homosexuals, and anyone else who identifies as something outside of the prescribed norm of heterosexuality, to think, believe, and embrace as truth? Interestingly, the

concept of a dialogic self and the Emergent Self model, because of its constructionist perspective, has implications that can be frightening, encouraging, empowering and/or mind-blowing. As with all things, one's view of a topic depends on where one stands along the perimeter.

If sexual identities are socially constructed, the biggest implications for lesbians, gays and bisexuals come into play when considering the monumental influence that religion plays both in the hearts and minds of individual citizens and in the collective mindset of the culture at large. This is not to suggest that Western culture has a 'mind' in which to formulate meanings and truths, but considering that "72% of Western religions . . . condemn homosexuality as being an abomination in the eyes of God" (Melton, 1991), and that such "values about family and sexuality have been taught from the pulpit for centuries" the result has been that these created meanings have been "integrated into society" (Walton, 2006, p. 15), the Western collective consciousness. For people in Western religious organizations and cultures, it is likely then that the meanings regarding homosexuality they have created and maintained have been reinforced within intrapersonal language-based thinking and interpersonal communicative acts with others who *do not* view a homosexual or bisexual identity in a positive frame. Hence, their view of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual self will likely not be a healthy or positive one.

Many academics generally accept that one's gender identity is socially constructed (Anderson & Hysock, 2010; Ridgeway, 2010; Rosenberg, 2010), but implying the same about sexual identity feels in some way problematic. Interestingly, many researchers who readily accept a social construction of gender identity tend to be opposed to the idea

that sexual identity is socially constructed. Researchers who view sexual identity as being socially constructed consider people who identify sexually as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as having chosen that identity, perhaps not consciously chosen to be homosexual, bisexual, or any other identity outside the accepted norm, but having at the least played a role in the construction of that sexual identity (Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002).

Psychologists Nicolosi and Nicolosi (2002), consider the chief factor in sexual identities that form as something other than heterosexual as stemming from Gender Identity Disorder. These researchers consider the role of the parents, the father in particular, to be the crucial factor in a biologically male child's development of a gay or identity. They state that whereas both boys and girls bond primarily with the mother; girls do not "need to go through the additional developmental task of disidentifying" from the mother, but boys are different and must "separate from the mother and grow in his differentness from his primary love object if he is ever to be a heterosexual man" (p. 23). The idea, according to Nicolosi and Nicolosi, is to:

prevent the boy from detaching from his normal maleness and to encourage him to claim the masculine identity for which he was designed, not to somehow mold him into the caricature of a macho man..., but to help him develop his own maleness within the context of the personality characteristics with which he was born. (p. 25)

They add that "if a father wants his son to grow up straight, he has to break the mother-son bond that is proper to infancy but not in the boy's best interest afterward" (p. 27). Yet, even in cases where the father performs his role in a way that Nicolosi and

Nicolosi would deem appropriate, there is no guarantee of heterosexual identity creation. They note that aggressive or hostile relationships with other males and/or abuse “can create a deep wound resulting in a sense of “gender inadequacy” or “gender esteem” (p. 31). In any case, Nicolosi states that he “has never known a single case of a homosexual man who was not wounded in his relationship with the male world” (p. 32). Regardless of Nicolosi and Nicolosi’s position however, the interpersonal and intrapersonal impact for the sexual identities of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals is mountainous. Those who identify as being lesbian, gay, or bisexual encounter and engage in interpersonal communicative acts regarding many if not all of these religious and cultural perspectives (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen, 2006; Atkinson, 2001; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bethmont, 2006; Buchanan et al., 2001; Chavez, 2004; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Grace et al., 2004; Hubbard, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Lease & Shulman, 2003, Moran et al., 2007; Nixon, 2003; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Sherkat, 2002; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002), and the interpersonal communicative act continues to impact the intrapersonal language-based thinking that continues even after the interpersonal communicative act has ended (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

1.3 Identity: Religious Identity

One can distinguish a number of aspects of what the research currently calls Religious Identity. Currently, it is considered to be a combination of both a religious component and a spiritual component (Buchanan et al., 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). The religious component is here defined as involving the external elements of the religious experience. Barret & Barzan (1996) call this an “extrinsic

orientation” and indicate it is evident when external religious elements affect religiosity. This orientation would be evident if one viewed “scripture, religious leaders, creeds, [and] canons” as the source of truth, “scripture or institution” as one’s primary focus, and if one only viewed “scripture, canons, [and] creeds” as being more valuable than perhaps their own experiences (p. 10). Since the majority of Western monotheistic religions condemn homosexuality, and those who experience extrinsic religiosity place authority outside of the self, many Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexuals experience God as being judgmental, petty, vindictive, and condemning (Wilcox, 2002). This becomes an important aspect of religiosity, especially when one recognizes that 72% of the United States population consider religion to be the most important influence in their lives (Melton, 1991), and religious experience and commitment plays a crucial role in the lived experience of many people (Batson et al., 2008; Jonathan, 2008; Knight et al., 2007; Rosik, 2007; Sherkat, 2002).

The second component involves a more spiritual aspect of religiosity. Buchanan et al. (2001) refer to this component as “intrinsic orientation” and define it as being “identified more closely with spirituality” (p. 436). Barret and Barzan (1996) also link the internal and spiritual struggle by noting that this element highlights one’s truth as coming from “individual experience . . . existential concern[s] [being one’s primary focus, and as placing value on] . . . personal experience and insight” (p. 10). Navigating through the intricacies of these components in relation to creating and maintaining a healthy sexual identity, especially when one’s predominant social, political, religious, and familial cultures do not view one’s identity positively, can be a process fraught with endless

hardships and struggles (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Allen, 2006; Bethmont, 2006; Buchanan, et al., 2001; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Grace, et al., 2004; Hutchins, 2001; Lease & Schulman, 2003; Moran et al., 2007; Roseborough, 2006; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002).

Even adolescence, a time when most youth begin to make their own decisions and “assert their independence,” religiosity can have an effect on decision making and lived experience (Knight et al., 2007, p. 349). A study involving 305 adolescents found that nearly 80% reported having a religious preference and the remainder reported identifying as either “atheist” or “don’t know/confused” (p. 351). Interestingly, this study examined levels of religiosity (and spirituality) among these adolescents in regard to alcohol use, and found that those who identified as “atheist” and “don’t know/confused” had the highest rates of alcohol usage; leading the researcher to conclude that adolescents with extrinsic religiosity, are more likely to avoid risk behaviors involving alcohol (p. 351).

Many, if not most, Western monotheistic religions view homosexuality as risky and/or deviant behavior. In an attempt to understand the impact of this view in connection with extrinsic religiosity, Rosik (2007) examines the levels of homophobia in religiously fundamentalist individuals. He suggests that “religious commitment” and “belief in the authority of the Bible” were both significantly linked to the viewpoint by conservatively religious students that homosexuality was “anti-religious” (pp. 149-150). Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are uniquely challenged when they approach monotheistic Western religions (Barret & Barzan, 1996). These organizations often refer to lesbian, gay, and bisexuals in negative ways leading many to feel unwelcome or unable to be included in the churches religious activities. This will often “take gay men, and

lesbians [and bisexuals] away from religious institutions” that are not accepting (p. 2). Still other research goes even farther in linking views on homosexuality to levels of religiosity. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals have been shown to have “less faith that the Bible is the inspired word of God”, and gay men “are significantly more likely to be apostates” meaning that they claim no religious affiliation, than are heterosexuals (Sherkat, 2002, p. 319). One reason for this is that gay people are often “doubly marginalized if they are religious, both by the church and the gay community” (Sweasey, 1997, p. 5). It is little surprise that many lesbians, gays, and bisexuals reject religion all together.

Another interesting concept is considered when Sherkat (2002) likens religiosity to economics by comparing levels of religiosity to the concepts of supply and demand. Noting that “only a handful of the more than 2,500 American religious denominations” view homosexuals as being worthy of religious affiliation, he suggests that most who identify as homosexual might then deem religious affiliation as unnecessary resulting in an under-consumption of religion, and hence, will experience lower levels of religious commitment (p. 315). But it seems that if the chasm between sexual identity and religiosity were really that simple, homosexuals would just decide not to go to church because churches don’t seem to want them; why do we then see real efforts to attempt to integrate one’s sexual and religious identity?

Though the church’s primary goal may be to maintain control and influence the thoughts and actions of both members and society at large in regard to its view of homosexuality, and though religion “is sometimes cast more in the role of aggressor than

supporter” (Nixon, 2003, p. 106), a change is occurring in the landscape of traditional Western monotheistic religious organizations. Like many Native American traditions, some Western denominations, such as Unitarian Universalist, Lutheran and Quaker denominations now have particular congregations/fellowships that are more affirming of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual individuals (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Batson et al., 2008; Buchanan et al., 2001; Nixon, 2003; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Roseborough, 2006). Additionally, Quest religions, which are defined by embracing “open-mindedness, viewing religious doubts as positive, and [having a] readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity”, are also becoming more recognized and are being researched in comparison with their closely related counterpart, fundamentalist religions (Batson et al., 2008, p. 136). Though there are a variety of religious organizations to choose from, and though some are more accepting of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, one’s level of religiosity likely impacts the level to which one can integrate his or her sexual and religious identities.

1.4 Identity Integration

The recognition of an intrinsic or spiritual side of experience has been the foundation of much of the current research in regard to sexual/religious identity integration (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). Queer theory has provided a lens that has enabled many to see the power differences that the dichotomy of sexual and religious identity enforce (Gamson & Moon, 2004), and once something is identified, it becomes easier to confront and dismantle. As lesbians, gays and bisexuals have begun to reject the negative messages of mainstream

religious organizations, they have also begun to accept the inner truths of their spirit (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Youth are particularly vulnerable to the struggle of navigation between their newly forming sexual identities in conjunction with their spiritual/religious identities (Buchanan et al., 2001). They are often encouraged through familial and religious relationships to pursue religious endeavors and “follow the familial path,” but inwardly they may struggle to reconcile their emerging sexual orientation with their religious beliefs” (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 440; Barret & Barzan, 1996). On the other hand, familial experiences can help to facilitate rethinking extrinsically religious viewpoints. One youth, having seen his father get denied board membership because he was a smoker commented, “the church teaches that anyone who smokes can’t be a board member, and isn’t as truly spirit-filled as someone else. And yet, when I look at my Dad, [he] is more of a Christian than many who profess to be” (Walton, 2006, p. 11). Walton (2006) adds, “For Wade, his father was a role model for questioning church authority without necessarily doubting one’s belief in God” (p. 11).

Regardless of age however, one’s view of God and the role that God plays in one’s life is often shaped throughout the struggle to define the difference between rightness and sin, between their perceived duty to love one another and the “limits of appropriate sexuality” (Gamson & Moon, 2004, p. 52). As one youth explained, he “knew right from the beginning that God loved [him] for who [he] was” (Walton, 2006, p. 12).

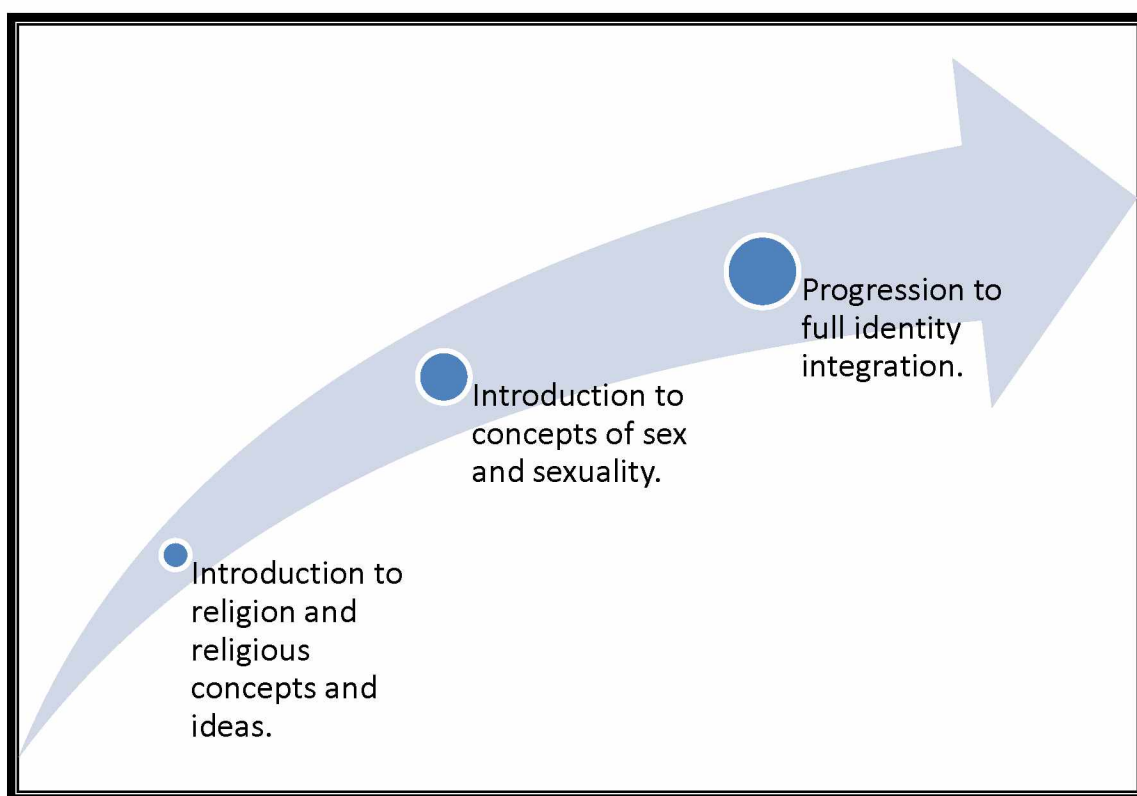
There are several concepts in current research in regard to the difference between religious and spiritual identity. For example, Barret and Barzan (1996) liken this

spiritual/religious dichotomy to the tension between counseling and religion stating that counseling places credibility on one's intrinsic, spiritual, "internal authority" which then tries to find ways to "accommodate the external authority of religion" (p. 4). In turn, this struggle allows this internal authority to grow by "rearranging" one's worldview and "organizing it in a more complex way" (Roseborough, 2006, p. 48). Wilcox (2002) views this dichotomy from the perspective of individualism by suggesting that "religious individualism" is a way of navigating through the rhetoric of the traditional linear religious experience, absorbing what works for the particular individual and embracing only those aspects of the faith that reaffirm and support what the individual feels intrinsically, spiritually. For these individuals, "the imagery of God" becomes a crucial aspect of their spiritual identity, and they are much more likely to experience God as being loving, non-judgmental, helpful, as both father and mother, and as energy rather than godhead (p. 506).

Interestingly, current research on this topic tends to view identity integration as occurring in stages, or that identity develops in a systematic process: one is introduced to concepts of religion, and as one grows he or she is introduced to concepts of sexuality, and finally he or she attempts to integrate the two identities with full integration as the end and optimal goal (Figure 1.1). Regardless of the concept, communication is central to this process because humans make meanings by actively constructing the events in their lives (Kegan, 1982; Roseborough, 2006), and it is through a person's "sense of wonder in being alive" that one is led to ask questions and make meanings (Roseborough, 2006, p. 49), many of which can potentially lead to either further conflict or possible

resolutions (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001; Kegan, 1982; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Roseborough, 2006).

Figure 1.1



Identity Integration – Linear Model (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

One might think that there are two basic options for individuals who struggle to integrate their sexual and religious identities; one might leave the church and embrace their sexuality, or stay in the church and reject their sexuality. Currently, however, research is showing that there are more options available. For example, one might still reject their sexual identity, or reject their religious identity, compartmentalize the two, or integrate them both. As defined by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) to reject one's religious identity would mean that one would simply renounce their faith and discontinue involvement with the particular religious denomination. Rejecting one's sexual identity might include seeking some sort of reparative therapy, seeking to form a heterosexual identity, or trying to abstain from thoughts and/or actions involving Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual activities. Compartmentalization would include embracing both identities but keeping them completely separate; not revealing one's sexual identity while around one's faith community, and not revealing one's religious affiliation while around associations who are supportive of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexuality. Sexual/Religious identity integration then implies attempting to bring both worlds, the sexual and the religious, into the same space and lived experience. The levels of success in this arena are the focus of this proposed study.

There are many conceptual strategies and models found for describing how individuals acquire sexual/religious identity integration. Roof (1999) outlines three different aspects of lived religious experience; (a) "*scripts*," which are defined as the messages that one would receive from other familial, community, religious, and societal members throughout their lives, and can either be negating, affirming or neutral as to the

individual's specific sexual identity, (b) "*practices*," which are actions or interactions that are also rooted in familial and community life, and then reinforce the scripted messages that have been received and interpreted, and (c) "*human agency*," which Roof defines as the internal and external process of negotiating through the various scripts and practices, both observed and enacted, and creating new meanings and describes as "a process of interiorizing and authenticating [one's] own affirmations" (p. 41).

Another set of strategies was developed by Walton (2006), namely, "biblical interpretation," "a Christianity of question," and "choice" (pp. 5-13). The first strategy, biblical interpretation, simply means that one may research and find other interpretations for the biblical texts that are most often cited as condemning Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual sexual identities. The 'Christianity of Questions' stage is defined as recognizing that Christianity does not have all the answers, and that its members are not without faults and struggles of their own. The final strategy of choice does not imply choice about one's sexual identity, but rather the choice to believe whether or not God loves and accepts oneself (pp. 5-13).

However, it is nearly impossible to discuss the possibility of such integration without recognizing the different components of religious experience discussed earlier - the religious/extrinsic and spiritual/intrinsic component. Buchanan et al. (2001) suggest that how one orientates, either extrinsically or intrinsically, will specifically indicate the difficulty level of their struggle to integrate their sexual/religious identities. Additionally, the research overwhelmingly indicates that it is only by strengthening the spiritual/intrinsic component of religiosity that one is able to achieve any level of

sexual/religious identity integration (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001; Lewis, 2008; Nixon, 2003; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Roseborough, 2006; Sherkat, 2002; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002).

Kegan (1982), a psychologist, builds on Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development and uses them as a lens through which to view Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual sexual/religious identity integration, focusing specifically on the third and fourth stages. Kegan's third stage is considered the 'interpersonal' stage (p. 191). In this stage, an individual allows for authority, or messages from others, to be internalized (p. 192). The fourth and final stage outlined by Kegan is the 'institutional' stage, in which individuals are able to disregard the messages received from others (p. 192) and rely on their own "internal system that is derived from a critical internal examination of these outer voices" (Roseborough, 2006, p. 51). When these stages were applied to the lived experience of a gay man, he was seen to be progressing from the third stage to the fourth stage when he acquired the ability to view the negative messages received from his lived religious experience as not having the same level of authority as he had internally. By recognizing that his internal (or spiritual) authority was the supreme authority, he was able to navigate through the various negative external familial and religious messages and embrace a more positive and affirming reality (Roseborough, 2006).

The concept of forgiveness sheds an interesting light on this point. Knight et al., (2007) found that the levels of "forgiveness" that adolescents felt, either from 'God' or from themselves, was significantly linked to a lower risk of alcohol consumption (p. 353). This indication is particularly interesting in that it incorporates both the

religious/extrinsic and spiritual/intrinsic elements of religiosity. The Documentary, *The Power of Forgiveness* (Schmidt, 2007) examines the various ways that the human psyche is profoundly affected by the act of granting and/or receiving forgiveness. Could forgiveness, in addition to being potentially influential in an adolescent's ability to resist alcohol usage, also be one of the positive and affirming qualities that allow for smoother sexual/religious identity integration?

Several researchers note that the terms which individuals use to describe God are a good indicator as to how successful they are in achieving sexual/religious identity integration. Walton (2006) relates that those successful in identity integration often see God in affirming ways. One of the participants in his research commented that "the Lord has given (me) grace . . . and understanding" (p. 9). Another participant, Ben, whose comment was used to illustrate his positive with God, said that "[I] knew right from the beginning that God loved me for who I was" (p 12). Successfully integrated participants in Rodriguez and Ouellette's research were reported to have said things such as; "I've been a child of God from the time I rocked into this world," "I am loved by God, being gay is the way that I was created. I feel strongly that if I fall in love with somebody and were to have a holy union that it would be blessed by God. My sexuality is very much a part of my religion," and "I mean, marching in the gay pride parade, just walking down 5th avenue, ministering to other gay men, and showing up at [MCC/NY] and giving communion in drag. I mean, how gay can you get. It's to celebrate with who I am with all I am in front of God. It's been wonderful" (pp. 340-342). Perhaps Barret & Barzan (1996) were correct when they suggested that helping a Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual

individual understand that their ability to love a person of the same sex is indeed a great spiritual blessing that will assist them in the struggle to successfully achieve their own sexual/religious identity integration.

1.5 Queer Theory

The major problem with the idea of integrating a homosexual identity and a religious identity is that the struggle even exists, because this struggle, at its core, assumes that there really is an answer to the ontological question, or namely, why someone is gay (Hutchins, 2001); one is *born* lesbian, gay or bisexual, or one *chooses* to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Though Chavez (2004) quotes the A.P.A. stating that “most scientists share the view that sexual orientation is shaped for most people at an early age through complex interactions of biological, psychological and social factors” (as cited, p. 269), he discusses the binary involved in homosexual identity, especially in regard to religious identity and suggests that churches have created a binary mindset that has been made foundational in the discussion regarding homosexuality. He states that “this cut and dry, either/or, black and white approach to life and death, eternal life or eternal damnation is indicative of the polarizing rhetoric of Christianity”, and that “in many ways [the church] depends on ‘homosexuals’ ... as the ‘evil’ to their ‘good’” (Chavez, 2004, p. 267). He also states the church’s “power system is reliant upon ‘homosexuality’ to maintain its position” of power and even goes so far as to suggest that the “foundations of Christianity are based on the binary of good and evil” (pp. 266-267). Chavez also states that if there were not ‘sin’, there would be no need for Jesus” because the churches have set “the parameters of ‘homosexuality’ in the binary of either biological and moral or choice and

immoral” (pp. 258-267). This is problematic because “it grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged” (Hutchins, 2001, p. 13). It is important to note that churches are not the only entities involved in cementing the discussion in this manner. Chavez (2004) states the rhetoric of “progay” groups, by insisting that being gay is *not* a choice, is often “complicit with the way evangelicals ha[ve] set the parameters for the ‘homosexuality’ debate” (pp. 260).

All of these ideas were influential in the “1970’s and 1980s . . . constructionist arguments about the nature of sexual orientation began to influence academic discussions” (Ball, 2001, p. 272). Foucault had observed that prior to this time “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration” and that now “the homosexual . . . was a species” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). And with this, the stage was set for:

The grand philosophical battle between postmodernists and liberals . . . in disputes within gay rights philosophy . . . On one side are postmodern queer theorists who . . . reject foundational values and deny that there is a natural or essentialist component to sexual orientation. On the other side are liberals who believe that the struggle for justice for gay men and lesbians can be grounded on foundational principles such as equality, reason and autonomy. (p. 271)

Ball (2001) puts it yet another way stating that while McWhorter, a queer theorist, sees identity as “opposed to freedom,” (as cited in Ball, 2001, p. 279) Richards, who is liberal, sees the idea of identity as “essential to freedom and justice” (p. 279). The reason that queer theorists find the notion of a ‘homosexual identity’ to be frightening is that

such an idea supports the notion that sexual orientations must be taken as “natural identities,” implying that sexual identity is set and unchangeable; for the queer theorist, “there is no such thing as a homosexual identity that is separate from social context and forces” (Ball, 2001, p 273). Because queer theorists and their theories seek to overturn the social, political, religious forces, and power relations that continually attempt to normalize heterosexuality by juxtaposing it to homosexuality, they try to deconstruct the notion of identity itself (Atkinson, 2001; Ball, 2001). Queer theorists consider sexual identities to be a complex combination of innate and chosen behaviors and decisions (Chavez, 2004), so they “emphasize the fluid and temporal nature of gender and sexual identities and the way in which sexual normalcy is constituted” (Allen, 2006, p. 168).

Though queer theory does have its place in this research, it also has its limitations. Using queer theory as a tool to discuss the problem that sexual identity poses to people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, is beneficial because the concept of choice, that is, that one may actually choose to be gay, is an idea that may frighten or anger some. Many who identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual may have, over the years, rested comfortably in the idea that he or she did not have a choice, and hence believed that God couldn't actually consider one an abomination because he or she was 'made' that way. Queer theory has the potential to shake such seemingly stable foundations. Yet, one may benefit by honestly considering the possibility of the points raised by queer theory. Atkinson (2001) points out a major issue with the realization that she “cannot forget or un-know the complications of [her] identity, [or] deny that they shape the representations

[she] use[d] to construct [her] world and the lenses through which [she] view[s] it” (p. 309).

Closely tied to her thoughts are Ball’s (2001) statements regarding the realities of queer theory. He cites McWhorter’s statement that “there is not absolute origin and thus no epistemic stopping point” for queer theory and that such “antiessentialism ‘goes all the way down’, that is, it denies that there are needs and capabilities that human beings . . . share” (p. 275). The end result then of queer theory is that it “there is no stable truth but only more and more social constructs and changing forms,” (as cited in Ball, 2001, p. 275) which suggests that “not even social constructionism can be thought of as objectively true . . . because the ‘knowing subject’ who believes in the truth of social constructionism is itself the effect of power relations. (p. 275).

Additionally problematic of queer theory is the rationality that just as there is “no homosexual identity that is separate from social context and forces, there are . . . no values (such as freedom or autonomy or reason) that are separate from social context” (Ball, 2001 p. 273). If this is true, one is left to wonder, what is the point of living, or being respectful, or being polite, or being peaceful? What does such a notion do to the idea or morality? Law Professor Carlos Ball (2001) recognized that a person can “know truths” as long as he or she also remembers that those truths are “contextual” and not “objective” (p. 275), because to consider the self as having no control over one’s life decisions and life course would be tantamount to “giving up all hope of a progressive political agenda” (p. 284).

In regard to the lived experience of the general population of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexuals, there are some key limitations to their research. First, by focusing only on members of a homosexual-friendly church, the authors leave unnoticed the lived experiences and struggles of lesbians, gays and bisexuals to integrate spiritual/religious identity among many, and I would argue most of the homosexual population. Second, the measures for assessing religious history were limited in that though denomination was identified, the levels of fundamentalism were not addressed. This thesis will delve more deeply into this aspect as it is a key component of both the struggle to achieve sexual/religious integration and a fundamental aspect of the lived experiences of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual population. Many voices and experiences are needed if one wants a fuller picture of people's lived and religious experience (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Atkinson, 2001; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bethmont, 2006; Buchanan et al., 2001; Chavez, 2004; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hubbard, 2002; Hutchins, 2001; Irvine, 2003; Nixon, 2003; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Roseborough, 2006; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002).

Although there is much research available on the topic of sexual/religious identity integration, the vast majority comes from the psychological discipline, and often utilizes a rhetorical lens (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Atkinson, 2001; Buchanan et al., 2001; Chavez, 2004; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hubbard, 2002; Hutchins, 2001; Irvine, 2003; Nixon, 2003; Roseborough, 2006; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2002). Another limitation is that the research examining sexual/religious identity integration qualitatively tends to be limited in that it primarily tends to only focus on individuals who attend liberal religious

organizations (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), and hence misses many of the voices that are available within Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual communities.

The next logical question may then be; what happens if one's sexual identity really is socially created within the dialogic process of interpersonal communicative acts? What courses of action are now open to those who identify sexually as something other than heterosexual? The answer, from a social constructionist position is to construct a different meaning, reality and truth because regardless of one's view of self in relation to sexual identity, be it accepting or un-accepting, those meanings and realities. From a dialogic perspective, one's meanings, realities, and truths are nothing more than metaphors for life (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996); they are ways in which meanings have been created and maintained within one's interpersonal communicative acts.

This is not to suggest that the process of socially constructing the self is accomplished on one's own or that it is easy to accomplish. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) are clear in their assertion that the self is formed and maintained within one's experiences with others. When one approaches another, each person approaches the encounter with pools of metaphors: remembered experiences containing emotions and desires wrapped in words, and within talking about these metaphors, each person shifts, changes and/or maintains the emotions, feelings, and desires of these remembered experiences (pp. 142-143). For example, consider a gay male who has recently attended his first gay pride parade; he found the experience frightening at first because he feared the reaction of some in the crowd, but in the end found himself liberated and excited to have been so open about his sexual identity. The feeling he described with the word "fear" at anticipating the reaction

of the crowd was formed and maintained within the interpersonal communicative acts with others, perhaps family and/or church members, and his remembered feelings described with the words “liberated” and “excited” were also formed and maintained within interpersonal communicative experiences with others, perhaps while cheering and chanting with the parade participants or within conversations with new acquaintances met during the parade procession. Now consider this same gay man, with the memory of all these feelings, desires, and emotions, wrapped in words; he would likely use different words when describing this experience to a lesbian, gay, or bisexual acquaintance than he would to a member of his church, and these retellings, or “re-author[ings]” (Shotter, 1991) will impact the remembered feelings, desires, and emotions of this word-wrapped experience and hence, his identity.

In recreating one’s sense of self, some may try to construct a new sexual identity which could be to attempt to change it to different identity or create a positive frame for one’s current sexual identity (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Atkinson, 2001; Ball, 2001; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bond et al., 2008; Eves, 2004; Grace et al., 2004; Heermann et al., 2007; Hutchins, 2001; Irvine, 2003; Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002; Oswald, 2001; Phillips & Stewart, 2008; Polk, 2003; Rand, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Others may construct a new religious identity which could include creating new relational and hermeneutical meanings for family, friends, religious acquaintances and religious texts (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bond et al., 2008; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Heerman et al., 2007; Hutchins, 2001; Jonathan, 2008; Nixon, 2003; Oswald, 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Still others may simply let things be, which by social

constructionist assumptions will lead to further changes in his/her meanings and self identity.

The ability to construct new identities is possible if one approaches identity and sense of self from the social constructionist epistemological stance used within both Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) view of a Dialogic Self, and Richey and Brown's (2007) Model of the Emergent Self. Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) three multivocalities of "the said and the unsaid, free and constrained talk, and inner and outer speech" (p. 145) go to the heart of self formation and maintenance. These multivocalities describe the ways in which, within communicative acts, word-wrapped memories change and shift over time impact the development of self. Richey and Brown's (2007) model of the emergent self describes how one's experiential, relational, and cultural self develops within the context of one's social and physical environment.

The purpose of this research is to begin to form a foundational understanding of sexual identity construction, religious identity construction, and religious and sexual identity integration from a social constructionist perspective, through the lens of communication theory. This research seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do interpersonal communicative experiences regarding God, sex, and self potentially impact and/or affect an individual's religious identity creation and maintenance?

RQ2: How do interpersonal communicative experiences regarding God, sex, and self potentially impact and/or affect an individual's sexual identity creation and maintenance?

RQ3: How do interpersonal communicative experiences regarding God, sex, and self potentially impact and affect one's ability to integrate one's sexual and religious identity?

It is the hope of this researcher that this study will reveal more dimensions in understanding of the uniqueness of each individuals struggle to integrate their religious and sexual identity and to build on the research that has been done in relation to sexual/religious identity integration. The results of this study will add more dimensions of thought and experience to this discussion, and will also help in beginning to build a foundational understanding about how interpersonal communication impacts views of self in connection to bigger and seemingly unanswerable questions of life, love, meaning and purpose within a framework specific to the sexual and religious identities of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Scientific researchers have opted to examine the phenomenon of identity integration through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Though there are a variety of methods that have been used in the past to examine the sexual and religious identity integration of lesbians, gays and bisexuals, the method which best suits these three specific research questions is to conduct narrative interviews. To ensure, as much as possible, that these narrative interviews glean useful information, this study was designed with a clear theoretical perspective. Within this chapter, the methodological framework will be discussed and will be followed by a discussion of the theoretical perspective embraced in the study. Finally, a discussion of the methods, samples, procedures and analysis will be presented.

2.1 Epistemological Framework

Many, if not most, in academia might agree that the pursuit of truth is goal number one. However, if asked to define what truth is, their voices might not seem so unanimous. A researcher's epistemology or belief as to "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8) determines all subsequent decisions regarding the research design. There are three general schools of thought regarding how people 'know' truth. Objectivism assumes that truth or reality exist somewhere separate from the observer, and that such truths or realities are intrinsic to an object whether or not it is ever observed (p. 8). For example, an objectivist would consider that an island in the middle of an

ocean is an island regardless of whether anyone ever saw or not. Objectivists also holds that if one, without ever learning what an island was, did approach and observe its island-like qualities, such as the sandy beach, the palm trees, and lack of inhabitants, then the person would simply ‘know’ it was an island. Subjectivism, on the other hand, considers truth or reality to be wholly a matter of the observer imposing on the object (p. 9). For a subjectivist, the island is real or true because the observer places truth, meaning and reality upon it. This study however is built on a constructionist epistemology.

Constructionism holds that people are born into a world of truths and realities which are not discovered, but have been constructed for eons before and will likely be co-constructed for eons to come (p. 79). From this epistemology, interactions with objects are necessary for truths or realities to be created. When an observer encounters an object, the island for example, the observer interacts with the island and these experiences combined with the observers past experiences contribute to and are involved in the truths and realities that the observer then constructs. This study considers all meaning and identity to be constructed within one’s interpersonal communicative acts with family, friends, acquaintances, and yes, even enemies because all reality, even knowledge itself only exists, is created, is maintained within interpersonal communicative interaction (Arundale 2009). “All knowledge . . . is constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42), and this study, as well as much of the research it is based on, considers this ‘within’ to be the central locale of meaning making and meaning maintenance.

2.2 Theoretical Perspective

This study partners a social constructionist epistemology with an interpretivist perspective. Crotty (1998) points out that an interpretive perspective respects the messiness of social reality. Whereas the natural sciences look for universal rules and laws that govern the behaviors of nature, social science lacks such rules and laws. The realities of social contexts are not determined by rules but rather are rooted in “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). Creswell (2007) adds that interpretivism recognizes the construction that has occurred in creating and maintaining a person’s truths and realities (p. 20). This study sought to understand how the constructed truths and realities of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals regarding their religious and sexual identities, as well as any integration of the two, have been created and maintained within their interpersonal communicative acts.

2.3 Research Methodology

Crotty (1998) considers the methodological design of a study to be the “strategy, plan of action, process or design” that informs the research methods used to reach the researcher’s intended outcome (p. 3). Since this study considered ‘reality’ to be completely created and maintained within a person’s interpersonal communicative acts, and considered each person’s ‘reality’ to be different from the person sitting next to them, this study utilized a phenomenological methodology. A phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of one or more people, and looks for similarities in the participant’s stories and experiences in an effort to locate the “universal essence” on the

person's experience (Creswell, 2007. pp. 57-58). Crotty (1998) points out that people's meanings are reified in that people consider their own take on the world to be the truth of the world, and are layered in that a person's meanings are created and maintained through reified conversations and experiences with other people and objects (p. 59). The goal of a phenomenological study is to peel back these layers in an attempt to understand the various emergent themes in lived experience (Crotty, 1998). This study, which uses narrative interviews, only sought to examine the emergent themes of the research participant's lived experiences. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) state that narrative interviews "focus on the stories told . . . and works out their structures and plots" (p. 222)

2.4 Methods

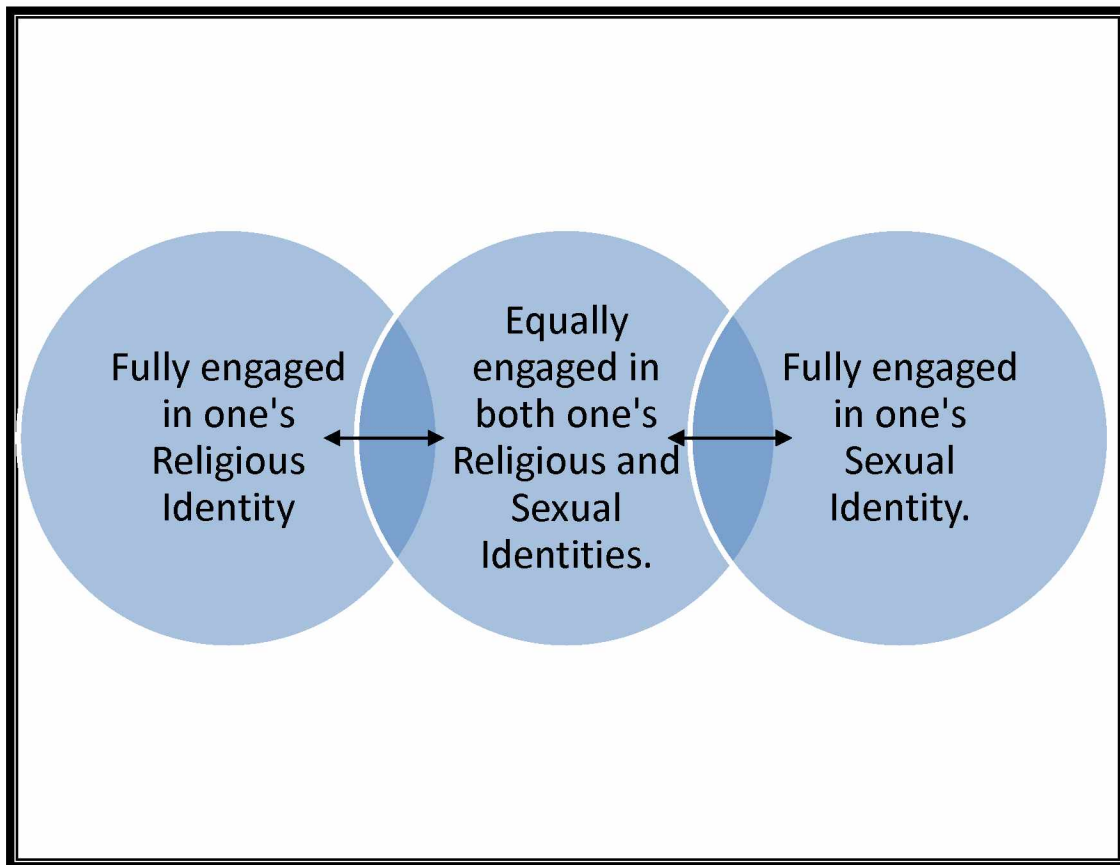
This study utilized individual narrative interviews to gather data regarding messages experienced in youth regarding God, sex, and self, in connection to a person's lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, their religious identity and their various levels of identity integration. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) list many benefits of gathering data through interviews: interviews allows the participants to use their own words and language forms to explain their own behaviors, actions and attitudes about things and processes that are largely unobservable (pp. 174-175).

Participants were asked to respond to broad open-ended questions regarding their experience with the phenomenon of identity integration. More open-ended questions were asked when needed to gain understanding of commonalities in the participants experiences (Creswell, 2007) (Appendix 1). This method of data collection was valuable

because it encouraged the participant to describe their “experiences and self-understanding” and to explore, examine and reconsider their “own perspectives on their lived experience” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 116).

While forming and developing the list of potential questions, a key concept, which resulted specifically from the literature review, was considered. The research tended to view identity integration as occurring in stages as one ages, develops and matures (Figure 1.1). This seemed problematic because identity is fluid and constantly shifting (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007), and identity is formed and maintained, not with the intent of progression or maturation, but as ‘being’, as existing only in a moment and never existing in the same way again. This concept requires a rethinking of identity integration so that it includes the sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle shifts in identity and identity integration (Figure 2.1). For example, one who identifies as lesbian may, while listening to a sermon on Sunday morning, decide that she does not want to engage in lesbian sexual behaviors any more, ever. At this point in time, she would likely not experience identity integration levels as high as she might like, so mere moments later, she may change her mind, and decide to be open to encounters that may allow her to experience her sexuality more fully. However, with such an interpersonal communicative event, she will likely experience shifts and changes in her levels of integration.

Figure 2.1



Identity Integration – Communicative Flow Continuum

The data collected, the recordings and transcriptions, were examined using a thematic analysis procedure (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). First, during the interview itself, and more so during the transcription process I became fully immersed in the data and sought to find common themes that emerged from within the interview process. As I

reexamined and reviewed the data more themes emerged and began to solidify. I compiled the list of emergent themes, and it was not long before I realized that some narrowing and focusing were going to be necessary. The first strategy was to go through each page and highlight the themes that emerged throughout the interview which resulted in hundreds of various themes. In order to narrow these themes, I listed the themes that emerged within the various interpersonal communicative acts which took place with different groups of individuals. And the result was over five pages of themes and a seemingly endless list of reference points. The final and most focused strategy occurred when I looked for themes that emerged from within interpersonal communicative acts that dealt specifically with one of the three research questions: sexual identity or religious identity formation and maintenance and/or sexual and religious identity integration. Once the various themes were teased out of the interviews, they were grouped together and then examined through the lens of the Relational Dialectic and Emergent Self theories of identity formation and creation.

2.4.1 Objectivity and the Researcher as an Instrument: Interview Ethics

Whereas quantitative research often depends on mechanical devices to perform repeatable processes that lead to duplicated results, qualitative research depends on the human researcher as the tool that both gathers and interprets the data (Creswell, 2007). This presents challenges for the qualitative researcher on many levels. One thing a researcher needs to consider is his or her own role in the interview process. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) consider interviews to be a “moral enterprise,” which affects the

research participants and the researcher (p. 63), because every person approaches each interaction loaded with their own “facts, beliefs, desires, prejudices, and rules [that] we have learned from personal experience, as well as the ready-made knowledge available to us in the culture into which we [were] born” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 34-35). This would be true for both the researcher and the research participants while they engage in the narrative interview process. It is crucial then that the researcher approach the narrative interview recognizing all of the potential problems that he or she may bring to and/or encounter within the narrative interview process. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) discuss using “bracketing” as a tool to help a researcher ensure that he or she is continually aware of their own perspectives, thoughts, and emotions during the data collection and analysis stages, and I used this technique to mentally reflect on my perspectives, thoughts, and emotions throughout this thesis research (p. 27).

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) address the potential for “co-optation”, which is the potential of the research results being impacted by the perceived needs and or benefit to either the research participant and/or the financial backers of the study. Lindlof and Taylor, (2002) also recognize this potential when they encourage qualitative researchers to beware of “self-serving motives that could negatively affect the quality of an interview narrative or the researchers relationship with a group or community” (p. 107). For example, I have wrestled and struggled with my own religious and sexual identity integration, and I am in a contractual relationship with the University of Alaska Fairbanks. These ties have the potential to impact the results of this study: (a) I might identify too closely with one or all of the research participants and interpret their stories

in a biased manner leading to a more sympathetic view of the research participants; (b) I might desire to increase my chances in attaining a permanent position with the University and allow professional goals to bias the results by interpreting the interviews in a particular way. It is crucial that qualitative researchers recognize these potentials and reflect on them throughout the design, data collection, and analysis processes (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkman 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), so that readers can accurately judge whether or not the researcher has successfully accomplished this challenging aspect of qualitative research.

Additionally, and in an attempt to bracket my own experiences and inner voices, I made a concerted effort to avoid using the term ‘spiritual’ while discussing religious identity. Though Barret and Barzan (1996) link the term “spiritual” to intrinsic religiosity (p. 10); I felt that allowing the term ‘spiritual identity’ to be interchangeable with ‘religious identity’ might be confusing to the participant.

Personally, I bring much to this thesis research. I am a forty-five year old male, and I religiously identify as agnostic. I was raised within and spent the first twenty-seven years of my life as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses; a religious organization which embraces the standard view of homosexuality; it is wrong and in no way approved of by God or the church. Upon writing a letter and disassociating myself from that religious organization, I embarked on my own religious journey. I tried out several organizations and belief systems, but have never found one that I could wholly embrace. However, the subject of religion remained a constant in my life. I received my undergraduate degree in Religious

Studies, and I have continued to pursue knowledge of world religions and religion's impact and influence on people and cultures from a variety of perspectives. Overall, I view organized religion as, in the words credited to St. Augustine, "The Holy Church is a whore, and she is my mother." In other words, horrible atrocities have been committed in the name of religion, *and* there have been displays of great human compassion committed in the name of religion.

I identify sexually as a gay male. Though I tend to agree with the generally accepted belief that it is a combination of biology, psychology and culture that impact one's sexuality, I find as an academic, that I have to at least accept the possibility that sexual identity and even sexual orientation is socially constructed. Admittedly, this possibility frightens me on two fronts. First, if it is socially constructed, then it can also be socially deconstructed, and I happen to like who and how I am. Second, if it is socially constructed, then all of the opponents to the pursuit of legal civil rights for lesbians, gays, and lesbians would likely use such research to bolster their efforts to continue to oppress and repress us.

In regard to the potential to integrate one's sexual and religious identity, I have altered my views over the last couple of years. When I first began to research this problem, I was pretty set in the idea that being wholly integrated, fully involved in one's sexual and religious identity, was the optimum goal if one were to achieve a full sense of happiness and satisfaction. I viewed someone in this position as being able to be open about their sexuality in all areas of their lives *and* regularly attending and engaged in a particular

religious organization. After researching these topics over the last couple of years, I have shifted that view to allow for the possibility that someone who is engaged in only one of these aspects of self, and who negates the other of the two, can be just as happy and satisfied as one who is wholly engaged in both identities.

2.4.2 Validity and Reliability

The ethical concerns involved with qualitative research that uses interviews as a method of data collection highlight another concern for researchers: validity and reliability. For any research to be considered valuable and/or useful there must be some foundational basis for trusting the analyzed results, and quantitative/positivistic research relies on validity and reliability for such a foundation. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) define reliability as the “consistency of observations” and validity as the “true value of observations” (pp. 238-239), and both aspects provide unique opportunities for qualitative researchers.

Reliability poses a particularly challenging situation for qualitative research in that people are not reliable, in that a person’s experience is unique to them and their retelling of their experiences will be unique each time (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As such, a researcher could ask the same research participant the same question on two different occasions and never create the same answer or interpretation. Additionally, the interview process is long and laborious (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkman 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), and interviewing more people in an attempt to show reliability would likely take years and even then likely have problems claiming reliability. Kvale and

Brinkman (2009) point out that qualitative research reliability pertains instead to the “consistency and trustworthiness” of the researcher throughout the research process (p. 245), and this idea is supported by other researchers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In other words, if a researcher demonstrates that he or she has considered and researched the topic from a variety of perspectives, demonstrates that he or she has internally designed their research with the goal of controlling outside influences, and demonstrates that he or she reflects upon and recognizes their own biases throughout the research process, then the researcher has demonstrated consistency, trustworthiness and reliability (Kvale & Brinkman 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Validity does not tend to be as challenging for qualitative researchers as validity asks whether or not the research “investigates what it purports to investigate” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 246), and whether or not the research accurately reports the “nature of the object of study” and all of its variations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 239). Though a qualitative analysis of the narrative interviews may not be able to generalized or applied to larger groups and populations, the analysis can still be valid as long as the interview questions and analysis achieve “a right interpretation” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that though there can be an “indefinite number of interpretations” of a narrative interview, the qualitative researcher seeks to find “the most plausible, and/or useful” interpretations (p. 240). The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences that the participants have encountered regarding sexual and religious identity integration, and the analysis of the narrative interviews only seeks validity for that person in relation to his or her experience.

2.5 Procedures

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) suggest that a qualitative study should include fifteen, plus or minus ten, research participants (p. 113), and I conducted five co-researcher interviews. Because much of the current research focuses on lesbian, gay, and bisexual members in typically ‘gay-friendly’ churches, this study sought perspectives from a variety of lived experiences; from lesbians, gays, and bisexuals who do not act on their sexual tendencies and wholly embrace their religious identity; from lesbians, gays, and bisexuals who do not seek to engage their religious identity and wholly embrace their lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity; and those inhabiting a multitude of spaces in-between including lesbians, gays, and bisexuals who have managed to integrate the two identities. Additionally, this study sought to include perspectives from fundamentally conservative individuals and fundamentally liberal religious individuals.

Upon completion of the UAF IRB process, a combination of sampling strategies were used to contact potential participants: (a) maximum variation, which requires the researcher to consider all of the various perspectives of potential participants and consider how to reach people within those respective perspectives; (b) snowballing, which includes asking research participants for suggestions or references; and (c) opportunistic strategies including following new leads and being open to unexpected participants (Creswell, 2007, pp. 126-127). Because discussing issues pertaining to sexual identity and the potential for one to co-create new meanings within the interpersonal communicative process, I anticipated that it would be very difficult to find

participants from one key perspective; one who is fully involved in his or her religious identity and not involved in his or her sexual identity. In order to contact potential participants within this group, I advertised in the Sunday edition of the *Daily News-Miner* and spoke with a local pastor about the research and asked him if he would be willing to refer potential research participants. Additionally, through the snowballing strategy I spoke to close friends and professional contacts for references and through opportunistic opportunities I placed a 12-foot banner in the Wood Center, which is a high traffic area for the students, staff and faculty of the University of Alaska Fairbank campus.

Once contacts were made, the interviews were conducted in a space requested by the research participant. One interview took place in a private room at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, one at my home, and two at the research participant's home. Each participant was provided with a consent form (Appendix 1) and all participant concerns were discussed and resolved prior to the interview. Though I began each interview with a list of potential questions, I allowed the interview to progress in an unstructured manner in an attempt to allow the research participant to be able to fully explore and retell their lived experiences regarding his or her struggle of religious and sexual identity integration. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following each interview. The original recording was destroyed after transcription, and a pseudonym system was utilized to replace any names or personal identity information that may have been recorded.

2.6 Participants

I interviewed one lesbian, three gay men, one in an individual interview and two in a dyadic interview, and one female bisexual. All research participants were over the age of twenty-one and residents of Fairbanks, Alaska. I followed all prescribed IRB regulations regarding human science research. Participation was completely voluntary and research participants were allowed to withdraw at any time prior to completion. All measures were taken to protect the research participant's confidentiality. Additionally, though I did not anticipate that the research participants would experience any harmful emotional or psychological harm as a result of participating, contact information for professional counselors was given to each participant.

Chapter 3

The Narrative Interviews

3.1 Aaron

Aaron was the first interview that I conducted for this project. Aaron is an adult male that identifies sexually as a gay man. Aaron and I had met a couple of years ago, and while catching up on the phone a few weeks earlier he said “hey, are you going to interview me for your thesis project?” I had forgotten that we had spoken about it, and was frankly, thankful for the willingness of someone to participate. I said “yes”, and we agreed to meet up on the following weekend. Since we hadn’t seen each other for some time, we enjoyed a bite of breakfast prior to the interview, and we spent some time reconnecting on the big and small issues of life in Fairbanks, Alaska. Prior to formally beginning the interview, I spent some time covering the consent form and asked Aaron if he had any questions. He said “no”, so we began.

I began by asking, “why don’t you just tell me a little bit maybe about your past religious history, and let’s start there.”

Aaron settled back and replied “My biological parents were . . . practicing agnostic. They didn’t really encourage me to have one religion or other, in fact, there was a period of time in my childhood when they would take me to different religious institutions and synagogues and what not, and have me experience a service or have me talk to clergy that [were] there, so that later on, when I was ready to formulate my own ideas as far as

religion; I would feel a little bit more empowered and sort of have a sampling which is a little unorthodox in American culture.”

Aaron continued his narrative response by linking the discussion of his early religious instruction to his struggle with sexual identity saying, “although I did struggle with it . . . I didn’t identify it by name until I was about 16 years old. So tracing back, its influence on me has been kind of tough because it wasn’t as if when I was 10 years old I decided that I felt gay and I was wrestling with ‘how does that sync with Christianity’ and what not.” Aaron continued by saying “I didn’t have that cognizant kind of struggle going on with me, but I often wondered how much that sort of influenced me subconsciously, or just the general motif of society, you know. You are more or less Christian; you have a wife, 2.5 kids, a dog, a car what not; you know, the American Dream.”

Aaron explained further noting, “as I child; I’m forming my reality, and my reality is going to be looking for role models and influences within mainstream culture to give me that guideline . . . I don’t know how to isolate . . . how exactly one religion affected me in that sense. I do remember, once I first started identifying myself as a homosexual, about age 16, that I had” and after a brief pause, Aaron continued “both a disappointment and resentment towards straight culture because [when] . . . I was ready to start dating other people, other men; I didn’t feel that I had those cultural guidelines as far as how I was to proceed, and how it works”, and Aaron noted that “even today I find it very, very difficult to figure out, because even straight men will say ‘so, did you get to second base’

or ‘did you get to third base’ . . . there is a certain understanding about how things are to proceed and what the rules are.”

Aaron discussed this idea further stating:

I really felt I didn’t have that, and I felt a little adrift, and I think the result is that I had the freedom to make decisions about how things should be, but at the same time I felt”, another lengthy pause, “an overburdening response to that area on my part. I don’t have a social example to sort myself into . . . I have to define things as I go along and to try to develop relationships with other people who are dealing with the same thing . . . where they’re defining where they are coming from so it becomes a very postmodern meeting of two minds and realities trying to figure out; ‘how are we gonna make this work’ you know, and defining our own rules. So there is some freedom there, and I think sometimes that it can be also . . . be a detriment to establishing relationships to other people.

I wanted to get the conversation back to discussing Aaron’s experiences with religion, so I asked, “You had mentioned that . . . your parents were interested in exposing you to lot of different religious ideas and religious beliefs. Where currently do you stand on organized religion? Do you currently participate in anything particular?”

Aaron replied, “I do not participate in organized religion. I have been incorporating a lot of Eastern philosophy or Eastern religion into my thoughts, and generally, I do find myself respecting a lot of Christian values. Sometimes . . . Christians that get lost in the

details . . . they get sort of off message or off purpose, and they get squabbling about details like ‘who is following this’ and ‘who is not doing that’ and ‘who is doing this?’” Then Aaron divulged that “recently I have gone into recovery for alcoholism, and that has involved a lot of rethinking about religion, especially because there is a lot of Christian influence in [the] recovery society.”

I attempted to narrow the subject to get to Aaron’s experiences and thoughts about God. I asked, “So I heard you say that you were not necessarily involved in any sort of organized religion, but would you say that you believe in God?”

Aaron answered, “I wouldn’t. . . I thought about God in many different ways, and I guess my approach to God is thinking that God is sort of everything. Meaning that God is me, God is you, God is the universe; a whole, not a separate entity that you could talk to, or be judged by, or be relieved by, but is this sort of ‘all-encompassing’ that represents all of us and that we are all a part of . . .that would be my understanding of God. It might be very abstract for people to be able to ascribe a sentient personality to this God idea.”

Then Aaron continued to discuss other themes about God saying, “To me that is a little bit much for me to handle, because I cannot reconcile a lot of the things that go on in the world with there being some sort of sentient, overlooking sort of deity. That’s not for me to say, that ‘it works in mysterious ways’ that, to me, is a huge cop-out.” Then Aaron discussed another outlook saying, “At the same time, I’m not quite on board with atheism. One of my best friends is a Physics major, and we talk about it constantly. So, I’m just not on board with atheism either because I think there is something more to the

universe than simply the exploited explanation of how our atoms and molecules are bouncing around against each other. I think there's something more deeply spiritual about reality."

I wanted to get a clearer understanding about Aaron's experiences regarding how he came to his specific understanding of God, so I asked, "you had mentioned that you think God is a broader concept and not some sentient being, but something that encompasses all of us . . . So can you tell me a little bit about how you came to that understanding?"

Aaron then related a story that began, "One time in Australia, I was crossing the road, and the traffic system was different, and I almost got killed. Some guy randomly saved my life by yelling 'Oi' really loud, and the driver stopped." Aaron wondered, "was that God looking after me? I felt like something was looking out for me at that time, but was it some random chance? I don't know." Aaron continued, "there's an endless series of instances that I could use both positively and negatively to try to understand the reality that I am in. Was something looking after me? . . . I'm having problems losing my eyesight right now; am I supposed to believe that that was some sort of divine punishment, or maybe an obstacle leading me to become a better spiritual being?" After a long pause, Aaron continued, "Any moment in our lives I feel like I could run into these things. It could be sort of a hurdle, or a guidance towards an understanding of my spiritual world, but at the same time that doesn't really lead me anywhere concrete for me to hold onto, so I'm constantly redefining and reexamining my spirit self."

I then asked, “do you think that you have some type of relationship with that broadened entity, and do you feel that your sexuality in anyway impacts that relationship with that bigger entity?”

Aaron answered, “I think of it more in reverse terms actually. I do feel like I have a relationship with that concept of God, and the universe, and the connection between myself and all living beings. And I feel like the more optimistic my relationship is to my self-esteem and the way that [I] interact with the world; the more optimistic, [and] the more healthy, and the more receptive I seem to be to developing relationships with others.” Then Aaron continued, “but when I’m feeling good about the world and my connection to the world and, thereby God; that’s when I feel that I am the more healthy inside and more able to develop good relationships, and sexual encounters, and romantic relationships with other men. So I feel like there is a reverse, I don’t feel like I’m being judged, or fulfilling a life process, . . . and then it is all the sudden being condemned or rewarded by this higher deity. I feel like when I have this connection with the spiritual world and myself, then I’m able to develop my relationships better.”

I had remembered the experience that Aaron had related regarding his experience in Australia, and I wanted to dig a little deeper into that communicative experience. I stated, “I’m going to go back to when the gentleman yelled ‘Oi’ in the road. Did you speak to that gentleman? What happened following that?”

Aaron replied, “I find it interesting that you say that because at the time I was so embarrassed, and I just sort of walked off, and did my own thing, and went to where I

was headed.” He continued, “In retrospect, I felt that it was almost my responsibility [to approach him], because that man saved my life. And it was a significant moment to me, not to him, . . . I should have approached him, and offered to buy him a drink, and gotten to know who he was, and taken advantage of that instance because that is one of those random occurrences where you develop a connection you did not intend to have with another person . . . I actually feel almost ashamed that I didn’t thank the man, and get to know him, and didn’t allow him to get to know the guy whose life he probably saved.”

I explored this idea further asking, “did that impact your life after that instance?” Aaron indicated that, should he have an experience like that again, he would “take the time to develop that connection with someone.” Then he began to tell me about one of his past relationships:

I have had problems with religions when it comes to other people that I’ve been in relationships with. Some of my longer relationships have failed because of the religious pressure felt by the other person in the relationship. I was involved with a Catholic person for a very long time, and he was not really comfortable with the idea of the relationship even though he clearly had some sort of infatuation with me and a physical attraction. It was here in Fairbanks that I had this long relationship, and of course, every time we left the vicinity of Fairbanks, then all the sudden he was a lot more free sexually because he was away from his family and away from all those pressures . . . and he was able to explore things more

openly with me. And so I think that . . . I have developed a sort of resentment towards organized religions just because of the indirect difficulties it has caused in my own romantic life.

I then asked Aaron if he was currently participating in any religious ceremonies or rituals. He answered, “No I’m not.” Though he said, “I’m occasionally invited, and I will participate in them as long as I don’t feel like I’m put in the position of paying lip-service to something that is not genuinely felt on my part. . . Two summers ago I performed a couple weddings for Christian couples who knew that I was not Christian or heterosexual. They knew it and they asked me to do it, and I was perfectly comfortable doing it and even honored to be a part of . . . that life ceremony that was very important for them. But no, I don’t have any sort of ritualistic or religious practices that I have been following in quite a long time.”

I was curious about how being involved in the religious rituals of others impacts Aaron’s own experience. So I asked, “How does that make you feel?”

He answered, “Sometimes I feel like I am a little bit directionless . . . like I stopped being a child and all of a sudden became an adult. So, being left to my own devices can be a little scary, a little daunting sometimes, and there always is that allure to turn to religion. I imagine that it’s true for most people” he continued, “but when I’m faced with times [of] intense stress or tragedy, I have turned to a higher power . . . and prayed. Sometimes I think that it is a human reaction when you feel like you have no power to effect change, to look for it elsewhere, to look for that power elsewhere to help you.”

I had the sense that we were approaching some important experiences, so I asked “Have you ever reached out for that help elsewhere . . . specifically in regards towards your sexuality?” Aaron asked for an example, so I said, “Well, you mentioned that you’ve reached out at times of struggle and turmoil, and I wonder if any of those times dealt specifically with sexuality issues?”

At first Aaron indicated that he had not, then he discussed a time in high school when:

I went to a meeting of the Thespian Society . . . and in walked the president . . . another student who was my age. He was a junior in high school just like me, and he was so attractive to me. And I do remember looking up, and I did say a prayer, a silent prayer, and I said ‘Oh, God’ and I was talking to God, and I said ‘please let him be gay’. And I had a long pause, and I remember asking, ‘now why would I ask that?’ And I said silently to myself, ‘well, I must be gay’. And it literally was that moment, when I had prayed to God asking for another man to be gay that I realized that I in turn was gay . . . That was actually the definitive moment when I identified myself as homosexual, and I started resolving those issues with myself and my lifestyle.

And Aaron laughed as he realized, “so I guess, yeah, it was a very religious moment when I asked a higher power to let another man be gay, . . . it is amazing to me that it was that sharp, that it was that overt, and that I was so specific in talking to a higher power.”

Then Aaron related another story about a conversation with God. He said, “the last time that I think I had honestly spoken to God was when I was a little boy, and I was asking God to ‘please let me die before my little dog did’. My dog, my best friend; my dog was a puppy when I was a toddler and she was getting old, and I knew she was gonna die soon, and I was doing that bargaining that’s very common when death comes around. And it wasn’t since that moment that, once again, when I was asking that ‘some guy be gay’ that I had had an open conversation with whatever I imagined, or felt, or thought was God.”

I then related an observation to Aaron. I told him that, “talking to different people and friends over the years; I’ve heard a lot of people talk about prayers to God asking God to make them ‘not gay’, and this is one of the first instances that I’ve heard, if not *the* first instance that I’ve heard of someone asking God for someone else to ‘be gay’.” After we both finished laughing about that, I continued by asking “So did you ever have any conversations with God asking forgiveness or change? Did you have any struggles maybe with him not being accepting?”

Aaron answered, “I never felt spiritual guilt about being gay . . . even after I was masturbating about guys and what not; it took me such a long time to identify those traits in myself as being gay, that by the time I did, I sort of recognized them as natural traits in myself. And it’s still impossible for me to understand why a higher power would ever create that sort of identification and desires within [me] and then say ‘No, you can’t have them’. You know, because happiness is almost such a comical theme within American

society.” Aaron continued to discuss the societal impact when he recognized “the ‘pursuit of happiness’, it’s written in our own political structure, . . . it would seem so grossly unfair to create that desire for happiness within myself, and knowing that it’s another man that would complete me . . . having to deny that seems to sort of arbitrary, cruel, and not any of the traits that I’m encouraged to think of as God.”

Aaron continued, “So, no. I’ve never felt that sort of guilt. Now I have, on occasion, instead of praying to ‘not be gay anymore’; . . . intensely wished; when I’ve had some deeper relationships with other men that are not quite gay . . . that I was a female, so then they wouldn’t be so troubled . . . but I never really wished for someone to magically make me not gay.” Aaron continued to put this idea into perspective saying, “. . . whatever it is about me that makes society uncomfortable; I don’t want to think of myself as a pimple on the face of modern culture. I’d rather think of myself as ‘we don’t know what to do with me yet’.”

Focusing the discussion back on religion, I asked, “During the times that your parents were taking you to all the sorts of religious organizations, do you remember hearing any sermons or conversations about homosexuality?”

Aaron answered, “You know, I was too young, and this was [the] early eighties . . . homosexuality was taboo, and it was treated so sporadically in the media that . . . very extreme examples . . . was all you were ever presented with, and all my parents were ever presented with. So it probably never even occurred to either me, or my family, or whatever religious institutions I was going to, to even discuss the issue of homosexuality.”

Then Aaron related a specific example saying, “I do remember having conflicts . . . I was going to a big Baptist church when I was little for Sunday School, and I remember them talking about sacrificing animals to God, . . . and I had strong issues with that right away, and I didn’t have problems talking to my religious teachers about that . . . We don’t sacrifice animals in our modern culture, so why would we think that it’s okay. And so I immediately had all sorts of conflicts with our modern reality when it does not sync up with those sorts of religious issues. And I was completely asked not to return to that Baptist [church].”

When I asked how old Aaron was at the time, he answered, “Oh, I think that was about pre-school, so just before first grade.”

Noting that such boldness at such a young age was not often seen, I asked, “What or whom do you credit for you having, at such a young age, [being able] to question a teacher in such an authoritarian role?”

Aaron replied, “I don’t know if I can credit anything to it . . . I might have just been someone who was able to take in information, process it, and make some judgment calls . . . but that’s a good question, and I really don’t know what to attribute that sort of assertiveness.”

Switching gears a little, I asked, “If you don’t mind, I want to go back to this relationship with you and this other gentleman who was Catholic. I said, “it sounds like you were in completely different places as far as relationships with God and ideas about

relationships with God in conjunction with relationships with family and church. And I wonder if you could tell me about [any] of those conversations.”

After stating that he could not speak for his friend and partner, Aaron explained, “I do remember asking him if I could attend his religious functions because I wanted to understand where he was coming from, and I do know that I was not welcome to do so. He did not want me in the presence of his family, in the presence of his religious peers in that sort of context because I was, even though he was continuing a relationship with me, I was antithetical to that whole world scheme of his . . . I was frustrated at not being able to resolve that conflict, and not being empowered. We had some religious discussions about homosexuality, and about what the Bible says, and . . . it doesn’t seem to be a high priority in the Bible about homosexuality.” Then Aaron discussed his view of the texts that are often quoted in relations to homosexuality saying, “I think it is very interesting to me when I will see other gay men trying to justify homosexuality within the context of Christianity . . . [it’s a] litigious mindset because I really think that the [Bible] is more less clear that it does not approve of homosexuality. And I think you either have to say, ‘look, Christianity as a whole does not approve of homosexuality and I am going to stick with Christianity nonetheless’, or ‘Christianity does not approve of homosexuality therefore, as a homosexual, I cannot be a part of Christianity’. And that’s sort of where I am. I’m in that second boat. I may empathize and agree with a lot of Christian values”, and then there was a sudden break in Aaron’s narrative because he wanted to add the thought that:

A lot of the leaders in the recovery community are also religious leaders outside of that context. And more than one of them has said to me, ‘look, come to our AA meetings because you will find acceptance there’, ‘If you go to church, if you to my Christian church, they will love you, but they will only love you as long as you fit within this behavior. As long as you fit these beliefs and you pursue these beliefs they will love you, but there is no universal love there’. And what they explained to me was hard for even them to understand. But it seems to be true in many religious communities. They’re there for you as long as you fit a certain mold, or at least are trying to fit yourself into that mold, but once they sense that you are not on board with that; the unconditional love becomes a little bit more conditional.

Then Aaron tells me about a familial experience saying, “there are Jehovah’s Witnesses in my family. And I have an uncle who was an elder in the church, and upon adulthood, his daughter decided to identify herself as a lesbian, and he was asked to not be an elder in the church anymore because apparently he could not [help] his daughter to lead what they considered to be ‘the right path’. And I found that really hard to accept; that on one hand you could say that adults are free to make their own choices, but if they do, there will be consequences for other people that were supposed to be their guiding figures.”

“Have you talked to your niece about that?” I asked.

Aaron answered, “I never got the chance . . . she lives in California, and we’ve never been really close, but I would like to at some point. Apparently she used to babysit me when I was little, so maybe that’s why I’m gay.” At that point we both laughed.

I followed by asking, “So, as far as things stand right now, how would you characterize your relationship with that higher power?”

Aaron explained that, “it’s in a lot of states of flux. I’ve had a lot of difficulties this past year, and it’s only this last week that I’ve felt my spirituality be a lot more anchored; my positivity being a lot more anchored . . . this last year . . . in many ways it was good for me spiritually to have gone through these things” adding, “when your world is grabbed like an etch as sketch toy and shaken up, that’s gonna test your foundation, and mine was completely tested, and I found myself living in a perspective of negativity that was not . . . me, so it was a long process getting back to that positivity, and I’m still working on it; where I can really accept the world around me as being part of me and me being a part of it.” And recognizing the impact on him currently he added, “it’s been a hard . . . I’ve backed away from relationships and all sorts of things that I knew I was not on steady ground spiritually [for]. And so I am developing that. I’m not sure what the right relationship is to my sexuality’ and to my homosexual lifestyle’ and my mindset. They are related, but sometimes it’s hard to figure out those exact connections . . .”

I then observed, “it sounds like [in] your relationship with [your] higher power, you place a lot of importance on a ‘happy perspective’ and an ‘optimistic perspective’. That is not everybody’s experience with a relationship with God. I wonder if you might tell

me a little bit about [why] those to aspects of emotion, optimism and happiness, are so crucial for that relationship with [your] higher power to be healthy.”

Aaron related, “when it comes to faith and spirituality, I feel that those are tools or at least a very strong understanding of your universe that allows you to deal with change, that allows you to deal with obstacles, and I think the basic concept to deal with” explaining “let’s say I am maimed in an accident and I lose my arm. Now, I cannot reattach that arm and make it grow as if I’m a starfish. That is not an option. So having or not having an arm is not really a choice. Once I’ve lost my arm, I’ve lost my arm. How I deal with that internally is a choice . . . To me that is a very big difference as far as the quality of life and the rewards you’re going to find in life . . . there could always be some unfairness in my life, or there could always be some blessing in my life.”

Then Aaron relates a brief personal example, “for instance, [the] panic attacks that I have had recently, that I just did not have any understanding of until I actually experienced them. I’m finding that I can get involved in having a panic attack . . . and get upset, . . . or I can just sit there accept what I’m going through . . . it is my decision how I deal with it. So, so my heart is racing really hard, and so my body is telling me ‘you feel like you’re drowning’ or ‘my body is on fire’. So [you] just let it wash over you and know it’s gonna be okay.” Explaining further, “I think for me spirituality and understanding of God comes down to this one thought. That it is going to be okay. And even if it’s not, what a wonderful thought.” adding “You know, things are gonna happen

to you whether you know it or not, so the way that you approach it is gonna determine the quality of your experience and the life that you have to live.”

I thought I recognized a potential nugget here, so I asked, “have you ever had the experience when someone said to you that ‘things will be okay’?”

Aaron responded affirmatively, so I asked him to “tell me about one of those”.

Aaron told me about “one of [his] best friends . . . David” stating, “he is the one who really brought my attention to that concept of acceptance . . . there’s nothing really more profound than [the] concept that everything is going to be okay . . . [and] once it’s there, once I have the sense that it’s okay, that everything is going to be okay, then I’m amazed at what I can endure and what I can deal with and still retain happiness, enjoyment, productivity, and creativity and all those sorts of things.”

Then Aaron tells me about a band named “Okay Go, and one of their big motifs is ‘its okay, this too will pass’. And I remember watching it, and that just that the idea that it communicates to me just makes me cry because . . . that was their message, and I remember it being a very, very profound one for me, and I think also that’s why I’m involved in the arts, because I think that that’s probably the most important message we can send to each other. We may not have all the answers, but we’re all going through the same things more or less together, and it’s going to be okay. And I think that that’s probably the strongest message that one artist can give to another. And I think in many ways, it reverberates in a lot of ways in the message that the clergy gives to their flocks.

It's that idea of comfort, and it might give hope, and even to certain extents, endurance through tribulations and trials."

I tried to redirect the question back to David saying, "You mentioned that it was your friend David . . . who kind of opened your eyes to recognize that message, and I wonder if you could tell me a little bit specifically about how that happened?"

It worked. Aaron began, "Okay . . . I got a tattoo in Hebrew that has his name, and it was both to remind me of a great friendship, but also to remind me of this very specific idea." Then Aaron told me a story about when he:

was working with a girl . . . in food service . . . I found her annoying, and I would go home at the end of the day's work, and I would actually be slightly fixated on her, but also dissatisfied with myself because I liked to accept people, and I liked to like people, and I just didn't like her. And she was annoying, and I felt she was not even capable of even doing her job correctly, and I was resentful of the people that hired her, and that I had to work with her and all. [So] I talked to my friend David about this and he said, you know, 'don't you understand Aaron, that your feelings, the way you feel about things is your choice. So you're choosing to feel this way about your coworker', and I had never thought about that. And I really, really took the time to digest that, and as soon as I did I was able to . . . work with this person and I would enjoy her presence . . . I felt pleasure in the ability to help her through her life, cause I know so many

people have helped me when I've had difficulties . . . my reactions towards her, and my feelings about her were a choice . . . and that was the beginning of that understanding for me, and the reason that I got the tattoo so that when I got up in the morning and would look in the mirror . . . I would see that and remind myself of that concept that . . . I can choose to feel bad about it or I can choose to feel good . . . and try to make the world a better place.

I told Aaron the I thought that it was “really interesting that a simple conversation . . . seemed to be so . . . encompassing that it even was able to effect [his] relationship with [his] higher power. So it's no longer the girl that you were working with, but it's the Being.”

Then Aaron told me another story. He began by stating, “I've met two gentlemen in my life, and they just happen to be men; one was the Dali Lama . . . and the other man was an old Director from Chicago . . . and they were both famous men in their own fields, one's a little bit more famous than the other.” After a little laugh, he continued, “But one thing that struck me about them was when I spoke to both of them, and they made eye contact with me, there was this feeling of universal acceptance, like, it's almost as if they saw everything that I was and accepted it.” Aaron explained, “in reality, I don't think that they could see down into me, but they had such a calmness towards their world that they saw all the possibilities that I could be and accepted all those possibilities. And did that in such an innocent and free way that I've been envious of that my entire life.”

Aaron then added, “I have tried to pursue that sort of acceptance of others, so just to look at someone, and no matter what happens, or what comes out of this persons mouth, I’m going to accept them, and I am going to enjoy the fact that they are a living sentient being that I can interact with.”

Aaron then likened this experience to religion saying, “it was just so powerful . . . those were religious moments for me . . . It was just, such a profound moment . . . my world literally stopped . . . and it’s such an intangible thing.” Aaron then observed, “I can’t really say why anybody else who loves me, [and] looks me in the eyes cannot carry on that feeling to me. Part of it may have been because they didn’t know me. But at the same time it was like it didn’t matter, I could have been their best friend or their worst enemy. They probably would have looked at me the same way.”

I then asked Aaron if he remembered any conversation that he may have had with the Dali Lama. He said, “honestly, I can’t remember all the ridiculous things that we asked him. I just remember is that presence that he had and that moment when he looked at me.”

I was curious about whether or not anybody else noticed or experienced the same type of experience. But Aaron said that though he did not “remember them commenting on it specifically”, he said that they “were overwhelmed by the . . . fame and the momentousness of getting to talk to such a large religious figure.”

I then asked if he “ever talked to anyone about that religious experience?”

Aaron admitted that it was not until “much later in my life [that he was] able to digest it in those terms.” Adding, “it wasn’t until I met the other gentleman, Eric, that I . . . had a second example. So I was able to say ‘Oh, okay, this is what I was responding to in the first place’ . . . he had had a stroke and was suffering from aphasia. He had a one-man play where he was basically describing his readiness to die, which was the most profound performance I have ever seen. At the same time he was accepting life . . . he didn’t seem depressed in any way, but he was pretty, you know, he had a performance where he kept saying, ‘Let me go’, ‘Let me go’.”

I was curious about this relationship, so I asked, “did you ever talk to him about that experience of him looking at you?”

Aaron replied, “I didn’t really get the opportunity. He was . . . somewhat secluded from most of us at the conference. I wish I had . . . I think it’s important when people have a strong impact on you for you to let them know.” Explaining, “cause I would think that it would be rewarding to have that sort of feedback from people . . . sort of a kindness. We sort of think of famous people as being so self-sustaining and all these other things, and it sort of dehumanizes them sometimes, and I think it’s important to reach out to people no matter what labels on their suit, or what vehicle that they are driving, you know.”

I asked Aaron if he had been able to actually do that at any time, and he replied, “I can’t think of a specific moment; however, I have been teased by my friends because I just sort of have an irreverence for famous people and just reaching out and talking to

them . . . I'm more intimidated by their body guards than I am by them as people", a comment that made us both laugh a little.

After checking the time, and insuring that Aaron was okay to continue, I mentioned that I found it "interesting that your parents . . . were willing to expose you to this variety of religions even though they . . . were agnostic." Then I asked Aaron if he could "remember any conversations that [he] may have had with them, even at a young age regarding God, or the existence of god, or his personality."

He replied, "I don't per say. I do know that . . . now my mother is strongly professing to be atheist." He added, "I find that a little disconcerting, because I think she's come to this conclusion that . . . she was born, and she will die, and that is beginning and the end of her personality and her soul." He explained further saying, "I don't really understand that mindset. To me that would be too much . . . despair. I'm still trying to understand how [someone] could have a positive attitude and be atheist. To me I just have to believe that there is more to who I am than just my physical body."

Then I asked Aaron if he "talked to [his] mom about that?" He answered saying, "Not in a long time. I probably should. I, just, I don't know why I haven't talked to her about that. I guess perhaps I find it too dark a subject for me to be comfortable with because it does make me a little bit sad for my mom."

I steered the conversation back to his previous comment asking him to explain a little more about his comment regarding his difficulty understanding "how someone could be happy and atheist." I asked him to "tell me a little about that."

He explained, “the way I look at is if the life that we’re given is all that we have; if I honestly believe that the life I’m given from the time I’m born ‘til the time I die, is all I have,” and after a long pause, he continued, “I would be more likely to think of myself as a screw-up. Because . . . if all of existence that pertains to me is involved in this lifetime, then every moment I spend in this lifetime that is not how I would want to spend it . . . would be lost forever . . . I don’t know, it seems like an incredible waste.” Observing further, Aaron noted, “it seems like an incredible pressure, ironically, even more than having religion.” Adding that for he “would venture to say that very few of us live our life in a way that we would be satisfied if we died the next day; that the day before we had spent it to our best ability.” He then wondered “does that prompt me to spend each day as if it were my last? I’d like to say it does, but in all honesty it doesn’t. I, I’m frivolous with my life, and the idea that maybe there is something more to my life than the poor choices I’m making during it is a little bit of a comforting thought.” Aaron then links this idea to religion by stating, “I think maybe that is what a lot of people alluded to in religion even though a lot of times there is this pressure . . . this is a moral testing ground, and you’re being judged for the choices you’ve made and what not. Well that’s fine if you believe that, but at least . . . it’s not the finality of it. There, there may be other moments after you die.”

I wanted to keep this line of conversation going, so I asked Aaron if he did talk to his mom about this, “what would [he] say to open the door to that conversation?”

Aaron shared saying, “I really have a free intellectual relationship with my mom, so it wouldn’t be hard to get into that conversation.” He added, “I’m not sure how I would start it . . . I’m sure that she is fairly depressed right now, so, I’m not sure if it would be a cheery conversation . . . It might be special to . . . find out where she is coming from.” He then returned to discussing a relationship mentioned earlier saying, “my roommate is a Physics major and an atheist, and we constantly have these discussions. So it’s not as though I’m out of the loop . . . so maybe that’s why I have this disinterest to talk to my mom, because I am sort of flushing out my arguments about my understandings, you know, of that perspective.”

As the interview began to wind down, Aaron discussed his views more specifically. He said “I don’t have a lot of specific dogma to really go into [regarding] conflicts with homosexuality . . . my personal spiritual development has been pursued in a way that it was done in a way to accommodate who I am, and being gay . . . is part of who I am . . . so I made a conscious effort [to] have those things not come into contact as much as I possible, and to resolve it when it does. So in that way maybe I am a little luckier to have a little bit more of a centered relationship between my spiritual self and my sexual side.”

My last question involved asking Aaron to place himself on a continuum. I explained the continuum saying, “on one hand is . . . someone who wholly experience[s] their sexual identity and ha[s] thrown their religious identity out the window.” I explained that this person may say things like “I’m gay, and proud, and am in a relationship, so screw religion. I’m never going to go to church again.” And I continued, explaining that “on

the other hand [is] someone who is wholly engaged in their religious identity and refuses to partake in any activity regarding their sexual identity” I then asked Aaron where on that continuum he would place himself.

Aaron indicated that he “would be with the person that rejects religion”, adding, “I am not gifted or burdened, however your perspective is, with this sort of faith idea; where there is this sort of spiritual reality ‘out there’ . . . I’m looking at this religion like Christianity or Muslim for instance, and say, ‘look, you don’t like homosexuality?’ Then you’re saying you don’t like me because I’m homosexual. So therefore I’m not going to take part in your religion. It’s a choice on my part . . . ‘If you don’t want me, you don’t want me’; ‘If you change your mind about homosexuals; come talk to me’. But that’s where I am. I, have the freedom to develop my faith outside of a pre-determined cosmos that I have to cram myself into. Now, my cosmos has kind of fit me in.”

I then asked Aaron if he had an opinion as to why he was able to develop this perspective when Western religious thought tended to disagree. He ended with by commenting, “I can postulate, I can say ‘well maybe I did feel excluded enough from the onset that I just wasn’t indoctrinated; maybe I was excluded, and maybe because my parents weren’t forcing me to become part of the scene, that there was never this inconsistency that I had to reconcile. I just had to say, ‘look, I’m either this or I’m that’. And it was easy enough for the religions themselves to tell me I’m not that.”

This provided me with one more opportunity to ask “do you remember any conversations with . . . your parents . . . regarding that idea of accepting people or ideas?”

Aaron explained, “I do remember having conversations, because we did talk about the Bible and read the Bible.” Aaron then described, what he called “the salad bar mentality” of modern Christians. His example highlighted “Leviticus, to roughly paraphrase . . . about women; when they are going through their time of the month and they are supposed to live in a separate facility, and there is a whole list of prescribed things that they choose not to follow.” Aaron noted that rules are “just not practical in modern day. However there are other parts of Leviticus, for example about homosexuality that [Christians] decide is very important to follow.” Aaron explained that “it’s that sort of salad bar mentality that we did discuss with my parents and that was probably their dissatisfaction with Christianity, that sort of idea that I can take what is acceptable and leave the rest.”

Aaron’s final comment expanded on this idea. He said that’s more like “a modern political machine than a religious one.” And he added, “I don’t think it was a judgment that they are not following everything. It just seems that if you are only following what is convenient to you and what you’ve chosen to follow is not convenient for other people, like for me, homosexuals, then how fair is that? For some people to be very arbitrary about what to believe and then push that as a sort of agenda, seems more like politics; something going on temporally and not some long religious tradition.”

I then concluded the interview and thanked Aaron for his time and participation.

3.2 Nancy

I had known Nancy, an adult female who identifies as bisexual, for over a year. Much like Aaron, Nancy approached me, reminded me that I had spoken to her previously about participating in my research, and she asked if she could be a participant in my thesis project. I eagerly said “Yes”! We agreed to meet on Monday night at her home in Fairbanks, Alaska. When I arrived, she had a pot of warm soup waiting for me. After I ate a bowl, we spent a few minutes discussing the consent form and then began the interview. Like the previous interview, my introductory question asked Nancy to “tell me a little bit about your religious history.”

Nancy began by saying “I was raised Catholic. My dad’s Protestant, but my mom’s Catholic, and my dad was working weird schedules so my mom had complete reign over our religious upbringing. And that was a point of contention, that he wasn’t really around to have any control over it, but he would pull me aside and say ‘please promise me that you will never marry a man that’s Catholic’ and ‘please promise me you will never become a nun’. So, I was raised Catholic.”

Next, I asked “How long were you an active participant in that church?”

Nancy answered, “I was required to go to mass every Sunday. Every church activity that kids were involved in, I had to be there. From as early as I remember until the day I turned eighteen . . . I was always told that ‘when you turn eighteen you can make your own decision about whether or not you go to church. And the first Sunday after I turned eighteen, it was like, ‘I’m Not going’!” She said with a laugh.

I asked, “Were you still living at home?”

“Yeah, I was.” She answered.

I began to ask “How did that go?”, but before I got the word “that” out; Nancy was already responding with “It did not go over well.”

So then I asked “What did that conversation look like?”

Nancy answered “Well, angry, loud. And I warned her, I warned her on my birthday, I warned her on the days leading up to it and she refused to acknowledge it, and then the morning of, she’s like ‘get in the car’, ‘get ready and get in the car’. And I’m like ‘I’m am not getting ready and I am not going with you’. ‘This is the deal that we have had for like a decade, that I had no choice until the day I turned eighteen’ and she was like ‘you still live in my house’ and I was ‘yeah, well, that’s not the deal. The deal was when I turned eighteen’.” After Nancy took a breath, we both laughed, and she continued with “and she argued with me a little bit and then let it go.”

I said “it sounds like your persuasive tactics were not necessarily emotionally based but rather...”

And again, before I could finish my thought Nancy said “Oh yeah, and her big argument was ‘we did not raise you to make a decision like this’, ‘we raised you to always put God first’. And I said, ‘I am not on board. I went to church every Sunday, I received all the sacraments, I went through confirmation even though I did not want to, and I was promised when I turned eighteen I could make my own decision. And I did all

of that, with a smile, never voicing my complaints or concerns at church.’ You know, putting on the nice face.”

Then I asked “What led you not to want to go to church when you turned eighteen?”

Nancy chuckled a bit and said “Sixth grade is when it all started changing for me. The decision to not go to church anymore was definitely not until sixth grade, because friends that I had, that were other religions, we started talking about stuff, and I was ‘wow’; my experience is so incredibly different than theirs.” Nancy continued saying, “the book that religion is supposed to be based upon is the Bible, and I go to church, and we never open a Bible. We have missals . . . and I understand that every Catholic Church uses that missal and does that reading for the day, but we never memorized Bible verses or anything. The only thing we did was memorize prayers, Catholic prayers, mostly Catholic, or Catholic versions of prayers, and I thought it was really weird that we never studied the Bible.” Nancy explained further “I brought that up to my CCD, which is like Sunday school in Catholic church, and my mom was one of the leaders of the . . . Sunday school program . . . they had a talk about it, and they were like ‘well, it’s kind of true’ you know, ‘the kids should be learning how to read a Bible, and they don’t even have a clue how to look stuff up’.” Nancy then told her dog to lie down, then continued, “So they bought us all a Bible, and we cracked it like, once the entire school year, and I was like ‘this is ridiculous’! This is, this is, you know, I don’t like this’. And every question that I ever . . . asked . . . I never felt that I got a truthful answer. It was always this holier than thou bullshit, that doesn’t really relate.”

I asked, “Can you remember any of those experiences particularly? Maybe what your question was?”

Nancy answered, “Well, one, where I got angry, was at confirmation. That was where you are dedicating your life to the church. Like your promising that you’re gonna live a certain way as an adult, and we went through a whole year of training where different people came in and covered different subjects, and elders in the church taught subjects that they felt comfortable with. And it was supposed to be an open forum where we could ask any question.” Nancy explained further saying, “And there were kids there that I knew through church growing up, and there were kids who I’d gone to school with but were never at church, and we were all there together, and we were all forced to go. And there were like two people who wanted to be there and the rest of us, it was the last place we wanted to be, and we were mad. And so we took the opportunity to ask questions, and our main, as you might imagine, a bunch of teenagers, our main focus was sex; ‘why is it wrong?’” Frustration could be detected in Nancy’s voice as she continued, “And we could not get a straight answer, and they finally brought the priest in, and he wouldn’t, he couldn’t even say words. He couldn’t say ‘genitalia’; he couldn’t say ‘sex’. He was so uncomfortable that he would just point at his nether regions; he would turn red, and be like ‘until you’re married, this is all off limits’; ‘why? Why?’ and he’s like ‘cause that’s the way God wants it’.” Nancy’s continued saying, “So all the answers were that ‘that’s the right way’ ‘... the church wants you to be this way’; Why? And ... they couldn’t even make something up that sounded halfway you know, like ‘respecting yourself’. It was just because ‘this is how God wants it to be’.” Nancy explained the result of that

conversation saying, “So we were all pretty mad. And they didn’t give us any sort of tools for like ‘how are you supposed to cope with that?’, ‘how are you supposed to deal with that on a date?’, ‘how, how [can] we live like this?’ Come on, teach us something like, if you want us to be this way, give us some tools to do it. But they did not talk to us. They were so offended that we wanted to talk about this. And uh, we all went through the motions.” She ended, chuckling and pondering.

I wanted to know the end of the story, so I asked, “So did everybody get confirmed?”

Nancy answered, “I think so . . . we were all forced to be there and told ‘you will do this’.”

I asked further, “And how old did you say you were then?”

Nancy answered, “that was like junior year, probably of high school.”

I continued, “Okay, so forward a year or two, and you have finally earned the right to go to church or not go to church.” Nancy chuckled as she acknowledged she understood, so I asked “so at that time, when you were having that ‘sex’ conversation at the confirmation . . . how aware were you of your own sexuality during that conversation?”

Nancy answered, “Very Not; like I was very curious about all that, but . . . my mom did not pull me aside at a certain point and give me the talk about birds and the bees, so I guess my disillusionment with the church started earlier on.” Nancy explained “Okay, so I guess I should say, I grew up on a farm, and I raised animals, and I had a sow, and I took her to the boar, and I watched it happen, and so I understood animal sexuality and

how they bred to have children, or litters or whatever. But as a child, I was always told that humans were different, and the way human babies are made is; that 'it's a gift from God', and 'he blesses the wedding bed of a happy couple by giving them a baby, by putting a baby in the mother's belly'. And there was never any talk about any other, uh, people, it didn't even dawn on me . . . I'd never known anyone who'd had a baby out of wedlock . . . when I got a little bit older, I guess I would hear about that sort of thing, and my mom would give some story about "well, sometimes bad girls, God shows them, he punishes them by embarrassing them and their family by giving them a baby out of wedlock'." Nancy continued, saying "But there [were] no details on sex, or intercourse, or anything like that, and we never discussed gays or lesbians; that was just something that was not allowed to talk about in our house."

Nancy then told me another story, "I remember being a small kid in the back seat of the car down in Portland. And we were going to visit my aunt and uncle. And my mom and dad were at a stop sign, and they were talking and the whole car just went silent." Nancy chuckled a little as she continued, "Because right outside the window, on the corner by the stop sign, this lesbian couple was just going at it, they were all over each other making out, and I was just 'Aaah!'", and Nancy took a deep breath before continuing, "'Oh my god', and the whole car was like, 'ah!', and my dad practically ran a red light to get away from it, and I was like 'uh', 'ah', 'uh, what, I don't understand!' 'Those ladies were making out like they were a couple'; 'is that okay?' 'Do ladies make out like that?' And they're like 'we don't talk about this'." Nancy continued, "And that was a huge eye-opening thing for me because . . . it had never crossed my mind really. I

loved my girlfriends, and they made me feel all tingly, but I knew that wasn't an option."

She said with a laugh.

I bluntly asked, "So when did you realize that it might be an option?"

Nancy answered, "Well, I was very sexually repressed. I never masturbated until I was like nineteen years old, and I didn't know what an orgasm was or anything like that because my mom didn't", Nancy interrupted herself and jumped to another story. She began "Oh, so I got ahead of myself. So like in the fifth grade; I'm at Sunday school, and there's this high school girl who is helping out in my Sunday school class room. And a bunch of girls who are a year, only a year older than me, they were sixth graders, come in there, and they're all whispering", and Nancy lowers her voice to a whisper as she continues, "'oh my gosh', 'I can't believe this happened to you', 'it could happen to any of us'. 'It could happen to any of us'? What are they talking about? And I'm listening very closely, and the teacher is getting very nervous because she is worried that all the girls in the class are going to hear what's happening, and I heard what was happening." Nancy explains further saying, "She was pregnant. This high school girl was pregnant and I was 'what?': 'She's not married, she's in high school, I don't understand this'; 'she's a good girl, she goes to church every Sunday, I don't understand this'. And I was just super quiet the rest of the day, and I got home from church, and I was super quiet, and I [said] to my mom 'I don't understand. I don't understand. Is she being punished for something? How is she pregnant?'" Nancy's volume increased as she continued "and my mom's like 'you don't want to know', and I'm like 'what? Now I really want to know.

How is she pregnant? Please tell me'. And she's like 'you do not want to know' and . . . we went around and round. She was super mad, and she called some of the ladies at church and told them what happened. And I [said] 'you have to tell me what happened!'", and Nancy chuckled as she continued, saying, "and she finally [said] 'okay, sit down. You're going to be really upset that I'm telling you this, you're gonna be really grossed out'." Nancy realized, "I'm way too old, she should have explained this. We'd had the talk at school about our periods, but we'd never gotten this far. And that's the year they were gonna have the sex ed. talk. So she had to do it, but she did not want to."

Nancy smiled and gasped as she continued, "I still can't get over how she told me about sex. She told it first-hand; 'your dad has a penis'," Nancy laughs while she continues, "'and I have a vagina, and you know what your vagina, and you remember your period and all that, and he sticks his penis in', and she just grossed me out. I was just horrified. I was so upset. It was the most disgusting, cause she made it so – inappropriate; just completely inappropriate." Nancy continues to recount her mother's explanation saying, "And so she explained that this girl was a floozy, and had probably 'gotten drunk at some party and had sex with some boy and blah, blah, blah'. And it, I mean, it just really ruined it for me; I was not at all intrigued; I was just disgusted. All through junior high, that was the most disgusting thing I ever heard of. And she also told me that girls who have sex, and do inappropriate things with boys, and people who touch themselves inappropriately; 'angels in heaven, God, Jesus, and all your dead relatives can see you doing it, and they are crying, and they are ashamed of you, and it breaks their heart'."

Nancy explains the result of this conversation, saying “So, the idea of having sex, or the idea of touching myself, which masturbation was kind of a foreign concept to me, was horrifying because I believed what she told me. I was so naïve I believed that, and I had a hard time with that even into my twenties. Maybe my grandma can see me; this is, this is pretty embarrassing; I’m a horrible, horrible person . . . you know, I’m breaking everyone’s heart, and someday when I die and go to heaven; they are going to be very ashamed of me and probably shun me because I’m such a filthy, filthy person.”

I asked “Do you still feel that way now?”

Nancy answered “No. no, I got over that.”

So I asked, “. . . How did that change?”

Nancy responded, saying “Um, distance from that whole family situation, and moving away, and realizing that religion for me, is not part of my life. I recognize it as being something that’s been socially constructed, and it’s man-made, and I fully believe that, and there might be something; there might be a higher being, but I don’t understand it, and I’m not meant to understand it right now because it’s not clear to me. And maybe someday I’ll change my mind about that, but right now it’s just not part of my life.”

I followed with another question. “When you were younger and you were going to church, and you were doing the prayers, and you going through those sorts of rituals; were there times when you felt like you connected with that higher power or with that entity?”

Nancy answered, “No, eh, no, or when I think about that I guess there were times that I got into it, but it was more the people. So I had certain teachers, and there were a couple of nuns who really; I just connected with them, and they inspired me and got me excited. But . . . I would pray, and pray, and pray, and I was always told there’s going to be a spiritual awakening ‘when you actually . . . truly commit yourself that you’ll just, you’ll know in your heart’. And I never had that, and it tormented me.” Nancy continued, “I didn’t understand it, and I’d ask all the time, ‘what am I doing wrong’, and it was really upsetting growing up, cause I felt like something was wrong with me that I couldn’t understand this feeling that they were saying that I should have. And now I kinda think it’s a bunch of bullshit. I don’t, I mean, I had that feeling in other aspects of my life. I found spirituality in other ways.”

I asked, “What are those ways?”

Nancy said, “Well, yoga, just going on a hike, doing things that I enjoy makes me feel good . . . that’s my spirituality; just enjoying my life and the things around me and the place that I live. I’d rather go on a canoe trip than Mass. It’s much more spiritual for me.”

I dug deeper, asking “How was it more spiritual for you? You mentioned that it was something that you enjoy, but what makes it a spiritual experience as opposed to a fun experience?”

Nancy responded, “I feel a connection there that I never feel at church.”

I asked, “How so? Tell me about that.”

Nancy laughed a little as she said “I don’t know . . . I always felt like I was on the outside looking in at church, like all these people shared something that I didn’t understand, and I would go through the motions and try to be a good kid, and it just didn’t make any sense to me. And when I’m on a river I love, it the most beautiful thing, and I’m at one with myself, and I can just let things go, and I feel calmer and I feel at peace, and I feel that I’m connected to something, the world, this huge thing. I’m, I’m connected to that and, so that’s a lot more meaningful to me.”

Then I said “You had mentioned that you at least allow for the possibility . . . [of] a larger being or a higher being”, and asked, “do you find now, as an adult, that you call out to that being, or reach out to that being in any sort of way?”

Nancy answered, “Sometimes I say ‘oh my God’ and it makes me laugh, because . . . it doesn’t mean anything to me, and I laugh because, oh my gosh”, which she doesn’t recognize saying, “it’s just so engrained in me because for twenty-something years I believed that there was a God. And now it’s a habitual thing, this phrasing. And, I don’t know . . . I don’t feel anything there, but I’m open to it. I think it’s a neat idea.” Then she adds, “If it’s a woman.”

We both chuckled. Then I asked, “If there is, and she exists, do you feel like you have a connection with her?”

Nancy responded, saying “I feel like I have a connection with the world around me. I like the idea of a mother earth because when I lived in a dry cabin, and I’d go out to the outhouse every night and see the moon; I felt very connected in the like rhythm of life.

We get away from that the more complicated our lives are, and I felt that my life was so simple when I lived in a cabin, and it was really wonderful, and I miss it a lot. Like, my period was in cycle with the moon; it's just, there was just this simplicity and you just felt so . . . in tune with the world around you. So I kinda like that.”

I wanted to shift focus a little, so I asked “[When] you became sexually aware – did that sexual awareness add to, or in any way complicate that religious journey?”

Nancy responded, “Oh yes. When I was first sexually active into my mid to late twenties probably, I would enjoy the act but then immediately feel such guilt. I just really had a hard time. It was really frustrating in relationships because I would talk about it with them, and they would sense that something was wrong, and I mean, a lot of the boys that I dated early on were also religious, and sometimes we even went to church together, and so we would kinda work each other up to this guilty frenzy where we would decide, okay, were not going to sleep together, and we struggled with that and it was just a disaster”, adding “you know, there's no going back . . . it was just complicated. We would desire each other but then we would feel all this guilt over it and yuck, ugh, it was just exhausting . . .”

Then I asked Nancy to “. . . tell me about that guilt.”

Nancy replied, “I felt like, well, I still believed that maybe Catholicism wasn't for me, but that there was a God, and I just needed to find the right church. So I went to a lot of different churches. After I left my parent's house I went to church a lot.” Nancy continued, saying she “tried out different religions and”, in a hushed voice said “all

Christian based, because I just didn't feel comfortable away from that, and I never really felt comfortable at any of those, there was never a right fit. But yeah, I struggled with that for years." Then Nancy admitted, "I already forgot what your question was, I got off base."

I reminded her that "I was just wondering if . . . you [would] explain a little bit about that guilt."

Nancy said, "Oh, okay, yeah, so I believed that there was a God, and it's against the Ten Commandments to have premarital sex; it's adultery, so yeah, I struggled with that. And I felt that maybe there was this sort of karmic thing that because I had made these bad decisions, and I was a 'whore' as my mom would put it", and tears welled up as Nancy continued, "that I was never gonna find, let's see, I get emotional talking about that stuff, uh, I was never going to find that true love, and I was never going to get married", and Nancy's voice was shaking as she continued, "or anything like that because I didn't deserve it."

As the tears rolled down her cheeks, I acknowledged "that's pretty heavy stuff."

"Uh-huh." Nancy said as she nodded and wiped her tears.

After a few moments, I pressed on saying "So it sounds like when . . . you were becoming sexually aware, your mom knew about that."

Nancy said, "Oh yes."

I asked, "Did you talk to her, or did she find out? What did that look like?"

Nancy still had tears in her eyes as she continued, saying “I was nineteen, and I had a boyfriend just before that, and he was wonderful. Everybody thought, that was it, ‘Nancy’s getting married, they are perfect for each other’. And he was my first kiss, my first orgasm, first everything; as if I even knew what an orgasm was, it was such a complicated thing, we were both like, ‘what was that?’ . . . We were so naïve and just so innocent.” Tears welled up again as Nancy continued, “we would go to church on Sundays, and we had this beautiful, innocent, love. We were experimenting, but we never even considered – we never even discussed having sex, it was not an option. We broke up because it was young and stupid.” Nancy continued, saying, “and immediately, immediately, this guy who would come into the restaurant where I had waited tables [and] had been pursuing me for a couple of years, asked me out, and I was just pretty devastated over the break-up, and I was like, ‘yeah’, back on the horse, ‘yeah, take me out’. . . and we were a couple weeks in, and we were making out, and I told him ‘I’m a virgin, and I want to stay that way’ and he immediately was, ‘eh’; he was such a jackass. He just immediately started making fun of me for being ‘nineteen years old and still a virgin’. Really?” Nancy asked, then continued with the story, saying, “and [he was] constantly just teasing me . . . he just had no respect for me, and he would tell his friends, and I was such an emotional wreck because I’d moved on way too fast. I was just so insecure, and I remember, it was a week before my 20th birthday, and I had sex with him, and it was such a huge disappointment; he practically jumped out of bed and was like ‘lets go bowling’ or something stupid, I don’t know. It just meant nothing to him and it meant so much to me, and I was so disappointed with the situation” she said as the tears

welled up again. She continued after a moment saying, “I dated him for another six months because I couldn’t have sex with more than one person, this had to work; I had to marry him.”

I then asked, “Earlier . . . you mentioned . . . God would show his disfavor by getting a baby involved”, at which point Nancy chuckled, and I continued “did you ever fear about that kind of stuff?”

Nancy explained, “No, because I had issues with my period all . . . this time, it was super-heavy, so even though my mom was super embarrassed . . . I was put on the pill at like thirteen . . . I’d been on the pill forever, and we used condoms, so I wasn’t worried about getting pregnant, I mean, it made me a little bit nervous but I never like was afraid that I was gonna be, because at that point I understood how you got pregnant. So I didn’t believe in like, God [was] gonna smite me”, she said with giggle.

I asked, “So, up into your twenties it sounds like it was a very heterosexual sexual experience. Tell me about how you became aware of other aspects of your sexuality.”

Nancy answered, “I dated boys mostly, and then when I moved into Portland; it was just this whole other world. And there were gay men everywhere, and there were lesbians everywhere and like, this is so beautiful, I love this, and . . . I’d always been curious as to why like, my girlfriends, when we would play with each other’s hair and everything, I would just get so titillated, and the guys that I dated, we would be making out and everything and it’s just like ‘eh’. I mean they could turn me on I guess, I would get turned on, but it was just a total different feeling, there was a gentle thing about other

ladies, other girls.” Nancy continued, saying, “Even when I was a little girl, and we would play with each other’s hair watching movies and stuff; I would get so excited. And I didn’t know what that was and I never thought about it ‘til I got older and wondered ‘how come boys never make me feel like that’? Then I was living in town and I was meeting girls all the time.” Nancy explained further, saying “The neighborhood I lived in, there [were] lesbian girls everywhere, and they were so cute, and I always found myself way more attracted to girls, and I met more girls that I found attractive than I ever did boys at that point, and it terrified me . . . I’d start spending time with a girl, and I thought ‘I can never take her home’, ‘I can never be in an out relationship because my whole family would be devastated’. ‘They would be so mad’. And my mom, all through my growing up accused me of being ‘a dyke’ . . . I was so confused; I don’t understand why she said things the way she did.”

“What sorts of things would she say?” I asked.

Nancy answered, “She always said that ‘I had penis envy’ and ‘I was just a big dyke’. I was a little kid, I didn’t know what that meant, but the fact that I was a tomboy, and I always played with all of the boys, and I never wanted to play with the girls, and I didn’t like to play with dolls because dolls are so boring, and I wanted to go play with the boys; so she always said that I was ‘a dyke’. . . I don’t even know what that means, but I knew it was an insult, and that it was a really bad thing . . . and then when I [got] older she would get mad, you know, because she felt that I didn’t give my boyfriend’s enough attention, and that I was way more involved with my female relationships, and that I was

never going to have a successful, husband type relationship if I didn't learn to cut my girlfriends off or have better boundaries with them, and uh, and be real ugly about them like you know; 'being a lesbian is not an option' and they would 'cut me off', and I never ever came to her and said", and Nancy lowered her voice to a whisper as she said, "'I like girls', because she'd always cut me off at the pass before it ever even dawned on me. She had been telling me 'that was not an option', 'we will never talk to you again', 'don't ever come to me and say something like that', 'I feel so bad for parents whose kids come to them with that sort of stuff, and the ones who accept it are better people than me because I will not accept it, it is not an option', 'you are dead to me', that's the kind of stuff that she would say, so I knew it was not an option, and I knew that if I wanted to explore that, then I needed to move somewhere else. And I would start dating girls, and I don't know, it got complicated for lots of reasons, but the fact that I couldn't be open about it, it just, I always ended it."

In an attempt to clarify, I asked, "Couldn't be open with your family or people in general?"

Nancy explained, "I didn't feel comfortable at all with my family [or] being open about it with my family. At that time I was kind of transitioning between the group of friends that I had that I grew up with; good friends like from my hometown . . . and then new friends that I met in the city. And my new friends in the city; the girls that I hung out with . . . were mostly all straight. And they were like 'wow, you handle it so, like, so gracefully when these women hit on you', and I'm like 'well why wouldn't I, she's hot!

What a compliment!’ And they would just laugh.” Nancy explained further, saying “They thought it was hysterical that it didn’t bother me . . . so they acted that way, and never for a second thought or assumed that I would be open it. And . . . I knew the friends that I grew up with would be horrified, just horrified. I had a couple of friends that I talked to about it and they’re like ‘oh, your straight, your straight, don’t even worry about it’. So everything that I did with girls was always on the sly. So I felt like it wasn’t fair to them, and it wasn’t fair to me, and I just couldn’t explore that.”

I wanted more clarification, so I asked “You had mentioned that, when you were sexual with men that it was always followed by feelings of guilt. Did you have similar feelings and experiences after being intimate with women?”

Nancy answered, “Well, yeah, there was a lot of guilt but it was way more complicated. I mean, I can’t even be open. It’s not fair because I can’t even be open about this. So I’m doing something that’s wrong. If I have to hide it its completely wrong for me so I shouldn’t be doing this.” Explaining further, Nancy said, “And it wasn’t even . . . that religion wasn’t a part of it, but it was so much bigger than religion because this was a life that was not acceptable in this society that I was a part of, I guess, like the family dynamics, I could never bring a girl to a family dinner or anything, so yeah, the guilt, uh, religion played a part in that but it was fractional.”

I was puzzled by this and asked “Do you find that interesting at all? I mean, that it was fractional? Religion was a fractional component of being intimate with women, but it was a major component of being intimate with men.”

Nancy explained, “But I think it weighed on me less, like the guilt was a lot less when I was with men. You know what I mean? It was like devastating, like, like I felt guilty about sleeping with boys but I felt guilty sleeping with girls AND I felt all of this. And it was like, I can’t even deal with this shit, and if I, if I’m going to actually live with women then I have to go somewhere else and start over.”

“Where did you go to seek help dealing with all of that?” I asked.

Nancy laughed and said, “Nowhere . . . I didn’t go anywhere.”

Then I asked Nancy to “tell me about your experience navigating through that.”

Nancy replied, “Um, I didn’t deal with it. So, I would date a girl for a while, and then it would be like ‘uh, I can’t deal with this, I can’t be a part of this’, ‘this is not right for me’, ‘this is off track’. ‘let’s go find a nice guy’.”

I asked, “And what would she say?”

“She would just think I was crazy.” Nancy explained, saying “And I usually chose women who would move way too fast so it just kind of scared the hell out of me anyways. You know, they were like pulling up with the U-Haul and I was like ‘whoa’.” Nancy laughed as she continued, saying, “and so it usually was dramatic in multiple ways, and for her, she was dramatic in her own ways and I was just, I was a total guy about it, I would just cut them out, and I’d be like ‘this isn’t working for me’ and I didn’t want to give an excuse or a reason, and I would just cut them out of my life. And I would just

avoid them, and I was a total bitch about it because I was scared to death. Yeah. I would just run, run, run.” She chuckled.

Switching focus for a moment, I asked “Are you still in contact with your parents?”

“Yes.” She said.

I followed by asking “What does that relationship look like now, with your parents?”

Nancy answered, saying “Well, part of the reason I moved so far away is that I wanted to be away from them. So when I decided to move somewhere new I weighed several different cities. I looked for jobs all over the place, but part of the reason I wanted to move, which moving to Alaska makes you think ‘what were you thinking?’ was; I wanted to date women.” Nancy continued, saying “I wanted to be able to openly live my life any way I wanted and just do whatever felt comfortable for me, and figure out what was right . . . the path that I was supposed to be on. So I was excited to move somewhere new and be able to date women. And I moved to Alaska where I’ve never met any women that I’d want to date.” After laughing, Nancy continued, “I’ve met two girls over the years that I thought, well maybe, but that didn’t, yeah, that just didn’t happen.”

Nancy explained further, saying “But I also just wanted to be far away from my parents so I could just have the freedom to only tell them what I wanted to share about my life. It’s taken a long time to have good boundaries with them, and I wouldn’t say that its good, but I’ve learned to hold back, and I’m a talker, so I share way too much. My mom’s got a way of pushing my buttons and drawing me in, and she calls right at the

right moment to find out something that I should never share with her, like, like recently I was at a gyno[cologist] visit and switching birth controls, and she called me a ‘whore’ and it was this big dramatic thing”. Nancy made sounds of exasperation mixed with laughter as she continued, saying, “I was like, ‘I can’t talk to you, I gotta get off the phone’. And then I didn’t talk to her for weeks. And she called me the other day and said ‘why haven’t I heard from you?’ And I said ‘the last time [we] were on the phone you called me a ‘whore’, and she’s like ‘oh you took that all wrong’. And I’m like, ‘oh really, you meant it in a fun sarcastic kinda way, because it didn’t sound like it?’” She said in a full laugh.

Curious where things stood in other areas, I asked, “So do you still feel, when you have intimacy, whether with females or males, do you still feel like you struggle with guilt?”

Nancy answered, “No, there’s no religious guilt. I feel like it’s a normal part of being a human being is to connect with other people sexually.”

I then asked “what was your experience of being able to put that guilt aside, or to not experience guilt anymore with physical intimacy?”

Nancy explained, “Really letting go of the religious stuff . . . It was like four or five years ago, and it was holiday season, and I was like ‘I wanna go to Mass’, and it was really weird. When I have been home at the holidays, and my mom has gone to church; I refuse to go with her. And she gets really mad. And I’m like ‘no, it’s not part of my life with you’ . . . ‘you have a nice time, but I’m not going’.” Nancy explained further,

saying, “I’ve gone to church a couple of times . . . when I first moved up here, but it was just, ‘eh’, but I really, for some reason wanted to go to Mass, and couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but I really wanted to go, and it was Christmas time, so I went and . . . it’s not the religion; it’s the beauty of the holidays. I love the candle lighting and the holiday music, but that’s it for me, that, that’s the part I was wanting; something festive, and it’s not the religion.” Nancy continued, “I found that very irritating. And then in school I had to read a book called *When God Was A Woman* and it just all, like, I let it all go. And I was like, this is the truth, this is my truth right here. This is how religion has evolved. It totally makes sense. I buy into this book.”

I asked “Do you remember having that conversation with anybody?”

Nancy replied, “Yeah, it was in a women’s studies class, so we discussed the hell out of it. We had some great discussions about it, and some of the religious girls in the class thought it was total hoax, and that it was all hokey bullshit, but for me it was like ‘yep! This is it’; it’s just man manipulating the rest of us.” She said as she laughed and then continued “Yeah. So reading that, and having this final realization that it’s this constructed thing, I was like, there’s no reason to beat myself up over enjoying myself. Yeah. I got plenty of other ways to beat myself up.” She said as she continued laughing.

I was close to wrapping the interview up, so I asked “So if there was a continuum, a line, and on one end is somebody who is wholly engaged in their sexual identity and thoroughly not engaged in a religious identity, and on the other end of the line is somebody who is wholly engaged in their religious identity and negates their sexual

identity, and in the middle is someone who is 100 percent engaged in both; where would you find yourself on that line?”

Pointing to the later end, Nancy answered, “I’m way over here; except that I don’t engage in my sexuality very often”, which elicited a laugh from us both. Nancy continued, explaining, “only because I had personal things that I had to work through for the last five years. So it’s just recently that I’ve become sexually active again. And the only guilt around that is I sell myself short because I want something real and not casual”, and a few tears appeared as Nancy said, “and this is more of a casual thing. And so, that sucks.” We both let out a little laugh.

I said, “. . . that’s all I have right now Nancy, [was] there anything else you’d like to share or talk about?”

Nancy laughed and said “No.”

As I was saying “Well I want to thank you for participating. . .” Nancy interrupted and said:

Um, you asked me a question I forgot to answer. You asked me if my mom knew when I became sexually active. So I have to tell you this because it’s funny. So I was dating that guy and we finally had sex, and she hated that guy. She was just having a fit because she hated, just hated him. And I came in the house one day and she just screamed at me ‘are you sleeping with him?’ . . . she was so upset, like they would drive by his

house at night to see if my car was there, they would drive by my house at night to see if his car was there. Like they were obsessed with how I was leading my life. And I was like ‘Yes I am! I am!’ and she started bawling, bawling about ‘this is not how we raised you’ and ran down the hall and threw herself on the bed and I was like ‘oh my god’. Part of me felt guilty cause I had told my mom the truth, and it was devastating her, and part of me felt so happy to piss her off so royally. Even if it wasn’t the experience I hoped, I was getting a little pleasure over how ridiculously she is reacting over this. Yeah. Anyway. Sorry.

I followed up by asking, “It definitely sounds like your mom puts a lot of her import for making decisions based on dogma, doctrine, who says what in the church, and yours really isn’t . . .”

Nancy agreed, saying “No.”

I asked, “What do you credit for that difference?”

Nancy said, “I don’t know. I mean. My grandpa was super religious and he became Catholic when he married my grandma, and so my mom was raised with it . . . So when I quit going to church, my sister . . . would have been fifteen, and it was only like two weeks later when she was like ‘if Nancy’s not going [to church]; I’m not going.’ And she’s stronger than me because she was just adamant, and my mom was just devastated.”

Nancy explained further, saying “So I turned eighteen in May and mid-June my sister was like ‘that’s it. You’re not making me go anymore’. And they just went round and

rounds over it and she won. She didn't go anymore." Then Nancy followed by revealing, "And by July, my mom quit going to church. She dropped out. She didn't do CCD anymore. She quit volunteering and she quit going to Mass. And she said that she was ashamed and that she couldn't show her face anymore."

I asked "What was your response to that?"

Nancy said, "I told her that she was ridiculous because if religion was such a big part of her life, her religious family would be there for her and wouldn't judge her in the way that she felt judged." Nancy compared this to her own view saying, "I was tired of being judged by my church family. And I don't know why, like, I could be very strong about my distaste for that church and those people, but she can manipulate me in so many ways. I was just like 'no, I can't stand these people, they're ugly', because they judged everything." Nancy then revealed:

My grandpa and other people in the church didn't consider my parent's marriage legitimate because my dad's not Catholic, so they were constantly trying to set my mother up with other men, and they'd been married for like 47 years. And it's just ridiculous, so ugly and weird. But she buys into it. They go to church now. I don't ask any questions about that and she doesn't offer it up about what it is. And I don't care. They are still religious and go to church together because my dad's retired. And uh, it means a lot to them, and I don't know why. And my sister and her

husband do not go to church. They didn't get married by a minister of any kind, and I don't believe that religion is a part of their life at all.

I said "Interesting. Life journeys."

"Yeah" She replied.

3.3 Grace

I had met Grace about a year prior to completing the interview phase of this research. Grace is an adult woman and identifies as lesbian. I approached Grace one afternoon and asked her if she would consider participating in this research. I was grateful and relieved when she agreed. I was eager to get a lesbian perspective, and her participation afforded me that opportunity.

We met in a confidential space in the Communication Department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks one afternoon. After a brief discussion covering the consent form, we began the interview. My first question, which was similar in each interview, was "would you tell me a little bit about your religious past?"

Grace laughed after she said "My religious past? Just a little bit about my religious past?" I laughed too. Then Grace continued, "I grew up Methodist in a small Methodist church in Iowa. My mom made us go to Sunday school . . . and as I grew up I was confirmed into the church", then Grace noted, "but, there were times during [confirmation] that the preacher would tell me [things] that just didn't seem to go right

with my sense of what religion was supposed to be and was all about. So I had some questions.”

Grace then told me about a time when her sense of right and wrong caused some problems. She began, “. . . I must have been a junior or senior in high school, and I was teaching Sunday school to the junior high [students]. . . I was using John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’”, then, after a brief rendition of the song Grace continued, “[I] got into all kinds of trouble because it was right next to where the church . . . and people could hear stuff that I was playing to these kids, and the whole ‘imagine there’s no religion’ and all that got me into lots of trouble.” Grace explained this further stating, “I would get into lots of trouble because I questioned things, and also because I taught kids things that they shouldn’t question or think about.”

Following this story, Grace immediately began to tell me “I was at one point going to be a missionary, and that is what I thought I should do . . . in fact I practiced being a missionary. I thought the whole pain thing was one of the things, so I would . . . take coke bottles up to my bed, and I’d lay on [the] coke bottles, to have the coke bottles poke into me, to practice, because when I was in Africa and they were going to sacrifice me or something” admitting “yeah, it was very weird stuff. . .”

I wanted to bring the conversation back to a previous statement. So I asked, “you had mentioned that you got into trouble sometimes, and I wondered if you could tell me about one of those experiences?”

She began, “Well the main one was playing “Imagine” and some rock music . . . that connected with religious themes which I thought we should explore, and exploring religion was not something that was smiled upon. It was very frowned upon.” Then Grace told me another interesting story. She started by revealing that while in high school, she “had decided to become a vegetarian . . . but [word] traveled into the church too because it was a very, very small community, only like 500 people, and there were a number of churches in town.” After briefly listing the various denominations and their locations, Grace continued, saying “what got me into trouble was; I decided to become a vegetarian because I loved animals, and animals were my best friends, in fact, my only friends during my growing up.” Then Grace told me about some of the pets she had while growing up saying:

I had a monkey who was my very best friend. He would sleep on me all the time and I had a raccoon, so animals were my friends. We had dogs and cats; everybody brought animals to our house if they needed a place to be. But I decided that it wasn't right to eat animals, that they were just as conscious [as] or maybe even more conscious than most people, so I thought that eating animals wasn't a good thing . . . so I refused to eat meat and I started telling people that they shouldn't eat meat. It was just like if some giants came down from outer space, and didn't understand our language, and decided to eat us. It was the same thing; us eating animals. And this freaked out one girl, Stephanie . . . so I got kicked out of school

because I was causing trouble and upsetting people with things they shouldn't have to think about.

Grace chuckled after she stated her recognition that “meat is big in Iowa. There are people who lost their jobs at the university because they told people they shouldn't eat meat. But I just got kicked out of school.”

I wanted to get a better understanding of Grace's willingness to think freely. I asked, “Were your parents big questioners?”

She answered, “not really, my dad was more of a critic of you know, rich people and things like that, so he had his issues with things but not a questioner really.”

I pushed further with this line of questioning by asking “so what do you credit that too?”

Grace explained a theory that she had regarding her parentage. “my dad was in Japan when I was born . . . and my mom was; my mom is a nut case; she was a scatter brain.

And she was on a train and had to get off to go to the bathroom, so she gave me to some guy, some soldier, and got off to go to the bathroom and didn't get back on in time. So I went on to Kansas city or someplace, so I think they got me mixed up or something and I'm not really”, and as I chuckled she added “so that's my narrative of what happened.”

Grace continued, “I think that animals gave me more insight into things and probably gave me more questions . . . animals could probably be deeper than most of the kids that I was growing up with.”

Grace then linked her friendship with animals to her many “causes”, saying, “There was this game in school . . . and [the kids] would play ‘Karen Binder has fleas’, and go ‘you got Karen Binder’s fleas’, and I was always for the underdog, and I would tell them ‘that’s not right’, and they would push me over their backs so that I would fall down, but I was fighting for the underdog, that was always my big thing. So I was always connecting more with animals . . . [also] I read *Black Like Me*, . . . and I was just a kid, and it was beyond my reading really, and things like that, so I think that’s where I got all of that.”

I wanted to steer the conversation back to Grace’s parents. I said, “You had mentioned that it was a pretty small town, and there were several churches. Sometimes church communities can [put] quite a bit of pressure on families. So . . . when you were playing ‘Imagine’ in the church and people could hear it, and you got into trouble; what was your mom’s reaction to that situation?”

Grace paused and said “I never really thought about that much. It’s interesting because even though my parents weren’t necessarily deep thinkers, over issues like that, they were very supportive of us kids, of me, of whatever I was doing . . . And my parents were very supportive of whatever I was into . . . and didn’t have expectations.” Grace then gave an example of this lack of expectations saying “. . . my mother was always going out for coffee so she was never there.” Grace chuckled at remembering this and continued “at one point, when we were just little kids; I must have been about 5 years old, and I have a brother that is two years younger and a sister that is 5 years younger than me.

And we had chicken pox; we all had chicken pox, and my mother was with the neighbors. And the doctor came . . . and he was so upset because my mom was out with the neighbors.” Grace concluded this comment by acknowledging, “my mom was always out having coffee, she just wasn’t around much” and she continued, “so I had that, I had their support, but I had no expectations that I would do this or be that, there were just no expectations. So no matter what it was it was never a big deal . . . I don’t think anything embarrassed my mother, so that wasn’t a problem, getting embarrassed about what we were doing.”

Then I asked, “When you would talk about the concept of God with your mother or father, what sorts of things did you talk about, and what sorts of things would they say about that entity?”

Grace explained, “I don’t remember talking about the concept of God. I mean, I remember on our kitchen table we had things to put money in, and we had Susumu, who was . . . adopted, we would put money in for Susumu, who was a guy in Japan, and we would send it to him. So that whole idea of money, and of giving money for religion, and, and that sort of thing, but we didn’t talk about God and that whole concept of God.”

Grace continued this discussion saying “I guess it was more in the context of Jesus with all the ‘Jesus loves me’ and all that kind of thing . . . we would put money in for Susumu, and send it, and get letters from Susumu, and we did that for a long time.”

Then Grace returned to an idea that she had mentioned earlier. “It became even more interesting when that whole idea of the missionary thing came up . . . I started thinking

more and more about it. I just didn't get it. Why would God put people in a country and not tell them about Jesus? I mean, it just didn't make sense to me. So I had some sense that God was something, but that fact that he wouldn't give them the message; that didn't make much sense to me" adding "but I never talked to my mom about that because thinking deeply is probably not what my mother does."

The next question I asked was "Did you talk to anybody about that?"

Grace pondered the question before saying "I probably brought it up in Sunday school and was told that that is not something to think about . . . [I] would bring it up, but more as a challenge . . . I was the devil's advocate . . . I would ask the questions nobody else would ask. Sometimes I would ask questions that were not something that I necessarily supported, but I'd just be asking it because nobody else would."

I wondered if Grace asked questions regarding sexuality. I said "my next question is, at what point did you start to discover your sexuality? How would you describe that experience?"

Again, Grace paused before she answered. "I knew all through school, and well forever, that I didn't fit in. I didn't know what it was; why it was I didn't fit in, but I always knew I didn't fit in, and that all the stupid things that the girls did just didn't, fit for me." Then Grace considered the time period and said "this is before Stonewall, this is way back . . . So it wasn't a concept that I had." This thought seemed to connect to a memory. Grace continued, saying:

Interestingly, there was a man who lived in town, Rick . . . he was the hairdresser in town, and . . . all the grandmas . . . would go to Rick and he would put blue in their hair. And my grandma Betty was just a trip, that's my mom's mother, and she would go bike riding with Rick, or eat, and Rick would, and we would never talk about it, but Rick wore make-up and was a very interesting character. And now of course I realize Rick was gay . . . but it just wasn't a concept, it wasn't something that was said, that was just Rick. That was Rick, and we never talked about it as sexuality. It wasn't a big deal. So I didn't realize it, I didn't recognize it.

Then Grace linked the idea of sexuality with the statement that she “was a good Iowa kid.” Grace explained this further saying, “this was the 50's and 60's . . . drugs hadn't made it to Iowa, and I hadn't even taken a drink; none of that stuff was there. My ex-husband was an athlete . . . so he didn't ever partake of anything, and we were good Iowa kids . . . we didn't have sex before our wedding, we might have played around a little bit but no sex before my wedding.”

Grace then told an interesting story about a disagreement between her and the wedding pastor. She said “I wanted to play the song ‘There's A Place For Us’ . . . and the preacher . . . wouldn't let me have that song because he said ‘you've already got that, you've already found that’, and I knew I hadn't found that”. We both laughed at that realization, and Grace continued, “I know it's out there someplace, but it's not right here.” The subject of sexuality came up again. Grace started talking about her friend who was

going to sing at her wedding saying “now I did know there was such a thing as gay because I went to community college which was five miles from there and this guy was obviously gay . . . he sang at my wedding, and he was going to sing that song, but the preacher . . . made him sing ‘One Hand One Heart’ which is also from *West Side Story*, but . . . there’s still something out there.’

The conversation then took a more serious turn. Grace continued, “[on] my wedding night, I found out I hate sex! I hate sex. I found out much, much, much, much, later that it was just that sex with men is just not what worked for me, but at the time I just thought; I hate sex, and so I went for a long time trying to be who I was supposed to be, and trying to be the wife that I was supposed to be, but that never fit very well.”

Grace then briefly told me about her early married life including their move to Arizona and her husband’s job in the Airforce. Grace’s journey with religion continued “I had some different jobs and one of them was a librarian . . . there was a women there in the library who was just wonderful, and I probably was just very much in love with Maria, and she probably didn’t realize it, but she would give me a ride home and we’d sit out in her little Volkswagen and just talk for hours and hours and hours and that was always very important to me.” Grace continued this theme saying “there were some women who were just flakes”, a thought that brought a chuckle out of Grace, “but there were some people who were very, very important . . . and still, there was no recognition that I might be a lesbian because that word was not in my vocabulary, it wasn’t something that was out there yet, or at least out there where I had been.”

After her husband deployed to Thailand, Grace began to tell me about another experience. “A guy came into my library, a black guy”, and then she digressed a bit adding, “oh, that was one of the things about religion that always bothered me, our preacher had said that people who are black and people who are white shouldn’t get married, that that was against God. And I didn’t get that, I couldn’t figure out how that could be against God. I didn’t get that part.” Grace returned to the story about the man in the library saying “and a black guy comes into my little teeny library and starts talking to me about Baha’u’llah, and starts telling me this whole story, and as I was sitting there listening to [him], everything got all dark, and all I could see was [his] eyes and his mouth talking, and everything got dark, and [then he] left.” However, she tells me that he had left “all this religious stuff” and Grace decided to “take a look at it.” She continued “so it was sitting there, and I didn’t look at it. I went to get up and . . . I hurt my back, and I couldn’t move, all I could do was sit down, and so I started reading the stuff. And it was Baha’i literature . . . So I started reading the stuff, and I started going to the firesides and listening to things, seeing people who were black and people who were white, and who were working together, and the whole Baha’i thing.”

After Grace established that I had some familiarity with the Baha’i faith, she continued “all of that made a whole lot of sense to me. And so I end up becoming a Baha’i . . . and I became a Baha’i big time.” It was at this time that Grace “met Sandra who had been a Baha’i in Taiwan . . . and she was this super-Baha’i . . . she came to my house, and then she fell ill and so she was laying down with her head in my lap and she, and she got up and kissed me on the lips,” Grace rose up out of her seat at this moment

and pressed her back up against the wall as she continued, saying “and, I, was, up against the wall, because that doesn’t happen, you, you, you, that, that doesn’t happen, you don’t do that, but, and, I loved Sandra so much that I was able to get through”, and Grace continued to stand as she said “she was a Baha’i, and I was able to get through that, that physically that’s not okay. It’s not okay for a woman to kiss a woman. I was able to get through that, but, the Baha’i faith of course”, and Grace began to relax and sit back down as she continued, “being same sex anything is not something that you do in the Baha’i faith.”

Grace then began to talk more about Sandra saying:

That was something that I realized later . . . [Sandra] had been in Taiwan, and there had been this person, her name was Sherry who [Sandra had] been very, very close to. And when I met Sherry later, and I could see from Sherry’s look that she knew that I was the one who had taken her place, and all that stuff. So anyway, it was a real mixed up thing because same sex stuff in the Baha’i faith is wrong. But, Sandra, I loved her very much, and she, she had needs. And so this was all, this was all, whew! A real big mess because, because, one, I was, I was very much a Baha’i, I had ended up climbing the rungs and was super-Baha’i and there was this thing of, well, you can’t really be doing this.

Grace then related the implications and impact that this had on her mentally and physically. As she made a gesture similar to ripping a large panel of cloth, she said:

I pretty much ripped myself in half. [My] physical body; [I] threw it away . . . I mean I was just denying pretty much that I had a physical body, except meeting the needs of Sandra. Then at one point she said, ‘well we can’t do this anymore’ and I said ‘fine, whatever it takes to still be with you’ and ‘we don’t need to be physical’, and, was it ever real sex? Well it was pretty close to it . . . in the tumbling around and in rubbing against, that kind of thing. So, so uh, big time. But that whole religion thing and how to put that into it, and of course it was wrong, so it was pretty much just denied, it was denied that all this was happening.

In order to explain this further, Grace said “Later on, when we read *Lesbian Nuns*.” After indicating that I had not read it, Grace continued “oh it’s a trip, and the woman who wrote that, Rosemary Curb . . . became the dean of faculty at the college where I worked and very, very much later I got to meet with her. But the whole idea that, that the religion, that a lot of these nuns were just totally denying what they were doing because it was just totally against their religion, but at the same time they were doing it.”

Grace then describes a choice that she had to make stating “then David came back from Thailand, and we were heading for Germany. And there’s something in the Baha’i faith that [says]”, and with a memorized cadence, Grace repeated:

Remain where God has placed you. Be faithful in your care of those He has entrusted to you. Never, ever waiver in this. Show by your life that

you have something different, so that all who see will say what has this person that I have not.

Grace continued, "I would say that a million times a day. I would say it all the time, because for me to say that, for me, [it] was saying that I had to go with David to Germany. I had to leave Sandra." Grace chuckled as she said "I don't think that went over really well with Sandra." Grace then continued, saying "[Sandra] ended up being in the hospital for different stuff, and it, it almost ripped me apart because, because I loved her so much, and I was doing what I really thought I was supposed to do; remaining where God has placed me. And I guess I could have thought of it differently and remained with Sandra, but that would have been a whole different story", another chuckle emerged from Grace before she continued, "so I went to Germany, and I would write, probably twenty-page letters every day to Sandra, I swear, I would write twenty pages every day. I was working . . . I would go to the post office where you could make long distance calls because when we were there you couldn't make long distance calls, and I would spend all of my money on calls to Sandra."

After reflecting on this, Grace said "I was really loving her." There was another pause before Grace continued "it just goes on and on, this whole Baha'i thing, the issue with 'this is the religion, and you can't have same sex', and that marriage is the thing, and having kids and children is the thing, and it just got more and more and more complicated. And [Sandra] ended up, well, at one point [Sandra] ended up coming too." Following this statement, Grace briefly shared her and Sandra's marital and extra-marital

relationship history, which for now culminated with Sandra, who had just “got with Sherri, and Sherri was a Mormon who then became a Baha’i”, a thought which lead Grace to gasp saying, “oh God, there are some stories there, you should find Sherri!” And after letting out a laugh, Grace continued, “It would be great if you could find Sherri; who is now Mitch by the way.”

Grace then returned to the story saying. “this is like really big screwed up stuff, but it all had to do with love, [and] religion, and trying to deal with the religion thing.” Things became more complicated as Grace continued, saying “[Sandra] stopped in Germany, and the two of us went to England together to visit the graves of some of the important Baha’i people, and [we] got into the hotel room and Sandra had her needs. And I’m like ‘no. no way’ I mean, ‘Were, we’re not supposed to be doing that?’ And yet, ‘you’re married to’, what was his name, ‘you’re married to Doug’, and in a way [that] was said but in a way it wasn’t said too . . . she still had her needs.”

Grace summed up this period of experience saying “in my opinion now, the whole religion/sexuality just . . . wasn’t supposed to be” and Grace chuckled before she continued “so I’m in Germany. I’m still with David, and I’m trying to be a good wife and still trying to have children because that’s what you’re supposed to do, and, especially in Baha’i. You’re supposed to do that, and that didn’t seem like it was a physical possibility for me, so I still didn’t know what I was supposed to do, and [I was] still hating sex totally because it made me sick. It just made me sick. I didn’t talk about

it on my wedding night how sick it made me, but it did, it made me sick and continued to make me sick throughout my life.”

Eventually, Sandra and her husband Doug visited Grace and her husband David in Germany. However, just before that happens, Grace says “I got a job in a saw mill, and there’s this tough, tough [girl], and she was short too. She had this hair, long blonde hair just past her knees; just a tough little shit, uh, young woman. She must have been like eighteen, and she started giving me . . . a whole lotta shit.”

Grace addresses the religious element again saying: “And I’m still Baha’i. I’m super-Baha’i. In Germany, I’m on the pioneering committee . . . so, I’m super Baha’i. I’m Baha’i, Baha’i, Baha’i, and that’s everything. Baha’i is my life, and I get this job, and here’s this little dyke, and I’d never really ran into someone who was quite that tough and dyky,” and especially during fasts.” Grace then takes a moment to explain “Baha’is’ have fasts. And the fasts were really difficult. I probably shouldn’t have been doing fasts when I was doing such physical labor, but I was, and it was really hard, and Tanya talked to me a lot during that time, and [though it] ended up being a relationship. . . I could have passed a lie detector test, because it wasn’t happening, because I had ripped myself in two, I had thrown away the body . . . everything that was happening over here was not happening.”

Grace continued “so I was in a relationship with Tanya, and here comes Sandra and her husband . . . I went to pick them up on the train . . . and Tanya went with me.” After making a sound reminiscent of Homer Simpson (D’oh), Grace continued “you could see

it; the two of them hated each other from minute one. And I'm sure each of them knew and understood what was going on, and that was all interesting."

Grace vocally and physically struggled with the passion and emotion involved with what she said next:

I was in contact with Sandra and stuff, but it was getting more difficult because it was so obvious that I was with Tanya, and then I, I started struggling with that, I mean struggling with that, uh, what am I doing, because even though I was so good at denying that, I was, I was starting to realize that I couldn't, I couldn't do that, that, uh, I was going to die, if I stayed in that marriage, and David is just a wonderful guy, I mean he is just a really nice guy, he's just really cool and I, I probably loved David except that I'm not heterosexual so it would have killed me to stay in that marriage. So it ended up, he must of, well we split up and for a long time he was living upstairs and I was living downstairs, because, but I really wasn't at the point where I was dealing with it, I just knew that I would die if I stayed in that marriage so we spilt up.

Grace seemed to gain some composure as she continued, "... I was still being a Baha'i and Tanya was still there with me . . . and it was probably becoming obvious to lots of people and yet, I wasn't realizing; I wasn't really, really, really accepting it."

This struggle eventually took its toll. Grace says, "I ended up in the hospital with diabetes . . . when I threw away the body, the weakest part on me was my pancreas; it just

went belly up. There was no way for me to continue to deny my body the way I was. I had lost so much weight that I was pinning over my pants about seven inches, but I had no physical body, I wasn't dealing with it, I wasn't dealing with all the stuff . . . I was just a mess, I had lost so much weight, and hair was falling out, so I ended up in the hospital with diabetes, and that's when I had to decide if I was going to live or going to die. And if I was going to live, then it meant that I was going to have to accept my homosexuality.” Grace continued “that's the first time when I had got to the point of accepting my homosexuality . . . right before that I had broken up with David.”

Grace then told me about her resolve saying “I gotta do what it takes, and that means accepting my sexuality, and . . . in the hospital in Duluth, Minnesota, I finally accepted my sexuality, and then started doing what it took, to, to accept my sexuality, and, and not throw away my body.” Grace continued by telling me about a support network of sorts saying “there was a lesbian collective there, and some of them came to the hospital, and I ended up going to the lesbian collective”. This had religious implications, and Grace continued by explaining, “it took me quite a while longer to actually get out of the Baha'i faith. The only way to get out of the Baha'i faith is to say that you don't believe in Baha'u'llah, and . . . you sign this card that says you do. And then to get out is a whole lot longer, [and] harder than that.” There were other concerns as well. Grace continued “to get a divorce is pretty hard too, you have to say that your husband or your wife is ‘abhorrent unto’ you, and then you have to have a year of patience in which you are supposed to try and get back together” adding “I think I was probably going through my year of patience when I had already come up with my diabetes.”

Then Grace told me about the final component of her religious dilemma. Grace continued, “What finally, finally, finally got me out was; remember Sherri, [who] became Mitch . . . [she] decided to do the whole trans thing, so she was doing the hormones and doing the whole thing because she was becoming a man. . . for someone who was a Mormon and then a Baha’i, that whole thing of her sexuality just wasn’t going to make it, and so she was going through the whole thing, and this is what clenched it for me, that I could no longer be a Baha’i.” Grace continued, “I think, as far as religion, it’s one of the better ones there is”, and then immediately contradicted herself by saying “but it’s not, because the National Spiritual Assembly, a bunch of big shots in the United States, [sent a] letter to Sherri stating, ‘oh yeah, its fine for you to cut things off and stick things on, that’s alright’. So it’s ‘fine, as long as it’s all looking like it’s supposed to be’, . . . there’s no women with women and men with men, ‘people can chop things off and stick things on in order to make this all look right’.”

Grace explains this further saying “that was finally it. This is, this is fucked” she said laughing, then she continued “It, it took me a long time to get out of it, because I was super-Baha’i, and I was always following all the rules. After being a kid who was not a rule follower, I had become the, the ultimate in a rule follower”, adding “. . . so I really bought it all, and it took whole long time to let that go.”

I wanted to revisit a point that Grace had made earlier. I reminded Grace saying “you had mentioned that men with men or women with women, just didn’t happen, or is not supposed to happen within the Baha’i faith.” Then I asked “what would have happened if

somebody found out? Were the issues more about what was going to happen with your circle of friends, or with your relationship with God?”

Grace answered saying “with the Baha’i faith . . . it really is more about what it will look like to the rest of the world, that’s my understanding of it, at least that is what I saw”, adding “Sandra was absolute super-Baha’i . . . she was next to the ‘hands of the cause of god’,” explaining “Baha’is have ‘hands of the cause of god’, and she was real close to some of them. So she was a really important person, she was a real spiritual person; I mean, I believe that she was.”

Grace continued reviewing the secrecy of her relationship with Sandra saying “some people couldn’t have helped but realize it. One time when Sandra had first come to my place in Arizona . . . she had gotten sick, and she was . . . in my bed . . . and one of the Baha’is came over . . . and he had to talk to us about something. And so he’s in there talking to us . . . I think people knew it, but I think that as long as it was something that wasn’t out there and [that] other people weren’t seeing this whole love and expressing love; I mean you could do all of that, as long as there’s no sex with it.” Grace further explained “but [it] wasn’t the rules that you couldn’t be in bed with another woman, it was that two unmarried people couldn’t be in bed together . . . those are nit-picky details, [but] it’s more about ‘what does it look like to the outside’, ‘how will we be able to show everyone that we have this very special faith if, if people are doing the wrong things, and drinking and stuff like that’. . . all sorts of things that are unacceptable Baha’i wise, and I stuck to most of them.”

I wanted Grace to talk a little more about the divide between her religious and physical selves. I asked, “you had mentioned that you had kind of ripped yourself in two and kind of forgot about your physical body. So when you were meeting the needs of Sandra, and those sorts of intimacy, moments . . . did you ever have any conversations with Sandra, or anybody else about that? Or what did that look like?”

Grace responded “when Sandra finally said ‘no, we can’t do this anymore’ . . . it was like ‘okay, I can do whatever it takes to be with you’. . . so it wasn’t like that was a driving need for me, [but] that was a driving need for Sandra; [judging] from from the list of women that I know that she was with.” Grace said chuckling. Then she continued “but, I’m not answering your question. Your question is about talking about it, and pretty much it wasn’t something that you talked about. I think in the same way as for the lesbian nuns, it wasn’t something they talked about because; here’s what religion says, here are the rules, and so, you can’t be doing this, and so then, I’m a spiritual person, so I’m not doing it.” Grace explained further:

I mean . . . it really is like a ripping apart and a throwing away. So, I’ve thrown this whole body part away, well not the body but the physical. The physical doesn’t exist, just the spiritual. And with that, then, in my life at least, there was nothing to talk about. I’m real good at denial. That’s how I survived a lot of my life . . . I stopped that, it certainly wouldn’t get me anywhere, and that could cause problems.

I followed quickly asking “I’m guessing that you don’t feel ripped apart anymore.”

Grace agreed, so I asked her to “tell me a little bit about your experience of bringing those two halves of self together again.”

Grace responded saying:

For me, because it was such a clear situation in the hospital there . . . I was pretty close to dying. I was in pretty bad shape. Every bit of my fat had been eaten away. My muscle had been eaten away. I was skin and bones, and I would have died. I realized that accepting my physical self . . . that I’m not just a spiritual being, that I have a physical self, and that I have to accept my sexuality, my sexual orientation . . . in order . . . to stay alive; to live. I would have died if I hadn’t. And that was it, and that’s what I have to do.

Grace added, “it did take some time to get into accepting my body . . . after I had gotten out of the hospital, and gotten ensconced in the lesbian community in Duluth, which is a wonderful place to, to find yourself and come out.” While there, Grace said, “I’d taken to log building school . . . but in building the logs, I had been kind of closed off to my body”. Grace then told an interesting story about her grandma saying “I might have gotten that from my grandma Johnson . . . she was really old; Women’s Christian Chapters Union, and I don’t think she ever took off her clothes. One time when I was young, I accidentally went into the bathroom and she had all her clothes on when she was taking a bath”. Grace continued, after I finished laughing, saying “yeah, and so I didn’t hardly ever take off my clothes. [I] wasn’t comfortable with my body.”

Grace continued talking about this struggle saying “with a lot of things with my body . . . [getting] my body and my head working together, all of that wasn’t something I was comfortable with . . . [but] working on the logs, they’re big and I could do something with them . . . I was lifting up logs and putting them on top of each other, and there’s this picture of me with my shirt off, and working on the logs and chipping on the logs. And that was the first time that my body was able to come together with the rest of me.” Grace explained this further saying, “and letting go of the Baha’i; the spiritual [and] the rules about what I could do, was helpful . . . they could come together in the middle instead of way out here or way up here; where I’m a spiritual being, and that’s all that matters . . . the body which I’d thrown away. So I was able to come to a place here in the middle where I could integrate that all I guess.”

Then I asked if she ever had conversations with anyone about that?

Grace replied, “not really, I hadn’t had people to talk to about things like that” adding “lots of my partners have been . . . very, very anti-religion; wanting nothing to do with it. One woman I was with once was Buddhist, which is another whole thing.” Then Grace told me her “. . . second wedding was to a woman . . . and we had a black and white wedding. She is black and I am white, and I must have worn white and she must have worn black. It was a new thing, and she was Buddhist.” Grace continued, saying, “We had such a big wedding . . . my parents, and even my brother came to my lesbian wedding.” Then Grace chuckled as she said “we did this chanting, and the minister for the Unitarian Church really got into it, so we are doing this [chant] and everybody

supposed to be doing it . . . and”, whispering, Grace continued, “she must have done it for like 15 minutes, and I thought, oh my God, and I looked at my clock and I knew that some of my friends who had come from miles for this were getting kind of freaked out by this whole thing” But Grace recognized “that religion had saved her [wife] in many ways” adding, “so I did the Buddhist thing for a while, but again . . . there are rules, and yet at the same time there are the practices . . . and with the Baha’is too, there’s the noon time Absolutions Prayer that you do, and so Buddhism was kind of the same thing” noting, “I’m fine with that, I’m fine with people. But then I’ve been with others who have [said] ‘religion is the opiate of the people’ and it’s evil, and it’s stupid.”

Then I asked “do you find now that you are involved religiously? What does that look like for you now?”

Grace answered “it’s more like when I was a kid; connecting with animals and connecting with nature, and connecting with those things. So, no God in the sky, no rules, nothing about ‘this is the way you have to do it to be religious’, and no [chanting] at least ten times a day; [rather] just connecting with what I think is life and spirit.”

I was getting ready to wrap up the interview, so I asked “if I can create a picture of a continuum, and on one end you might find people who are wholly engaged in their sexual identity and have thrown away their religious or spiritual identity, and on the other end of the continuum you have people who are wholly engaged in their religious identity and have thrown away their sexual identity, and in the middle is somebody who is perfectly

integrated; those who are wholly engaged in each of those aspects of themselves; where would you find yourself in that continuum?”

Grace replied, “So I think we need to switch this up and make a dimensional . . . because I can’t put myself on that line and so, up here” pointing above the imaginary line “is the spiritual, and down here” pointing below the imaginary line “. . . is the earth . . . so I think that I lay towards the middle but down here”, pointing toward the lower half of the design, “I can’t put myself on that line between . . . sexuality and the religious. I can’t put myself on that line because I’m down here on the earth, in the earth. So I’m not above ground there in the spiritual at all. I’m more earth based.”

I then asked Grace if “you consider yourself to be atheist or agnostic?” adding, “I don’t know how you feel about those sorts of terms.”

Grace said “I’m not sure what the real difference is between them. . .”

I replied, “My understanding is that atheists believe there is no God, and agnostics allow for the existence of something, but maybe not a particular kind of God.”

Then Grace said “I certainly allow for the existence of something, but not something that has to be stuck into a box . . . which we, which men, and I’ll use ‘men’”, a comment which we both laugh at, “I’ll use ‘men’ very directly here; where men come up with all these rules that one follows in order to be in this box.” Grace explained further saying, “that’s been a big thing for me, especially in my growing up, is that, I can’t help feeling like I’m in this box here and, and the walls are coming in, and I’m inside, and I can’t get

out. And all the walls are coming in and that was one of those things I felt happened a lot, in fact, I put my hand through a window at one of those times I felt those things were coming”, and she pointed to her forearm as she said “I’ve got the scar to prove it.”

Grace then summed up her feelings saying:

And so that whole idea of boxes, and I guess that’s what I think of when I think of organized religion, as, as those inside that box, and its [walls were] coming in, and this rule, and that rule, and ‘this is way you have to be’, and ‘this way you have to be’, so it just cramps people in. and I’ve never ‘til this moment connected that to religion in any way. I just connected it to the feelings that I had. But somehow that’s just heavy, that, if I had to put myself someplace . . . I guess I would be agnostic. And I would be that if I had to pick one because it seems there’d be less rules being written out here, that would be pushing the boxes in.

I felt that I needed to wrap the interview up, but I still had a couple of ideas that I wanted to follow up on. I asked “you talked about spiritually, you feel connected when you are with animals and nature and that kind of thing, so how often do you experience animals and nature now in your regular week or month?”

Grace answered saying:

Well, every morning I take the dogs on a walk, and every evening I take the dogs on a walk and we go . . . probably at the least twenty minutes

each time and sometimes it can be a half hour or a lot longer if we have more time, so I get that, and during that time I get to watch the ravens and get to connect with other animals like foxes . . . and I do berry picking for long, long hours. I got so many cranberries this year . . . just tons and tons of cranberries, and so I get that here a lot. I think Alaska's the only place besides Minnesota [that] I could live because I could really have that, that connection to nature, because we've got 70 acres that we own plus it goes on forever, almost to Nenana . . . so I've got all of that, that land and connection. And it's always really close.

I said "I noticed you've said 'we' a couple times, so I'm just going to ask; are you in a relationship? And if you have been, how long has that been?"

Grace answered, "Yes, I am in a relationship, and I'm the one who is bad with numbers," a comment that I couldn't help but laugh at "and I always get in trouble with that, and it's probably been since 95, so that would be . . . 15 years."

I concluded saying, "that's all I really have. I'd like to thank you for coming in and sharing so many great stories."

3.4 Sam and Gary

I had met Sam and Gary, a gay couple who had just celebrated their seven year anniversary, at various functions over the last couple years. We had finally agreed to meet up one afternoon for dinner and a movie. When they arrived, they mentioned that

they had seen the advertisement that I placed in the *Daily Newsminer* to reach potential participants. I told them a little about my research, and I warned them that I may be calling them with a request to participate. That is exactly what happened, and they graciously agreed. I met them at the home they built together, met their friendly dog, and looked at some of the Halloween pictures that were taken the night before. After a brief discussion about the consent form, we began.

As usual, my first question asked them to “. . . give me an idea of your religious upbringing . . . what did that look like for you?”

Sam began by saying, “I remember that my mother was searching for a church. I must have been five or six. And we settled on a Baptist church, which now when I think about it makes me chuckle because, it’s kinda kooky . . . it makes me chuckle because it’s such a conservative religion, and I don’t feel that my parents are particularly conservative people? So it strikes me as odd that they continue to go there.” Sam continued saying, “I know my mother has problems with the church there, and I’m always harassing her to leave.” And after a chuckle, Sam continued “So as a young person it was what we did, no questions asked. And my dad did not go. It was a long time ‘til my dad joined it. So we’d go to Sunday School in the morning, an hour Sunday school, and an hour service, and I was comfortable there because that’s where I grew up, and it became routine and routine’s always comfortable.” Sam concluded his answer saying, “Then I stopped going in my college years . . .”

I asked, “So you stayed in that Baptist church until you went to college?”

Sam answered, "I stayed there. I went to church there all through high school, and then when I graduated high school I moved out of state. My brother had already left the state, so I moved down and lived with him. And that was in Madison, so when I first moved there I, you know, fresh out of the nest, I was like, 'so it's Sunday, we gotta go to church'", and with a laugh, Sam continued "and he, he had been out of the house for two years and he was like, 'uh, No'", another laugh from Sam, "'what are you talkin' about'. And so I felt this, I don't know if it was pressure; I guess I felt this expectation that it was something that I should continue to do. So I went to a southern Baptist church there; which now it's like 'why did I do that'? But it's because it's what I knew." Sam explained further, saying "But I went there, and it was uncomfortable, because it was a different area, and I didn't know anybody there. I went two or three times and then said 'um, I don't think I want to continue doing this', then . . . I lived in Madison for two years, and then when I came back, every once in a while, I would go to church with my folks, but when I was in college I had a falling out, basically with the people there and stopped going there completely."

Gary had left the room briefly to take their dog into another room. So I continued to question Sam, asking "When you were going to the other churches prior to going to the Baptist church, and your parents were exploring different religious environments in town . . . what sorts of things did you . . . learn about God?"

Sam answered, "Well . . . I remember as a young person thinking that God was all-powerful, and all-around you, and something to be a little bit, a little bit afraid of. And

then I remember when I was in junior high or maybe sixth grade, that God wasn't actually all-powerful, because one of the things that he gave to humanity was freedom of choice, and so if God was all-powerful, then people would be like Sims characters, you know, no free will. And because we have free will, he can't, or doesn't, control our actions. So that was kind of an interesting revelation for me."

"Do you remember what was going on when you had that revelation?" I asked.

Sam explained saying, "Well, I was still pretty young, and it had nothing to do with my sexuality at all. The pastor at the church sponsored . . . this 'question[s] [for] the young people' there, and it was 'what is it that God cannot do?', and I thought that that was really intriguing because God can do anything, because that's what I was always taught you know." Sam explained further, saying "So when I started looking into it, I said, well, he gave us free will, you know . . . he can't make us do certain things. That was probably not the way I phrased the answer, but I won the prize which was going to lunch with the pastor of the church." Sam laughed at this memory as he continued, "'Oh sweet', you know", he said while he continued laughing, then he continued, "I think I must have been in sixth grade, and we went to this restaurant . . . here in town, its closed now, and it was really uncomfortable because I'm a young person going to lunch with this much older man who I don't have a personal relationship with, you know, uh, he was the pastor, and we know each other, but it's not like were buddies. So it was a forced prize." Refocusing, Sam said, "So what was going on in my life? It was nothing; it was just a regular routine childhood. And I don't know why that experience was so

memorable for me, because there wasn't anything earth shattering happening to me personally."

I asked, "Did you ever have conversations with your parents about the God character?"

Sam clarified, "You mean, did I ever talk to my parents about God?"

"Uh-huh" I answered.

Sam explained, "Yeah! My mom was my Sunday school teacher. Oh my, so every morning my mother listened to KJNP . . . and *The Mooney Bible* was on every morning, and I'd have to eat breakfast listening to this. And we always had morning devotional. My mom would wake us up at like 6:30 in the morning, and this", and pointing to the couch that he and Gary were sitting on, continued "was my parents couch, and its winter, and this couch is leather, and it old. And so, having to get out of bed at 6 a.m., and having to sit on this couch, you know, doing our daily devotional; not what I wanted to be doing. So yeah, we talked about God a lot, or religious aspects, maybe not necessarily God specifically, but whatever the message or the talking points were."

Then I asked, "So when you had this revelation that God was maybe not all-powerful, that . . . at least at the moment, seemed to be a big deal. Did you talk to your mom about that?"

Sam replied, "Nope, at least I don't think so. I, uh, well I know that I must have. Yes, I talked to her about it; not, I don't think in the way that you're curious about it. Because I was talking to my mom about it, about what God can and can't do, so I know I

discussed that with her as part of my research on answering this question for the pastor.” Sam explained further, saying “But then . . . I came to that conclusion. I’m sure that she helped me figure out that free will, you know, that God can’t control our free will. I think after that I just, you know, ‘well that makes sense’, and I just accepted it as fact, and didn’t feel the need to expound or pontificate on it any longer.”

Gary had returned prior to this, so after thanking Sam, I redirected, asking “What about you Gary? Why don’t you, in a nutshell, sum up what your childhood . . . religious experience was like?”

Gary began, saying “I guess, for me, I was raised Episcopal, and we started going to church when I was six, maybe? I was adopted, and my mother and father attended an Episcopal church, but they had taken a kind of a little break. And they started going again when we came into their life.” Gary continued, “Actually my father’s side of the family [were] Episcopal . . . and my mom was born and raised Presbyterian, and when she married my father [she] joined his religion. We went to church every single Sunday. And she was involved in Sunday school. And it was always kind of an interesting service, because the way it was set up in upstate New York where I grew up, the church is very conservative there, and the set-up of the church was interesting to me as a child because we all came into church right up until communion.” Gary explained further, saying “And right after communion, all the children left and went to Sunday school, and we regrouped with our parents after Sunday school and went to the coffeehouse afterwards, so what I found interesting about that as a kid is that the service didn’t seem as long as now . . . I

went every single Sunday, and if for some reason we were sick we were allowed to stay home, but we always went as a family. The liturgy and the set-up, the way the service is became entrancing to me as a kid.” Then Gary summed up saying, “I really enjoyed the religion, and it’s the religion I keep to this day. So I still find it grounding and interesting.”

Next, I asked, “So as a youth . . . if you had to describe what your relationship with God looked like, what sorts of language would you use to describe that relationship?”

Gary answered, “Gosh, as a youth I saw God as many things. In my youth and my teen and my preteen years, my parent’s marriage began to fall apart, and so, already having that really strong religious base was helpful because it enabled me to rely on God a lot, and I think it primarily helped me to rely on God as a friend, and a confidant, and a protector, and a soother. Very big with the soothing, because I was just overwhelmed with everything going on, so, yeah, I would say in my youth he was a friend.” Gary continued, saying “And I was heavily involved in extracurricular activities with the church and the school that were related to Jesus, and God, and things like that, like youth groups, and functions, and Christian camp, and stuff like that.”

I followed by asking, “You mentioned that as a youth God was a friend, a soother, and a confidant. It’s interesting that a lot of biblical texts portray him in a lot of different roles . . . how did you reconcile those ideas with maybe other stories . . . such as different wars or different destructions. Did you ever wrestle with those two ideas of God?”

Gary began his answer saying, “Not really. It just naturally felt that way to me, and I still feel that way.” Then Gary clarified, saying, “Are you asking, ‘did I have trouble seeing God differently as a vengeful God? Maybe like my parents breaking up; ‘how could you do this’ kind of a thing?”

“Right.” I answered.

Gary continued, “I think I looked at it from the perspective of; you know people say ‘God does things for a reason’, and I think I always just felt that way. And in my relationship of thinking of him as a friend I thought ‘well you must have a reason for this happening or allowing this to happen’, so I’m just going to trust that at the end of all of this; everything will be okay, so that’s kind of the attitude that I’ve adopted in thinking of him as a friend and as a soother. I don’t know if that answers your question or not.” He chuckled.

I said “Sure.”

Then Sam asked, “Am I allowed to ask questions?”

“Please.” I answered.

Sam turned to Gary and said, “That’s interesting Gary, [you said that] ‘God must have a reason for this’, you know, ‘why do bad things happen’, and I would counter that God had absolutely nothing to do with that, because, because of free will. This happens because two people were incompatible, because of x, y, z, whatever.” Sam continued, saying, “maybe God had nothing to do with it, those actions or behaviors, so why are we,

why are people looking to God for ‘why does he do that’ well, well that is misplaced. It’s ‘why did two people do that’ you know . . . I just thought of that right now. I’m just having a hard time with that right now actually, uh. You hear that a lot.”

Gary said “You do hear that a lot.”

Sam continued, “‘Why did this happen?’ ‘Why does God let war happen?’ Well, maybe God doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

Gary responded, saying, “Well I think that if, if I can respond, I think . . . God gave people free will, but I think that . . . God is somehow innately part of all things that are loving. So I think when two people get together in a relationship that God is there in the relationship, nurturing the relationship, helping in a relationship, and helping in a way of, I don’t know; it’s difficult to understand God . . . but I believe that when loving things happen, or when really amazing down-right great things happen, that God was in that.”

Gary explained further, saying, “And so I think that when two people get married or two people become partners or get together, that he’s there, and when that break-up happens, I think that’s where people start to wonder; that’s where they get the idea because they already think that God was in the relationship, he’s there too, and when the break-up happens they’re wondering what happened. ‘Did he just leave?’, ‘Why would he allow something that was so good in the beginning go so bad?’ So I don’t know if that helps, but anyway.”

I observed, “Well it definitely sounds like both of you grew up . . . in religious institutions that may be considered conservative. And I imagine that you two are young

enough that maybe there may have been lectures or sermons about sexuality or homosexuality specifically, and I wondered if either of you may have had experiences with those types of sermons before you had any awareness of your own sexuality.”

Gary responded first. “In my particular church, the Episcopal Diocese of Albany on the east coast and here in Alaska, are actually very different. Every diocese is run by a bishop and every bishop, in a way, sends out a vibe about what’s . . . acceptable and what’s, maybe, borderline . . . from what the church would really like to see. And I think that in the conservativeness of the east coast, the Albany Diocese, it’s, it’s, well definitely frowned upon to have a same-sex relationship, because on one level they are trying to make the argument that you are not able to lie together and bring about children, so that’s one of the points that they try to make.” Gary explained further, saying, “And another point that they make is that they just think that, and when I say ‘they’ I mean committees and different people in the diocese believe this, and I think their other angle is that they just think its sinful for two men to be together; ‘Be friends’, ‘be roommates’, ‘but don’t be in love with each other’.” Gary compared the two locations, saying, “And here in Alaska, the temperament is somewhat shifted. The people are more open, more accepting. As far as sermons went, honestly, growing up I never heard one sermon where they mentioned homosexuality being a sin or being awful. If it was brought up, and I don’t necessarily [remember it] being brought up, other than in my home life with my parents, it was that ‘that’s a sin’.”

I then asked Gary, “When it was brought up at home with your parents, what did that conversation look like?”

Gary replied, “Uh, it was awkward, and at the time it was brought up, it wasn’t brought up because of me. They didn’t, actually, I think, on some level I innately feel that my mother knew I was gay. I think that both of them did. My father and I had a horrible relationship, and uh, I was pretty effeminate as a child, and I think it irked him, and I think that that’s a totally different story.” Gary continued, saying “The particular topic came up because we were walking through a mall one day, and there was a lesbian couple holding hands, and kissing, and just being affectionate. And this was in the 80’s, the late 80’s, and my parents were with us; we were at the mall. And my father made a derogatory comment using the ‘F’ word, and just being very derogatory in general. And my mother took a, um, a slightly different route, she wasn’t derogatory.”

Sam interrupted saying, “She’s too proper to be derogatory.”

Gary laughed, and then continued, saying, “Yeah. I have a very proper mother.” Then, returning to the story said, “She pointed out that it was a sin, and that it was wrong, and it disgusted her and made her sick.” Gary chuckled again as he continued, saying, “Both strong, both avenues are very strong, and as a child that message hit pretty hard, I was like, okay, if I was ever I was going to open the door and come out of the closet, I’m definitely shutting it right now.”

“How old were you? Do you remember that?”

Gary paused, and then said, “Late 80’s, so maybe ten.”

I asked, “So you already had some self-awareness it sounds like?”

Gary answered, “Um, yeah, I think, I think I did, um, at an early age.” Gary laughed before saying, “I had a sister, I was adopted with my biological sister, and she and I played a lot together with many of her things. And I was just very drawn to her nature. And I feel like we grew up more like two sisters instead of a brother and a sister, you know?” Gary explained further saying, “We did build forts outside and do boyish things; played Star Wars, and Star Trek, and things like that, but there are so many memories of us fighting over who was going to be Dr. Quinn, and who was going to dress the cat, and you know, just crazy things like that. And my mother did make occasional comments that I had a swishy way of walking, and so she would always comment and say ‘do you wish you were a girl?’ and I would say ‘no’; ‘then stop walking like one’ is what she would say to me.”

Then I asked, “During this time God was kind of a friend, and a confidant, and a soother, so was this something that you would talk to him about?”

Gary said, “Absolutely. I think as a child that I was constantly talking to God. As soon as the concept . . . that prayer was a venue that I could [use to] talk to God, and that prayer didn’t always have to be a conservative, you know, ‘our father, who art in heaven’, but more of a, ‘you can have a conversation with God’, and . . . that prayer can take . . . many different forms. And when that concept became a revelation to me, and I was fairly young because it was taught in Sunday school and what not; it became a habit for me.”

Gary continued, saying, “If I was stressed out, or didn’t agree with something my parents had said with regards to my homosexuality, or the notion of homosexuality, I talked to God about it. And I didn’t so much ask him questions like ‘why am I gay’, I just accepted I was gay, in a way, and just wanted to know how I would be safe, and how I could get through that day or that particular event.”

“What did your answers look like?” I asked.

Gary responded, “Well . . . I always felt better after I talked with God, and . . . even though I didn’t get an answer per say, I felt relieved, so I felt like God still heard me, and that feeling is something that I gravitate towards now in my life. And I know that if I feel okay after saying whatever it is I have to say . . . to God, or give it to God; he’s there with me and we’re working it out.” Gary explained further, saying, “There’ve been times when I’ve asked for Gods help, and that feeling hasn’t been there, and I just feel like, ‘well maybe I’ll just check in with you later’. So, I don’t know. Not necessarily that he’s gone, but he’s, you know, I don’t know.”

I said, “thank you for sharing”, and then turned my attention and said, “Sam. What about you? Do you remember any particular sermons or conversations with parents, or church environments in regard to sexual issues, sexuality issues?”

Sam replied, “There were never any sermons along that topic when I was growing up. What I do remember is being in my junior high years, and there was a guy at church”, and Sam chuckled as he continued, saying, “and he was on this anti-Disney campaign because Disney was very pro-gay and terrible values, and I thought that was very odd,

because, well, because it was Walt Disney, you know, Mickey Mouse! What's the problem with Mickey Mouse? And so, I remember thinking how odd it was that he felt so strongly about a company that produced, well in my opinion, wholesome material for kids and families." Sam continued, saying, "And then . . . every spring, once you were in junior high school you had the opportunity to go to this, revival, youth, um, week long . . . I can't remember what they called it . . . so we would always go down to that, and one evening we were driving back to the place we were staying. Somehow we got on the topic, um, not 'we', because I was not a part of this conversation", Sam clarified while chuckling, "we, the people in the van and the anti-Disney guy, he was driving, and the kids and my brother [were] there. I remember that, they started talking about gay, gay issues, or something about being gay, and Randy, 'no-Disney Randy' . . . he felt very strongly that it was an abomination. And I was very uncomfortable being in this van during this whole ride because, well for obvious reasons." Sam explained further, saying, "They were talking about something that was so integral to who I am, but nobody knew it, and I hardly even thought about it, so when the van stopped, I got out under the guise . . . 'I gotta go pee'. So I jetted out of there as soon as I can, and people stayed in the van and kept talking, and I was inside thinking 'glad I'm outta that environment' but still, I was constantly surrounded by these people . . . but Randy . . . he didn't hold a position in the church, he was just a member, and I remember my parent's, we never talked about gay issues at all." Sam continued saying, "It was, it was kinda nice actually, because when I told my folks that I was gay, prior to that, I tried to think, you know, how do you anticipate someone's reaction, and I really actually had no idea how my parents felt about

it because we had never discussed it. And . . . I don't think we did not discuss homosexuality because it was uncomfortable or [a] forbidden topic. I think it was more an aspect of our family. We didn't really sit around and have these philosophical debates . . . even though I grew up in this Southern Baptist Church, there wasn't this Fred Phelps mentality that was pervasive.”

Then I asked Sam, “When you were contemplating talking to your parents about this, what did you anticipate, or what did you think their reaction might be?”

Sam answered, “Well, you go from one end of the, well actually, I stayed on the most extreme end of the spectrum . . . that they would disown me and not want to have anything to do with me. That's what I kinda dwelled upon, because fear takes over at that point, so instead of being rational, you become emotional. Even though I didn't know how they would react, I prepared myself for the worst because that's a survival instinct. And I was living out of state at the time and I remember choosing this moment strategically because I wasn't reliant on them, if the worst were to happen I would still be okay, you know, I could still meet my needs.”

“Were you aware of situations that didn't work out well for people?” I asked.

Sam began, “Just horror stories all around. I think when a person is coming to terms with their sexuality they gravitate towards stories, movies, books, magazine articles. They may go to their Gay and Lesbian Center. There was one of those there in Madison when I lived there, so I was keenly aware of that because I had been doing some, some covert research at the time, because I didn't even tell my brother that I was visiting these

subversive places”, and after a brief chuckle, Sam continues, “so yeah, I think that’s why I tended to think the worst, because I knew there were these instances. And most of the time, when you’re reading these experiences of people . . . [the] really negative experiences came from families who were ultra-conservative, [and] the Southern Baptist Church is a very conservative church.”

Then I asked Sam, “Is it something that you prayed to God about before you talked to your parents . . . was that any sort of an issue?”

Sam replied, “No, I kinda stopped praying by that point. I remember when I was younger, in high school, although now it’s kinda funny that I think about it because between high school and when I came out it was probably two years.” Sam laughed, and then continued, saying “but those two years were very formative; I changed dramatically during that time. When I was in high school I remember praying ‘please God, don’t let me be gay’ so very hard, and being at summer camp down in the Kenai Peninsula, I remember praying a lot about that, and I think by the time I moved out and was contemplating telling my parents, I think I’d stopped bargaining. It was pointless; I came to acceptance, whatever stage that is.”

“So you accepted your own.” I said, and then asked, “Did you have any qualms about whether or not God accepted that?”

Sam answered, “No. I don’t think that I ever rejected God? I don’t think that I’ve ever rejected God in my religious life. I think what it changed was that”, and after a long pause, Sam continued, “was that ‘God’s not going to change me, I was always this

way' . . . I think what I rejected was other people's beliefs about homosexuality, because they don't know what they're talking about. These other people who are telling me that 'it is wrong' have no basis for what they are speaking about, and I do. And I . . . felt really good about that position, that 'God's not changing me, I was made this way', so I'm going to, instead of trying to bargain with it, um, be okay with it." Sam explained further, saying, "And that was a process to come to that point, and we probably continue with it." There was another long pause before Sam continued, saying:

One of the things that I remember was, 'if I was made this way, was it still a sin'? So I tried to think of the relationship of like, oh pedophiles and just deviants . . . did God make them that way? I guess so. I decided he did. But is it okay for them to act upon their feelings? And I said 'No'. Is it okay for me to act upon my feelings? 'Yes'. You know, 'Yes'. I'm rationalizing of course, but I don't think that I ever really bought into the biblical scripture that people site to be against of homosexuality. I thought it was silly. So that probably helped me in my mental justification for being comfortable acting on being gay.

I turned my attention back to Gary and asked, "What about you Gary? What did you anticipate when you thought about talking to your parents?" I admitted, "I don't know that you have talked to your parents", to which both Gary and I chuckled, "but, if you have or even if you haven't, what did or does that anticipation look like?"

Gary began by saying, “Well, I waited until I was outta high school. I had joined the military, got through basic training, and got stationed here at Fort Wainwright here in Fairbanks, Alaska. And I think the culmination of being in the military, being a very strict environment, and coming out of basic training at Fort Benning . . . an infantry based basic training unit, place, or compound, however you want to say it. It’s all male, there are no females there, but there’s always this sort of looming sense that it’s not okay to be out yet.” Gary continued, saying, “. . . the risk factor is so high because it wasn’t tolerated, and especially in basic training in that male environment, it would have been an absolute killer. I would have been packed up and sent home or had the crap beat out of me. So, I think when I finally reached my duty, stationed here in Alaska, I wanted to finally have that moment to sigh and breathe, because I had just gone through this enormous change in my life . . . and had to act macho and non-sexual . . . having a non-identifying sexuality about me, or something of that nature.” Gary explained further, “And so the weight became too heavy when I got here because I finally got to feel like I wanted to let it out and there was still this sort of air that ‘you’re in the military’; even though you’re not in that conservative of an environment; you’re still in the military. And I sent feelers out through friends and whatnot, and my closest friends in the military told me that they would support me and that they were not shocked. So I started there initially, and I told them I was gay and they accepted it.”

Gary continued his explanation, saying, “At this point in my life I don’t want to be in the closet anymore. And it’s kinda like any news . . . of a huge magnitude that you feel like once you burst that bubble, you, have to like get it out. And so I told my friends,

‘you know, I really want to tell my mother’, and my mother and I have a reasonably good relationship. I wouldn’t say that were best friends but we, um, we work at respecting one another, and I wanted to keep that intact.” Gary explained, “And I, and I was struggling with, ‘okay, now that I have come out to my friends’ . . . I somehow [have] to balance living in the closet with coming out . . . and then I thought that that was just silly. I want to be me. I just want this all out on the table.” Gary then explains, “So, they encouraged me to tell my mother face to face, and I said, ‘I . . . really feel like now’s the moment’. And I can’t afford a last minute plane ticket to fly to New York to tell my mother this news so I, and part of me was a little bit scared because I had this really conservative childhood; I already knew my mother’s reaction. I knew that she was not going to like it, and that she was probably going to say some really horrific things, and so, I was petrified to tell my mother.” Gary concludes this comment saying, “But my friends encouraged me, and supported me, and they said ‘you’ll feel better’ and I said ‘you’re right’, because this is killing me, like this weight of not being able to tell my mother is killing me in a, in a spiritual sense, in an emotional sense, so I did the next best thing I could think of. I figured nobody wants to hear it over the phone.”

Sam interjected “That’s what I did.”

Gary chuckled, and continued to explain his decision saying, “so I said, ‘let me write a letter’ because a letter’s somewhat personal, especially if you’re [hand-]writing it. So I wrote a letter,” and again, with a laugh stated, “and for some reason, Rosie O’Donnell, at the time was this comforting aspect for my sexuality. And so I think, I clipped out some

picture of Rosie O'Donnell, and I put it in the letter, and I made mention in the letter that she was kinda my encouragement for coming out. I said 'look at this woman, she is on TV, and so many people love her – gay, straight, otherwise – and she's a lesbian!'" Gary continued, saying, "'Look at me, I'm your son, and at the end of the day, I love you, and you know, and that's all that should matter, but you need to know that I am gay'. And that was kinda the context of the letter, and I sent it off; actually my friend put it in the mailbox for me." Gary said, chuckling again, and then continued, "then my mother got it . . . I remember when I finally had the courage to call about a week later, and my sister answered the phone because she was living with my mother at the time. My mom was out of the house, and I took the opportunity to broach the subject, and I said to my sister 'did you happen to notice if mom got a letter from me recently', and she said 'oh yeah, mom got your letter'. Again Gary laughed a few moments before continuing with "'oh really Mary, so what was her reaction, are you okay?' and she said 'yeah, I've always known, I'm fine; I love you, I'm your sister, and I support you'. And I thought, well that's great, and I feel really good hearing that, and I knew in my home that I had a friend and . . . an ally, but I wanted to know about my mom, and she said that my 'mom took the letter, opened it up and started to read it, started to shake, began to cry, and went upstairs to her room and shut the door, and she stayed in there for a long time, and then she came down and'", Gary pauses for a few moments. I see tears well in his eyes as he continued saying, "it's still kind of an emotional thing for me to telling that story, because I think of my mother and how hard that that was for her, and uh, so then Mary told me [mom's] schedule and said 'look, she's not really mad at you, but um, she probably needs some

time with it' and so I said 'okay'. And I called maybe a few days later, maybe a week later, and she answered, and immediately she started talking about the weather, and then she started talking about her life and her job, and I said 'all of this is really great mom, but I really want to talk to you about the letter. And I know that you read it, Mary told me that', and she said 'yes I read your letter, and I think it's a phase'." Gary laughed as he continued with "and so I said 'okay', and inside my head I'm going 'it's not the direction I thought she was gonna go, but I can work with this'", chuckling again, Gary continued "she said it was a phase and I said 'no', I said 'I'm gay, it's who I am, and I love you', and she said 'well there's no doubt that you love me, and I love you, but', and she said 'I'm your mother and I will always love you', and she said 'I don't think that you know, I don't think that you know who you are, and I think that you're confused'. And then she proceeded to point out all the girlfriends I had, all of which, in my mind, in my knowledge of knowing me, were a definite façade,"

Sam interrupted as he said "Your beards."

Gary paused momentarily, and then continued, explaining, "yeah, yeah, this conservative household, and I was trying to survive, and these lovely ladies helped me", laughing for a moment, "and my mother saw them as absolute proof that I was straight. And so we had to dish that out over the phone, and we went back and forth over the phone, and finally I said 'mother, If you tell me one more time that this is a phase, I'm gonna hang up, because you're making me mad, and I want to end the conversation on a good note or I just want to end the conversation, and I don't want to be disrespectful, but

I'm going to hang up. And so she started trying to work with that and then she slipped and", chuckling "I did hang the phone up on her. And I remember standing by the phone and crying. I was really physically, and mentally, and spiritually upset, and um, hurt. And I called my mother back ten minutes later, and she was crying and said she was sorry." Tears welled up again as Gary neared the end of this response, saying, "so we kinda worked it out from there. It, it goes back and forth because she now claims to be accepting of the fact that I am gay, but she still has trouble with all the aspects of being gay, such as Sam and I holding hands, or Sam and I showing emotion to each other of a physical, emotional moment like a kiss or a hug. So those things are uncomfortable for her . . . if I mention that I'm bringing my partner home with me, and Sam's came home to New York with me a couple times, she wants to know what our agenda is, what we have planned, how were going to behave together [and] around other people; 'please think about this' or 'think about that', are her phrases."

Sam added, "She's terribly concerned about appearances and how her children actions are going to reflect upon her . . . it all comes back to her."

Gary builds on Sam's comment saying, "and she's very involved within her community and,"

Sam, without breaking stride with his previous comment continues, "'what will people say if', 'what will people think about me if they see you and Sam holding hands downtown?' We don't hold hands anyway", he said, laughing, "so you got nothing to worry about."

“But now were gonna.” Gary added.

Sam capped the story, adding, “yeah.” Then both he and Gary shared a laugh.

After establishing the time, and asking if Sam and Gary were okay to continue, I said, “I do wanna go a little further with this because it is really interesting.” They both answered affirmatively.

Then Gary threw in one final point to his last story saying “Oh, and I never told my father.”

I asked, “and your mother never told him either?”

Gary answered, “My mother told him and my sister told him. From what I could gather, from what I could tell from his reaction, um, he’s not okay with it, but um, there’s nothing he can do about it so.”

I commented, “I heard that your mom is very concerned with, how this reflects upon her and her family as far as the community and the church and that sort of thing. Have you had any conversations with her about how this potentially affects your relationship with God and life beyond this earthly existence? Have you had conversations about that?”

Gary explained, saying:

We, um, we talk about it every now again in the context of, she is now an ordained Episcopal Deacon and, you know, so we talk about it as it pertains to um, how the church views it and how she isn’t really able to

weigh in on [at] these conservative conventions that they have in the church where they all get together and decide things and issues going on in the church. And this homosexuality issue is always brought up every convention and um, I always say to her ‘gosh mom, that must be very hard for you to do’ and ‘how do you deal with that’ and she comments that she makes no comment. So you know, if the questions asked of her ‘what is your view of this Lorraine?’ she will just say ‘I’d like to pass’ or ‘I’m not comfortable talking about it’ or um, something of that nature . . .

Then Gary asks, “I’m not really sure where that question should go; how does she feel about it with God herself?”

I tried to answer, saying, “you’ve shared that you feel that God is aware, and supportive, and soothes, and is a friend to you [both] in light of your sexuality, and in light of your accepting your own sexuality. So I just wondered if she had concerns with your relationship with God.”

Gary answered, “Oh, no. She doesn’t because she, and maybe she’s just coming around to this view, but she now believes that, homosexuality is not necessarily a sin, and that being gay is not something that you choose, and it’s not a phase, and I give her applause for coming to terms with all of that and progressively learning more and educating herself. She knows that I have a relationship with God, and she knows how I view that with God, and I think she shares some of the similar beliefs in that God is accepting of it . . . I think she’s mostly happy that I still have a relationship with God.”

“You mentioned . . . your faith is still a big part of your life.” I said.

Gary said, “Uh-huh.”

“And you’d mentioned that the Episcopal community here, or at least the particular place where you go, is much more accepting, and tolerant, and that sort of thing. So how important is that tolerant attitude to you in your continued membership?”

Gary was silent for a few moments, so I asked, “does that make sense?”

Gary answered, “Uh-huh. I think that it’s important because, it takes the edge off me feeling like I am always looking around me to see who isn’t accepting of me. So that atmosphere can kinda create a barrier, a freedom to have this kinda wonderful connection within your church . . . So having a level of acceptance feels to me, wonderful, because I don’t have to worry about it. We go in together, we sit in the same pew together, and worship together, and um, it’s pretty well known that were a couple.” Gary adds, “I don’t think we’ve ever mentioned to people necessarily that were um, um that were homosexuals”, and after a brief chuckle, he continued, saying, “but we do say ‘this is my partner’ and ‘this is my boyfriend’ and so, it’s never a hidden thing. And so the level of acceptance is the way people react to it.”

Sam responded by uttering “eh.”

“Well, I think.” Replied Gary.

Sam explained further, saying “That’s a weird church I think.” To which Gary laughed. Sam continued, “because we’ve been going there for two years, if not more,

and, for that length of time; I don't feel like we really know anybody there? So, Gary says that 'they're accepting', but I think it's that we don't really know anyone well enough to know if they are. It could be that they're bothered, but they're just too proper to say anything impolite, you know. I would lean more towards them being accepting."

Gary added, "I think I view it as acceptance because growing up in the church, I feel like you would know. I feel like people would approach you and like say 'that isn't appropriate' or 'were uncomfortable with you here, please leave'. I think that tone would be somehow evident in the church, and it isn't in this local church. Nobody's run away screaming, nobody's giving us glares, there's no tension, I don't feel tension during the 'peace', when you go around and you say 'peace' in the middle of service, but the setup of the service itself is conservative in that you're not constantly running all over the place and you're not 'hallelujah this' and 'hallelujah that'." Gary adds "Its, its, you're following a dialogue, your following a prayer book, you're following a, uh, i don't know, how would you put it? Like a . . ."

"Program?" I suggested.

"Not a program." Gary responded.

"Prayer structure?" I suggested again.

"Like a liturgy." Gary said.

Sam added, "It's kinda weird."

Gary continued, "lots of prayers sort of incorporated in the . . ."

“Everybody knows what to say at the same time.” Sam said as they continued.

“Because it’s the same, it’s all the same...” Gary added.

“That’s not how I grew up. . .” Sam said.

“The catholic influence, so yeah,” Gary continued.

“up, down, up, down,” Sam added.

“Yeah, sit, kneel, sit, kneel.” Gary said.

“All the sudden everybody starts saying something like, ‘where?’, ‘how do you know what you’re saying?’” Sam continued.

“Weird how they have it all figured out.” I said.

“Now his brother and sister are going.” Gary added.

“yeah, yeah.” Sam concluded.

After the banter between Sam and Gary subsided, I continued “Sometimes if there is something that is disruptive in the congregation, a homosexual couple or something like that . . . sometimes you’ll know there’s a problem, because often times there’s a sermon or something specifically dealing with the issue to kind of answer the question for the whole congregation.”

Gary responded, “That’s an interesting point, I hadn’t thought about that. I had never thought of that.”

I continued with my thought, and asked, “And so I’m wondering if the topic of homosexuality has ever come up in a sermon or something?”

Both Sam and Gary say “no”, with Gary adding, “Not at [our church].”

So I asked, “If it did, and it wasn’t a positive and accepting message, would you question whether or not you’d continue to go there?”

Sam responded immediately, saying, “Oh, I wouldn’t need to question it; I’d just stop.”

I turned my attention to Gary and asked “what about you?”

Gary paused for a moment before he responded, saying, “Um, I’ve thought about that, and I still haven’t come up with a great answer. I’d think I would still go. I would be hurt. I’d be upset, but I’d still go.” Then Gary added, “And I might even consider the idea of finding another church you know, like in North Pole.”

Sam interrupted again, laughing as he said, “Oh, yeah, like that is more liberal.”

Gary laughed too, and then continued, saying, “I don’t know much about North Pole, so maybe I’m really setting myself on fire. I would try and find another brother or sister church of the same denomination, and if I couldn’t find it there, I could possibly look into other denominations.”

Sam added, “Well, at my southern Baptist church, the pastor never said anything, but a number of the people . . . spent some time in ‘one-on-one counseling’, [that] is probably how they would phrase it. But they were uncomfortable with me being gay.” Sam

continued, explaining, “The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District was amending their policy to include ‘sexual orientation’ into their nondiscrimination clause, and I testified on that, and part of my testimony was carried on the radio. Actually, the school board meetings were always on the radio, and the following day, in the morning, one of the NPR radio stations played part of what I said. So a lot of people in town heard that.” Sam then added, “You know, it’s a small town, they know exactly who I am. So then they had confirmation that I’m a homo. Well, at least I didn’t say that; well maybe I did. I, I probably did. No, I’m sure I did.”

Sam explained further, saying:

So they heard straight from the horse’s mouth, and things at church got uncomfortable for me, because they started wanting for me to meet together and discuss . . . ‘that homosexuality is a sin’, and ‘what the Bible says’, and all of this. And you know, one of the deacons was talking to one of my parents about it, and I had no idea. And one day my dad kinda told me, and that pissed me off. So I called the deacon up and said ‘you know what?’ I’m, geez, how old was I, I must have been twenty-three, twenty-two, and I said, ‘don’t discuss me and my sexuality with my parents. If you have a problem with me; talk to me. I’m twenty-three years old you know, give me a break’. So the end result was basically that the deacons there, without saying ‘please don’t come to church here’ said that ‘this behavior is not accepted here, and if you continue with this

behavior, then it shouldn't be part of the church'. So, I stopped going to church. Um, my folks never said that, and my folks, when people were talking to him, said "I think church is the best place for Sam. I think church is great for both my kids.' So, why would you, why would you, why would you want somebody NOT to go to church? So, so that's why I stopped going to the Southern Baptist Church, because my interpretation was that I was not welcome there.

After a few moments, I continued, saying, "We had talked a little bit, Sam, about your anticipation of what your parents response would be, but I don't think we ever got the story about what happened when you actually did tell them."

Sam responded, "Uh, no. Well, I didn't share that. I did the opposite approach of Gary, which is why I kind of scoffed, whatever my reaction was . . . well, like Gary, I was separated by distance between my parents, so I had the choice of either; well, I suppose I could have emailed them, but. . ."

This time Gary interrupted, saying, "And see, that would have seemed mechanical to me."

Sam continued, "Well, so I called them. I told my brother first, and it was terrible. It was a great experience because, like Gary's sister, he was like 'well, yeah.'" Sam chuckled.

"Siblings are just wonderful." Gary added.

Sam explained further, saying, “But emotionally it was a terrible experience, because it was so terribly frightening. So he said ‘well what do you want to do about mom and dad’, so I said ‘well, I want to tell them today because I don’t want go through this turmoil again’. So I called my parents, and my dad answered the phone, and up until this point, my relationship with my mother was and always has been very strong.” Sam continued, saying, “My father and I, I wouldn’t say we didn’t have a good relationship, we just didn’t have much of one, because, well, because I was uncomfortable with who I was, and I felt like my father being a man had a, a male expectation of what I should be doing . . . hunting, fishing, football, and, you know, and so I avoided interaction with my dad because I didn’t want to uh; because I was uncomfortable with who I was it affected my relationship with my father. So he was the one who answered the phone, and I did not want to talk to him, he was not the first, or, the second person that I wanted to tell, but um, my mom was taking a nap, and so, he could tell that I was distressed, so I told him, and his reaction was, it was neutral actually, I think that’s the best way to say it, and . . .”

Gary interjected, “Was it something about soup?”

Sam laughed, and then explained, saying, “Yeah, well when I shared with my parents I said ‘well, I like boys and I don’t like girls’, and I related it to soup, because I don’t like tomato soup. I don’t really like tomatoes, and I definitely don’t like tomato soup, and my parents know this . . . so could I eat tomato soup and live? Absolutely, you know, it’s not gonna kill me; but why should I?” Sam continued, “You know, there’s chicken noodle soup right next to me. I love chicken noodle soup! I want to eat chicken noodle soup,

that's what I always eat. So it was just as simple as an apparent like and dislike, so that's how I related it to them." Sam explained further, saying, "So when I told my father this, he said 'okay', and I was very, I was extremely upset, you know, I was crying and having a hard time speaking, and he said, you know, 'just relax, we'll deal with this'." Then Sam said, "And I told somebody about that once, and they had a different reaction, they thought 'we'll deal with this?'; they . . . viewed it negatively, like it's something to 'deal with', and I don't think that's how my father meant it, well that's not how his tone came across. I think he meant, you know, we'll process through it, my father's a very analytical, scientific minded person, and so, when he said that, I'm sure he meant that 'we'll deal with this', 'we'll sort this out', 'we'll fix this', so, not 'fix you', but 'don't be so worked up here'." Sam continued the story, saying, "And he said 'mom's still taking a nap', so he'll tell her, and so he did, and we talked about it, and I think having that distance between us was beneficial because they could process this information on their own . . . I think I told them in fall, and they came out at Christmas, and uh, coming out was the best thing I'd ever done because it allowed me to become comfortable with who I am, and if people aren't comfortable in their own skin, then people are not going to be comfortable around you." Sam chuckled as he explained this, saying, "You could be the most oddball person, but if you're okay with your oddballishness, you know, then other people are going to be like, 'oh well, you're just a goofball', but if you're uncomfortable; like Blanche Devereaux said 'if I'm ill at ease, then my guest will be [too].'"

"And that's just, un-Southern." I added; finishing the quote from that *Golden Girls* episode.

We all laughed. Then Sam continued, saying, “So, my relationship with my father has grown tremendously since then, because you can like lay your cards out on the table and ‘this is who I am’, and ‘this is what I like to do’ you know, and ‘let’s find something we both like to do’ and so I found that I actually like doing those ‘guy’ things, you know, I like go hunting with my dad, we built this house,

Gary interjected again with “um-hum, you go fishing.”

Sam followed, saying, “We go fishing, we do. Because, I mean, do I want to go gut fish? Well not really, but I want to be with my dad, because I like my dad. So it’s been wonderful.”

“Awesome.” I said as I began to wrap-up the interview, asking, “So this is my last question, and if you could; answer individually. “If there was a continuum, and on one end there is somebody who is wholly engaged in their sexual identity and has thrown away any idea or relationship with God or any religious connection, and on the other side is somebody who is wholly engaged in their religious identity and their relationship with God, and has thrown away their sexual identity or engagement with their sexual side, and in the middle [is someone] 100 percent wholly engaged in both their sexual identity and their religious identity and their relationship with God, where would you find yourself on that continuum?”

Gary responded immediately, saying, “I think in the middle.”

“Smack dab in the middle?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.” Gary confirmed.

Turning toward Sam, I asked, “and you?”

Sam responded, explaining, “Well I definitely think I feel a balance, so I would say the middle, but, eh, but for verification of the question, are you wanting to know if we are equally participating in both aspects of our life?”

I didn’t want to define the question too much, so I asked, “Well, do you feel like you’re wholly engaged in both sides of yourself, with both of those aspects of self?”

Sam explained, “Well, I’m going to answer that in two different ways. I am comfortable with both; I am smack dab in the middle with both aspects. I don’t feel like I am actively participating equally, 50 percent, in both aspects . . . my religious experience currently with God is . . . pretty minimal, honestly.” Sam continued, explaining, “Growing up Southern Baptist was just, you know, the daily devotionals every single day, you know, ‘God, God, God, God, God’. And now we go on Sundays, you know, when we are not hung over”, Sam continued, after his and Gary’s laughter subsided, saying, “you know, when it’s convenient, so I guess currently I’m comfortable with both aspects of my life. But I’m currently more active in living my life, and you could say my gay life, but I’m just more active in living my secular life than my religious life, because God has become a convenience to me . . . when I want to, when I feel like it, and not when I’m called to do that.” And Sam added, “What’s also interesting to me, having attended the Episcopal Church, is that it seems to me that God is more secularly integrated into the Episcopal religion than he is in the Southern Baptist religion. What I noticed is that it

seems that the Episcopal mission is serving humanity locally; serving the needs of the bums in Fairbanks, helping provide food and shelter and alcoholics anonymous programs locally, which is more getting involved in the secular aspects of people's lives, while the Southern Baptist mission is going to foreign countries and converting people to Christianity. So, I think it's easier to be involved with the secular God in the Episcopal religion."

I commented, "It's really interesting to me, this different role of God in these two religious institutions." Then, I turned toward Gary and asked, "as far as the Episcopal Church here and the Episcopal Church back home, do you see the role of God as being different in those two meeting places? Even though they are under the same Episcopal umbrella?"

Gary explained, "It is different, yeah, and I think it just comes down to the community, and the bishop in charge of that diocese, and what their itinerary is. And Alaska, people just have a different way of living here. Back in upstate New York it's more image conscious, and it's interesting that my mother has that mentality, but she fits so well there because the church is exactly like that, like 'how are we being perceived', and that sort of thing, and here in Alaska I don't feel that the church really cares so much about how they're being perceived. . ."

Sam added, "You know, the minister here wears converse sneakers underneath his robes . . . and smokes cigarettes."

Gary chuckled, saying, “[He] wears long hair. And there’s no long hair on any of the Episcopal priests back home.” And added, “he even incorporates part of the native culture into the service, which is interesting, and so we have the native people doing their prayer .”

Since the interview had gone on nearly ninety minutes, I decided to wrap-up. I thanked Sam and Gary for participating.

Chapter 4

Analysis

“This is like really big screwed up stuff, but it all had to do with love, religion, and trying to deal with the religion thing.” Grace

In their own way, each research participant brought a unique and fascinating story to this research, and each story was filled with its own struggle, its own happiness, its own tragedy and its own momentary resolution. As with all life stories involving struggle, where one finds oneself today will likely be different tomorrow; that is why it is called a journey. The great thing about life journeys, however, is that there are really very few rights or wrongs, it's the process of the journey that matters most. Some journeys, such as mountain climbing, deep sea diving, or parachuting have many variables including weather, gear, and personal stamina. In contrast, the journey involving the formation, maintenance, and potential integration of one's sexual and religious identity consists of countless variables.

4.1 Religious Identity

A deep examination of the participant's interpersonal communicative experiences in regard to religious identity formation and maintenance provided three major themes: (a) Home Schooling, (b) Sunday school, and (c) I'm Okay, God's Okay. There were also many emergent sub-themes, and these will be discussed within the major themes.

4.1.1 Home schooling.

One of the most interesting aspects of religious identity formation and maintenance that these stories highlighted was the impact of parental communication. The religious

identity formation and maintenance of these five participants were each impacted, to a large degree, within the interpersonal communicative acts with parents, primarily with their mothers. Though this should not necessarily be surprising, none of the research that I read made any mention of this aspect of religious identity. When considering the impact those interpersonal communicative acts with parents had on the participant's religious identity formation and maintenance, the following sub-themes emerged; (a) Oh, Know God and (b) Life is a Banquet.

4.1.1.1 Oh, know god.

All of the participants spoke about the influence that their mothers had in forming their early religious instruction. For example, Nancy, Sam and Gary all mentioned that their mothers consistently engaged in both one-on-one religious tutelage and held to a strict regimen of church activities. In fact, each of their mothers also had roles in their respective religious institutions, either as active volunteers, Sunday school teachers, or office holders. As youths, these three individuals learned to know God by actively participating in various church services and youth activities, though at times somewhat begrudgingly. Richey and Brown's (2007) emergent self model illustrates that such activities provide fertile ground for the creation of the "emergent self" (p. 148).

Nancy commented that though she "went to church every Sunday . . . went through confirmation . . . and received all the sacraments . . . with a smile and never voicing complaint," and even though her mother insisted that she "did not raise [Nancy] to make a decision like this," and "we raised you to always put God first," Nancy couldn't wait until her eighteenth birthday, when, as promised by her mother, she could decide for

herself whether or not to continue with her religious instruction and involvement.

Nancy's early religious instruction emphasized an extrinsic orientation (Barret & Barzan, 1996) as she was encouraged to consider the churches rules and canons as being more valuable than perhaps her own experiences. The impact of such interactions is critical in the formation and maintenance of one's identity (Richey and Brown, 2007).

Sam and Gary also had rigid and consistent religious instruction, and of the five participants, are the only ones who continue to be involved in religious organizations. The reason for their level of religious participation may be due to the instruction received and lessons learned about God through conversations with their mothers. For example, it was through a conversation with his mother that Sam had the "revelation" that God, whom he had always considered as "all-powerful", may be limited in power after all; Man's freedom of choice or free will implied for Sam that God "can't, or doesn't control our actions." This revelation, which Sam "just accepted as fact" because it "makes sense" and was consistent with his prior socially constructed meanings and realities regarding his knowledge of God.

4.1.1.2 Life is a banquet.

Aaron and Grace's mothers also played an instrumental role, however with a different emphasis. Aaron's mother introduced him to a variety of religious organizations so that he could meet with and ask questions of priests, pastors, rabbis and members so that he could make informed decisions regarding the direction of his own religious path. Grace was raised as a member of the Methodist church, and her mother supported her free-thinking endeavors and ideals even when they got her into trouble with the church

community. Both Aaron and Grace, because of the emphasis and encouragement that they received from their parents, primarily their mothers, to question the authority of the church and the value placed on their experience and insights, were helped to form and maintain a more intrinsic religious identity (Barret & Barzan, 1996); Consequently, based upon this feast of previous conversations about religious ideas, they were able to draw on their discursive repositories (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) which allowed their religious identity to emerge (Richey & Brown, 2007). The nourishment that all this fancy food provided was the perfect preparation for getting the mind ready for even more activity.

4.1.2 Sunday school.

People within the religious institutions themselves also provided the participants with interpersonal communicative events which impacted their religious identity formation and maintenance, but unlike their parental interactions, these institutional communicative events tended to encourage an extrinsic rather than intrinsic religious identity (Barrett & Barzan, 1996) This resulted in a real struggle for the participants as they all struggled with the chasm between what their respective institutions taught compared with their lived experiences (Richey & Brown, 1996). The sub-themes that emerged from struggles involved within these communicative events are; (a) The Wrestlers and (b) The Feelers.

4.1.2.1 The wrestlers.

The Wrestler's struggle is to pin-down or change particular ideas that he or she has encountered within religious institutions, and these wrestlings are instrumental to both the constraints (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and the emergence of one's relational and cultural self (Richey & Brown, 2007). Nancy wrestled with this chasm on at least two

occasions. First, while in sixth grade, Nancy was talking to her friends about church services and realized that “wow, my experience is so incredibly different than theirs’.” So Nancy approached the Sunday school staff and addressed the problem; Nancy had never opened a Bible in church. The church officials agreed, and though Nancy only opened the Bible once; the Bibles were at least available. The second wrestling occurred during catechism training. The students were given the opportunity to ask any question, and “as you might imagine, a bunch of teenagers, our main focus was sex; ‘why is it wrong.’” The discussion left Nancy frustrated because:

we could not get a straight answer, and they finally brought the priest in, and he wouldn’t, he couldn’t even say words. He couldn’t say ‘genitalia’; he couldn’t say ‘sex’. He was so uncomfortable that he would just point at his nether regions; he would turn red, and be like ‘until you’re married, this is all off limits’; ‘why? Why?’ and he’s like ‘cause that’s the way God wants it’. So all the answers were that ‘that’s the right way’ ‘. . . the church wants you to be this way’; Why? And . . . they couldn’t even make something up that sounded halfway you know, like ‘respecting yourself’. It was just because ‘this is how God wants it to be’. So we were all pretty mad. And they didn’t give us any sort of tools for like ‘how are you supposed to cope with that?’, ‘how are you supposed to deal with that on a date?’, ‘how, how [can] we live like this?’ Come on, teach us something like, if you want us to be this way, give us some tools to do it. But they did

not talk to us. They were so offended that we wanted to talk about this.

And we all went through the motions.

Though Nancy did go through confirmation, this interpersonal communicative event was one of many that impacted Nancy's determination to leave the church as soon as she was able. Conversations such as those occurring in Nancy's lived experience constitute an integral aspect of the ongoing "emergent self" (Richey & Brown, 2007, p. 147).

Grace also wrestled with many chasms that the church presented. One was encountered when she read a letter from church authorities regarding her friend and fellow church member's upcoming gender reassignment surgery. The letter, in Grace's words, stated "oh yeah, it's fine for you to cut things off and stick things on, that's alright . . . as long as it's all looking like it's supposed to be . . . no women with women and men with men, people can chop things off and stick things on in order to make this all look right."

This chasm proved to be unbridgeable, and was the final pin for Grace. She left the church afterward.

One of Aaron's wrestlings occurred in connection to the Bible's teachings regarding animal sacrifice. Aaron was not even old enough to be in the first grade before he confronted a Sunday school teacher regarding the religious practice mentioned throughout the Old Testament. He couldn't understand why "we don't sacrifice animals in our modern culture, so why would we think that it's okay . . . and I was completely asked not to return to that Baptist [church]." And Sam wrestled with the concept of fate

and peoples willingness to accept the idea that “God must have a reason” for bad things to happen, particularly within the context of romantic relationships. Within his life experiences and discursive repositories (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007) Sam had learned that “maybe God has nothing to do with it . . . [rather,] it’s ‘why did two people do that.’” Gary however, did not wrestle with the comment often spoken by religious individuals; “God must have a reason” because Gary is a feeler.

4.1.2.2 The feelers.

Though Gary also recognized the problem involved in God’s involvement in one’s free will and/or fate; he did not seek to change it, but simply understood it within the context of his own experiences (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007). Gary, while rebutting Sam’s comment, said “I think . . . God gave people free will, but I think that . . . God is somehow innately part of all things loving” and allows for either his presence or absence “when the break-up happens.” The reason for this response might have been based on Gary’s previous communicative events. Gary had commented earlier that when he was young, his “parent’s marriage began to fall apart . . . having a strong religious base was helpful because it enabled [him] to rely on God.” The interchange between Sam and Gary highlights all three of Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) three contradictions; the final contradiction, that of “inner and outer speech” goes to the heart of this conversation (p. 148). Sam’s position appears to be heavily informed by the inner voice of his mother and their conversation regarding God’s limited power, and Gary’s position was most certainly informed by the inner voices of his past communication with his parents during the time of their break-up.

Grace also experienced a “feeling” type of struggle with church teachings and ideas presented in conversations. Because Grace was encouraged and supported by her mother in asking questions that explored a variety of themes and ideas, Grace defined and negotiated her religious identity and decided to instill this same value in her Sunday school students (Richey & Brown, 2007). One Sunday morning Grace played John Lennon’s *Imagine* in an attempt to engage the students in a discussion of the religious themes expressed in the song. Unfortunately some of the churchgoers heard the song being played, complained, and Grace “got into trouble”. But that did not stop Grace, she moved on to another “cause” and began to convince her school mates to become vegetarians because “eating meat . . . was just like if some giants came down from outer space, and didn’t understand our language, and decided to eat us. It was the same thing, us eating animals.”

Aaron’s interpersonal communicative events regarding the atheistic beliefs of his friend and mother, in conjunction with other communicative events in Aaron’s life, such as being saved by a stranger in Australia, led Aaron to wrestle with his desire for something more, some sort of afterlife and the potential outcomes that may be implied. When talking to his friend and his mother, Aaron struggles because, as he puts it:

The way I look at is if the life that we’re given is all that we have; if I honestly believe that the life I’m given from the time I’m born ‘til the time I die, is all I have, I would be more likely to think of myself as a screw-up. Because . . . if all of existence that pertains to me is involved in this lifetime, then every moment I spend in this lifetime that is not how I

would want to spend it . . . would be lost forever . . . I don't know, it seems like an incredible waste.

These conversations allow Aaron's discursive reservoirs (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) to churn and shift within interpersonal communicative events resulting in a continually renewing religious identity (Richey & Brown, 2007).

4.1.3 I'm okay, god's okay.

Though all of the participants indicated some struggle or another with religious organizations, not one mentioned any real struggle with the identity or existence of a higher power or God; in fact, most, at least at the time of the interview, considered this possibility a comfort. Gary, for example, experienced a "revelation" when he recognized the concept introduced in Sunday School, that his conversations with God did not have to be formal and "conservative" like saying the Lord's Prayer in rote. This revelation helped Gary to form a relationship in which God was a "friend, and a confidant, and a protector, and a soother" who helped him to "trust that at the end . . . everything will be okay". Likewise, Sam's "revelation" that God's granting people with free will, hence making God less than "all-powerful", was spurred by a competition that was introduced by the priest. The priest would ask the teens a question, and the first to get it right was given a prize. The question that led Gary to this "revelation" was "what is it that God cannot do?", and the answer provided Gary with a foundation to be a little less "afraid" of God.

Although Aaron was not raised within any particular religious organization, he experienced an interpersonal communicative event that helped him to view God as a

potential caregiver and protector. As Aaron crossed a busy street in Australia, he narrowly avoided getting hit by a car when a complete stranger yelled out “Oi”. Aaron, upon reflection wondered:

Was that God looking after me? I felt like something was looking out for me at that time, but was it random chance? . . . Any moment in our lives I feel like I could run into [those] things. It could be a sort of a hurdle, or a guidance towards an understanding of my spiritual world.

These sorts of revelations have helped Aaron reach a current working definition that “God is me, God is you, God is the universe; a whole, not separate entity that you could talk to, or be judged by, or be relieved by, but is this sort of ‘all-encompassing’ that represents all of us and that we are all a part of.”

Similarly, Nancy and Grace also have a more expansive view of God. For example, Nancy commented that the phrase “Oh my God” had become a “habitual thing . . . that [was] engrained” during her “twenty-something years” of believing that there was a God. She currently thinks that the concept of God is a “neat idea . . . if it’s a woman”; an idea that was spun out of interpersonal communicative acts in a college classroom in which they “discussed the hell out of it” thereby illustrating the concept of the “discursive self” (Harre & Gillette, 1994; Richey & Brown, 2007) and “free and constrained talk contradiction” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 147).

4.2 Sexual Identity

Approaching this research, in regard to sexual identity, I anticipated that research participants may likely struggle most with their relationship with God. I was surprised

however to learn, for these five individuals, that their relationships with family, friends and church members were much more influential in the formation and maintenance of sexual identity. The interpersonal communicative events that were related by the participants in regard to sexual identity formation and maintenance were consistently heartfelt, revealing and often very painful. There were four major themes that emerged from these conversations, namely: (a) I'm Speechless, (b) The Thousand Words, (c) The Fitting Room, and (d) A Room with a View. Additionally, many emergent sub-themes were found and will be discussed.

4.2.1 I'm speechless.

Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) first two constraints; "said and the unsaid" and "free and constrained talk" pinpoint an interesting theme involved in several stories told by the participants (p. 145); there were several accounts that highlighted an inability to communicate. Even these instances, where communicative events are hindered for one reason or another, still allow for identity formation and maintenance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This lack of communication was noticed in two different areas, and they have been categorized within the following sub-themes: (a) No Words Can Express . . . , and (b) From a Distance.

4.2.1.1. No words can express . . .

When asked about her experiences discovering her sexual identity, Grace said "this is before Stonewall, this is way back . . .so it wasn't a concept that I had," and "there was no recognition that I might be a lesbian because that word was not in my vocabulary, it wasn't something that was out there yet, or at least out there where I had been."

However, this lack of vocabulary and common reference does not negate the potential of identity formation and maintenance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007), because even without these aspects of communication, Grace said, “I knew all through school, and, well, forever, that I didn’t fit in. I didn’t know what it was . . . but I always knew I didn’t fit in, and that all the stupid things that the girls did just didn’t fit for me.” These feelings of oddness, even though they didn’t have a name and may have included a variety of aspects of self, were in fact present, acknowledged, formed and maintained within Grace’s interpersonal communicative experiences (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007).

Another example was provided by Nancy. Though Nancy had witnessed animals on the farm procreate, when it came to human reproduction, Nancy was told that “babies are a gift from God . . . he blesses the wedding bed of a happy couple by giving them a baby by putting a baby in the mother’s belly.” Nancy never questioned this because her lived experience up to that point had supported that story; Nancy had never encountered a situation that did not fit that mold. One day however, Nancy did encounter such a situation and she couldn’t “understand”. She said that she “went home from church, and was super quiet for the rest of the day.” This may be a compelling story, but Nancy’s sexual identity was being impacted whether or not she understood that unmarried women can indeed become pregnant because up until that point she was simply reinforcing or maintaining the misunderstood reality of sexuality. Therefore, ‘no words can express . . .’ as a subtheme of sexual identity, illustrates the construction of this aspect of self even in the absence of direct strategies of language and/or other forms of communication.

4.2.1.2 From a distance.

Place played a significant role in several stories regarding sexual identity formation and maintenance. Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) "said and unsaid" contradiction includes the notion of Bakhtin's "chronotypes"; an emphasis on the temporal-spatial context of a given communicative event. For example, Nancy moved to Portland, Oregon, and eventually Fairbanks, Alaska, in order to put a comfortable distance between herself and her unaccepting family and friends so that she would be able to "openly live my life any way that I wanted and just do whatever felt comfortable for me, and figure out what was right . . . the path that I was supposed to be on." Sam and Gary also considered the distance between them and their potentially unforgiving parents and friends as a "strategic" element of their "coming out" experiences.

4.2.2 The thousand words.

A couple of stories that were told during these interviews were so vivid and descriptive that it made me think of the saying "a picture paints a thousand words." The following interpersonal communicative events tell the stories of what happened to three participants upon their first encounter witnessing a same-sex display of affection. In the first two stories, the participant was merely a bystander. Nancy's thousand words was the first that I heard. She began:

I remember being a small kid in the back seat of the car down in Portland.

And we were going to visit my aunt and uncle. And my mom and dad were at a stop sign, and they were talking and the whole car just went silent because right outside the window, on the corner by the stop sign,

this lesbian couple was just going at it, they were all over each other making out, and I was just 'Aaah!' and 'Oh My God', and the whole car was like, 'Ah!', and my dad practically ran a red light to get away from it, and I was like 'Uh', 'Ah', 'Uh, What? I don't understand!' 'Those ladies were making out like they were a couple'; 'Is that okay?' 'Do ladies make out like that?' And they're like 'We don't talk about this.' And that was a huge eye-opening thing for me because . . . it had never crossed my mind really. I loved my girlfriends, and they made me feel all tingly, but I knew that wasn't an option."

Gary began painting his thousand words by stating:

The particular topic came up because we were walking through a mall one day, and there was a lesbian couple holding hands, and kissing, and just being affectionate. And this was in the 80's, the late 80's, and my parents were with us; we were at the mall. And my father made a derogatory comment using the 'F' word, and just being very derogatory in general. And my mother took a, um, a slightly different route, she wasn't derogatory . . . I have a very proper mother. She pointed out that it was 'a sin', and that it 'was wrong', and it 'disgusted her and made her sick.' . . . both avenues are very strong, and as a child that message hit pretty hard, I was like, okay, if I was ever I was going to open the door and come out of the closet, I'm definitely shutting it right now.

“How old were you? Do you remember that?”

Gary paused, and then said, “Late 80’s, so maybe ten.”

There is no doubt that Nancy and Gary’s parents have socially constructed their realities through experiences with Western religions that generally consider homosexuality as an “abomination” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) and which has been taught “from the pulpits for centuries” (Walton, 2006). The expectations were loud, clear, and remained unchallenged for many years.

The last thousand words were painted by Grace, and she was not a mere bystander. She began:

And so I end up becoming a Baha’i . . . and I became a Baha’i big time. I met Sandra who had been a Baha’i in Taiwan . . . and she was this super-Baha’i . . . she came to my house, and then she fell ill and so she was laying down with her head in my lap and she, and she got up and kissed me on the lips. And, I, was, up against the wall, because that doesn’t happen, you, you, you, that, that doesn’t happen, you don’t do that, but, and, I loved Sandra so much that I was able to get through . . . she was a Baha’i, and I was able to get through that, that physically that’s not okay. It’s not okay for a woman to kiss a woman. I was able to get through that, but, the Baha’i faith of course . . . being same sex anything is not something that you do in the Baha’i faith.

Each participant, within their respective communicative event with family members and friends, continued to form and maintain their continually shifting and changing sexual identity (Richey & Brown, 1996). The words that emerge out of these stories, and many stories like them, are not painted with washable paint. They are most often painted with water-resistant permanent paint and generally leave a residue that is visible for the rest of the person's lived experience. All three participants, when faced with great familial and relational pressures endeavored to maintain the sexual identities that they had when they encountered the communicative event (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Grace et al., 2004). Through these three thousand words: Nancy maintained her understanding that same-sex romantic relationships "were not an option," Grace maintained her understanding that "this doesn't happen" in the Baha'i faith, and Gary maintained his understanding that talking to God about sexual matters was his only option.

4.2.3. The fitting room.

Nearly every interview included stories about the expectations of their families, friends, and religious institutions. These expectations, for better or worse, are often expressed within interpersonal communicative acts are integral parts to one's sexual identity formation and maintenance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007). These expectations as expressed in these interviews involved four sub-themes: (a) Everything Fits, (b) That's Not My Size, (c) No Peeking, and (d) I'm Dying In Here.

4.2.3.1 Everything fits.

Occasionally, everything fits. Aaron was the only person that did not seem to have a struggle with his sexual identity formation and maintenance. The most conflicted that he reported feeling was “a little adrift” because, as he stated:

I felt a little adrift, and I think the result is that I had the freedom to make decisions about how things should be, but at the same time I felt an overburdening response to that area on my part. I don't have a social example to sort myself into . . . I have to define things as I go along and to try to develop relationships with other people who are dealing with the same thing . . . where they're defining where they are coming from so it becomes a very postmodern meeting of two minds and realities trying to figure out; 'how are we gonna make this work' you know, and defining our own rules. So there is some freedom there.

In fact, when asked if he had ever reached out to God for help in regard to his sexual identity, Aaron discussed a time in high school when:

I went to a meeting of the Thespian Society . . . and in walked the president . . . another student who was my age. He was a junior in high school just like me, and he was so attractive to me. And I do remember looking up, and I did say a prayer, a silent prayer, and I said 'Oh, God' and I was talking to God, and I said 'please let him be gay'. And I had a long pause, and I remember asking, 'now why would I ask that?' And I

said silently to myself, ‘well, I must be gay’. And it literally was that moment, when I had prayed to God asking for another man to be gay that I realized that I in turn was gay . . . That was actually the definitive moment when I identified myself as homosexual, and I started resolving those issues with myself and my lifestyle.

And Aaron laughed as he realized, “so I guess, yeah, it was a very religious moment when I asked a higher power to let another man be gay, . . . it is amazing to me that it was that sharp, that it was that overt, and that I was so specific in talking to a higher power.”

Aaron also stated, in relation to his sexual identity:

I never felt spiritual guilt about being gay . . . even after I was masturbating about guys and what not; it took me such a long time to identify those traits in myself as being gay, that by the time I did, I sort of recognized them as natural traits in myself. And it’s still impossible for me to understand why a higher power would ever create that sort of identification and desires within [me] and then say ‘No, you can’t have them’.

There is little doubt that Aaron’s explorative religious childhood and being raised by parents who did not appear to embrace the power dynamics espoused in most Western monotheistic organizations (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) helped ease his sexual identity formation and maintenance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007).

Generally speaking though, to expect a perfect fit is not recommended because nobody is the exact same size.

4.2.3.2 That's not my size.

Additionally, some participants, due to the power structures that have been created within family, religious, and societal structures (Chavez, 2004; Walton, 2006), find that the expectations of others do not usually fit their continually changing shape. As a result, people simply deny their sexual identity. After hearing her parents say things like “I will not accept it,” “we will never talk to you again,” and “you are dead to me,” Nancy considered the possibility of being bisexual or lesbian as “not an option.” In fact, Nancy used the phrase “not an option” five times during our one-hour interview. Grace also related many stories involving denial. Because of the emphasis that her religious environment placed on “getting married,” “being a good wife,” and having children”; Grace said that she was “really good at denial” several times, and throughout much of her young adult life, each instance in which she discussed satisfying the “needs” of her partner was followed by statements of “this doesn’t happen,” “we can’t be doing this,” and “we’re not supposed to be doing that”; phrases that were used nearly ten times. Both Nancy and Grace, even while denying their sexual identity were actively forming and maintaining their relational self, their experiential self (Richey & Brown, 2007), and the whole of their sexual identity (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). So, the forced fit of one’s social expectations really did not fit in the final analysis no matter how much mental maneuvering intervened – a person eventually realizes his or her own size.

4.2.3.3 No peeking.

Another sub-theme is the expectation that people will not try to get a sneaking glance of sexuality and refuse to either begin or continue to explore any sexual activity that has not been deemed acceptable. On one occasion, Gary's mother asked him "do you wish you were a girl?" When Gary answered "no," his mother replied saying, "Then stop walking like one." Another example was related when Sam said that Gary's mother expressed concern about people's reactions should "they see you and Sam holding hands downtown." When such communicative events are engaged in, one will make decisions regarding their responses, meanings, and memories, and within these decision making moments the person's sexual identity continues to form and be maintained (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007).

Peeking in the wrong door can sometimes lead to getting one's eye jabbed or blackened should the occupant open the door quickly and firmly enough, and family members can be very cruel in their intent to prevent one from exposing themselves to dissuade someone from making poor decisions. Nancy's mother's tactics were cruel indeed in her efforts to force Nancy to meet her expectations regarding sexual behaviors and experimentation. She told Nancy that "God punishes [bad girls] by embarrassing them and their family by giving them a baby out of wedlock." She told Nancy that should she ever "touch" herself "inappropriately . . . the angels in heaven, God, Jesus, and all your dead relatives can see you doing it, and they are crying, and they are ashamed of you, and it breaks their heart." She told Nancy about human sexuality in first person narrative saying "I have a vagina . . . and your dad has a penis . . . and he sticks it

in,” and, because she suspected that Nancy may be lesbian, she often called Nancy “dyke” and “whore.” The impact of these communicative acts on Nancy’s sexual identity formation and maintenance were equally strong. Even into her twenties, when Nancy would peek into her own sexuality, she felt like “a horrible, horrible person . . . I’m breaking everyone’s heart, and someday when I die and go to heaven; they are going to be very ashamed of me and probably shun me because I’m a filthy, filthy person.”

4.2.3.4 I’m dying in here.

Grace, in her efforts to conform to the expectations of her family, friends and religious organization, nearly died. Though Grace, in her early years, was encouraged and supported in her endeavor to “play the devil’s advocate” and “ask the questions that nobody else would ask,” she eventually followed the cultural norms by getting married, and eventually joined a church that encouraged women to both “be a good wife” and “to have children.” There were however two realities that Grace was learning. She learned on her wedding night that she “hated sex . . . and it made [her] sick,” and a couple years later learned that she loved a woman; neither reality was going to help her meet the expectations of her family, friends, and religious organization.

Throughout the following years, Grace was determined to both meet her societal expectations and the physical needs of Sandra, the romantic love in her life. Doing so however resulted in Grace’s “ripping herself in half.” She explained further saying: I mean . . . it really is like a ripping apart and a throwing away. So, I’ve thrown this whole body part away, well not the body but the physical. The physical doesn’t exist, just the spiritual. And with that, then, in my life at least, there was

nothing to talk about. I'm real good at denial. That's how I survived a lot of my life . . .

She began to deny her physical body so that she would be mentally able to meet Sandra's physical needs, and each time that she and Sandra were physically intimate, Grace was struck with the realizations that "this can't happen," "we can't be doing this," and "this doesn't happen" in our church. Eventually, Grace's refusal to recognize her physical self culminated in her being admitted into the hospital and nearing death. Grace explained:

For me, because it was such a clear situation in the hospital there . . . I was pretty close to dying. I was in pretty bad shape. Every bit of my fat had been eaten away. My muscle had been eaten away. I was skin and bones, and I would have died. I realized that accepting my physical self . . . that I'm not just a spiritual being, that I have a physical self, and that I have to accept my sexuality, my sexual orientation . . . in order . . . to stay alive; to live. I would have died if I hadn't. And that was it, and that's what I [had] to do.

During the interview, I asked Grace several times, "did you ever talk to anyone about that?" and she answered "No" nearly every time. And the "No" was often followed by "I [didn't have] people to talk to about things like that." I have to wonder whether or not talking about this struggle to meet those expectations might have helped ease the physical and mental anguish that Grace experienced throughout her journey.

4.2.4 A room with a view.

The internal struggle of reckoning one's sexual identity within the self is the "spiritual challenge at the heart of the gay experience" (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 436). Every journey has its moments of struggle and its moments of peace. Each participant in this research has indicated that they experienced moments of peace when they began to recognize the expectations that they had for themselves. For example, Grace said "I gotta do what it takes, and that means accepting my sexuality," and then "I finally. . . started doing what it took to accept my sexuality and not throw away my body." One way that Grace did this was by going to "a lesbian collective" where she found support by becoming "ensconced in the lesbian community . . . [which] was a wonderful place to find yourself and come out."

Gary created expectations for himself when "the weight became too heavy," "[the] huge magnitude that [he] felt like once you burst that bubble, you have to get it out," and the thought of "balance[ing] living in the closet with coming out . . . was just silly." So in steps, which began with friends and extended to family beginning with his sister and then his parents, Gary began to "burst that bubble." Sam began to create expectations for himself once he had decided to stop "bargaining" with God by pleading "please God, don't let me be gay" was pointless, and decided to come to "acceptance." Similar to Gary, Sam said that he told his sibling first and then his parents. Though Nancy has not told her parents, she has created a safe space and home where she is able to meet her own expectations regarding her sexual identity formation and creation. Each of these participants have joined the throngs of individuals who have struggled to come to terms

with their sexual identities (Atkinson, 2001, Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hutchins, 2001) throughout the communicative process (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007). And each participant, in their own way, has created their own room with a view.

4.3 Identity Integration

The process involved in integrating one's sexual and religious identity is difficult and challenging, and regardless of the outcome, is only successful when one's "sense of wonder in being alive" (Roseborough, 2006, p. 49) is open to both the questions and potential conflict and resolution that integration affords (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Barret & Barzan, 1996; Rodrigues & Ouellette, 2000). The two major emergent themes in this section are: (a) The Power of Choice, and (b) Inside Out. There were also emergent sub-themes that will be identified and discussed.

4.3.1 The power of choice.

The concept of "free will", "freedom", and "choice" came up in many of the interviews, and these concepts are also highlighted within much of the identity integration literature (Roof, 1999; Walton, 2006). Both the participants and the researchers agreed that people can choose not only their actions and responses, but also the meanings and interpretations they apply to the actions and responses of others. There were two emergent sub-themes that involved interpersonal communicative events: (a) Attitude Adjustment, and (b) Separation Anxiety.

4.3.1.1 Attitude adjustment.

Aaron had, on one occasion, been angry and resentful regarding a certain co-worker, and his attitude and outlook on life changed after one conversation with a friend. His

friend said “don’t you understand Aaron, that your feelings, the way you feel about things is your choice? So you’re choosing to feel this way about your coworker.” This one thought had a major impact on Aaron. He “really, really took the time to digest that [thought]” and tested it; the result was that “as soon as I did I was able to . . . work with this person and I would enjoy her presence.” It wasn’t long before Aaron was applying this concept to other parts of his life saying, “I can choose to feel bad about it or I can choose to feel good . . . and try to make the world a better place.”

Aaron was not always successful in his attempt to create and maintain a positive attitude. On one occasion he said “when your world is grabbed like an etch-a-sketch toy and shaken up, that’s gonna test your foundation, and mine was completely tested, and I found myself living in a perspective of negativity that was not . . . me. So it was a long process getting back to that positivity, and I’m still working on it; where I can really accept the world around me as being part of me and me being a part of it.” However, when it came to spirituality and faith, Aaron considered optimism and happiness to be the “tools . . . [for] understanding your universe, that allows you to deal with change, that allows you to deal with obstacles How I deal with [obstacles] internally is a choice . . . To me that is a very big difference as far as the quality of life and the rewards you’re going to find in life . . . there could always be some unfairness in my life, or there could always be some blessing in my life.”

Both Sam and Gary explained another aspect of choice: acceptance. When Sam was struggling with the chasm between his sexual and religious identities he stated “I don’t think that I’ve ever rejected God in my religious life. I think what changed was . . .

God's not going to change me. I was always this way. I think what I rejected was other people's beliefs about homosexuality . . . these other people who are telling me that 'it is wrong' have no basis for what they are speaking about, and I do. God's not changing me . . . so I'm going to be okay with it." Similarly, Gary chose to "trust that at the end of all this: everything will be okay." Gary prayed often, though not to "ask him questions like 'why am I gay', I just accepted I was gay . . . and just wanted to know how I would be safe, and how I could get through." He added, "I always felt better after [he] talked with God . . . and I know that if I feel okay after saying whatever it is I have to say . . . he's there with me and we're working it out."

Each of these participants demonstrated several strategies in connection with identity integration (Roof, 1999; Walton, 2006). And though the ability to adjust one's attitude can impact the satisfaction of one's lived experience, there are times when the participants learned the value of walking away.

4.3.1.2 Separation anxiety.

Several participants enacted the strategy of separation in their efforts to integrate their sexual and religious identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Nancy indicated that she was learning that distance from parents and religion can be a positive choice when she said "I just wanted to be far away from my parents so I could just have the freedom to only tell them what I wanted to share about my life . . . to have good boundaries with them," and that "really letting go of the religious stuff" was instrumental in her "being able to put . . . guilt aside."

Sam also experienced separation from the religious organization in which he grew up. He said that when church officials heard that he was openly identifying as gay, “they started wanting for me to meet together and discuss . . . ‘that homosexuality is a sin’, and ‘what the Bible says,’ and all of this So the end result was basically that the deacons there, without saying ‘please don’t come to church here,’ said ‘this behavior is not accepted here, and if you continue with this behavior, then it shouldn’t be part of the church’. So I stopped going . . . because my interpretation was that I was not welcome there.”

Though it may seem that Grace was mostly harmed because of separation; the separation of her physical body from her spiritual body almost cost her her life. Grace chose to go through the process of separating from her husband and her church. Grace explained that “the only way to get out of the Baha’i faith is to say that you don’t believe in Baha’u’llah . . . and sign this card.” Similarly, the spoken word was required for one to obtain a recognized divorce in the church. Grace said “to get a divorce is pretty hard too, you have to say that your husband or your wife is ‘abhorrent unto you’ and then you have to have a year of ‘patience’ in which you are supposed to try and get back together.”

However, as logic would suggest, when one steps away from one thing, they are at the same time stepping toward something else, and that something else is identity integration.

4.3.2 To be continued.

The self, and one’s identities are never fully formed or complete because as long as one is alive, one is socially constructing one’s meanings, truths and realities (Baxter &

Montgomery, 1996; Richey & Brown, 2007). Each of the five participants were asked to place themselves on a continuum that represented levels of religious and sexual identity integration. Two participants placed themselves on the end of the continuum which represented someone who was wholly engaged in their sexual identity and had negated their religious identity. Two participants placed themselves near the middle of the continuum, which represented someone who felt that they were wholly engaged in both their sexual and religious identities, and one participant turned the continuum into a more dimensional model that included a heavenly and an earthly component. She placed herself, not on the line, but near the earth.

Research has indicated that for any level of integration to be achieved one must strengthen the intrinsic component of their religious identity (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Lewis, 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), and that the more intrinsically a person orientates, the less they struggle with integration (Buchanan et al., 2001). Consider the two emergent sub-themes within the interviews: (a) Identity Integration: Extrinsic Orientation, and (b) Identity Integration: Intrinsic Orientation.

4.3.2.1 Identity integration: extrinsic orientation.

It was not surprising to me that Gary immediately and without hesitation placed himself “in the middle” of the continuum. I attempted to clarify by asking “Smack dab in the middle?” and Gary indicated ‘yes’. I was not surprised by this because Gary had discussed the value that he placed on attending a church that, to him, demonstrated high levels of acceptance. He felt comfortable saying “this is my boyfriend” and “this is my partner” when introducing Sam. He also said, should the church ever publically state that

they were not accepting, “I’d think I would still go. I would be hurt . . . [and] upset, but I’d still go . . . and I might even consider the idea of finding another church.” Because of the importance that Gary places on religious involvement, I immediately considered him to be extrinsically religious.

Sam did not just point to one spot on the continuum, but rather provided some context for his answer. Though he felt “comfortable” and a “balance” between the two identities, he said, “I don’t feel like I am actively participating equally . . . in both aspects.” He explained that this was because, for him, God and religious involvement had “become a convenience to [him] . . . when I want to, when I feel like it, and not when I’m called to do that.” Sam said that though he felt balanced, he was “currently more active in living . . . my gay life . . . my secular life.” Both Sam and Gary have placed value on their lived experience and have sought out religious environments that also place value on their lived experience, so they exhibit both extrinsic and intrinsic orientations (Buchanan et al., 2001)

4.3.2.2. identity integration: intrinsic orientation.

The three participants in this category have indicated that they are overwhelmingly intrinsically orientated. Nancy said that she was “way over here” as she indicated the end of the continuum associated with those who are wholly engaged in their sexual identity and not their religious identity. Similarly, Aaron said that he “would be the person that rejects religion,” and Grace said “I can’t put myself on that line between . . . sexuality and the religious . . . because I’m down here on the earth, in the earth. So I’m not above

ground there in the spiritual at all. I'm more earth based." So it seems clear. Nancy, Aaron, and Grace are intrinsically orientated.

But all three have also indicated that they are willing to allow for the existence of some sort of higher being or God. When Nancy read *When God Was A Woman* she said "this is the truth, this is my truth right here," and said that she was "open to" to the existence of God and considered it "a neat idea." And Aaron even became emotional when he was discussing the implications of there not being a God saying "I don't know, it seems like [life would be] an incredible waste." And this willingness to consider indicates some level, however minute, of extrinsic religiousness (Barret & Barzan, 1996).

4.4 Summary and Suggestions for Future Research

Though much research has been done in connection with the struggle experienced by Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in relation to sexual and religious identity integration, none that I could find viewed this problem through the theoretic lens of Communication. The literature review highlighted core concepts that have been identified through a variety of other disciplines including Psychology, Sociology, and Religion, highlighted theories from a variety of disciplines, and placed a human face on this problem. The interviews, transcription, and analysis were all guided by the three research questions, and each question was addressed through an in-depth discussion of the emergent themes and sub-themes that were found throughout the narrative interviews. The information gleaned through the unpacking of these themes has contributed to understanding of both struggle experienced in regard to sexual and religious identity integration, to understanding many of the ways in which interpersonal communicative acts affects the

person who is struggling to integrate these two identities, and to understanding the ways in which current communication theory regarding the formation and development of self can be applied and utilized.

The emergent themes and sub-themes in relation to the participant's religious identity formation and maintenance were Home Schooling, Sunday school, and I'm okay, God's okay. These three major themes discussed the ways that familial communicative acts, communicative acts with church members and representatives, and interpersonal and intrapersonal communicative acts with and about God, impact the lived experience and meaning creation in regard to each participant's religious identity formation and maintenance.

The emergent themes and sub-themes in relation to the participant's sexual identity formation and maintenance were I'm Speechless, The Thousand Words, The Fitting Room, and A Room with a View. These four major themes discussed the ways that an inability to communicate impacts sexual identity, the ways that vivid and shocking encounters can affect sexual identity, the ways that both expectations from family and church can impact sexual identity, and the ways in that expectations of self can affect sexual identity.

The emergent themes and sub-themes in relation to identity integration were The Power of Choice and Inside Out. These two major themes discussed the ways that both attitude and separation, and the delicate balance of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations impact identity integration.

There were several limitations to this research. First, this is a struggle that I myself have gone through and continue to go through, so there is certainly potential that some of my interpretations may have been skewed or slanted. However, throughout the entire two-year process of compiling this research, throughout my forty-five years of interpersonal and intrapersonal communicative acts, and throughout the interview, immersion, and analysis process, I have grown in my own understandings of this problem both academically and personally; and I have been able to, as much as possible, bracket (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) these inner voices so that the emergent themes reflect the experiences of the participants and not my own. Second, there are only five participants involved in this research and more voices can always help in gaining deeper and more finely attuned themes and sub-themes. In fact, there is a critical voice missing from this research. Though I attempted to reach and contact individuals who may have identified with the other end of the continuum, namely, the voice of someone who fully engaged in their religious identity and negates their sexual identity; as did Grace prior to coming out. The voices of persons in their position are missing from nearly all research regarding this topic.

A third limitation involves the continuum that I described in regard to sexual and religious identity integration. I made an effort to avoid the word “spiritual” in both the interview process and in my description of the identity integration continuum. This is a limitation because it did not provide the participants with an opportunity to incorporate their own terms and experiences in finding their place on the identity integration continuum. If I would have explained the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity,

or used the term “spiritual” as being equal to “religious” on the continuum, I anticipate that some of the participants may have considered themselves more integrated.

As far as I am aware, this is the only research that approaches this particular struggle from a Communication perspective, and if it is, I certainly have not even scratched the surface in beginning to understand the impact that interpersonal communicative acts can have on sexual and religious identity formation and maintenance or on the integration process. As I read, and reread, and reread this research, I am constantly amazed at the amount of information that one could extract from these interviews, and then be examined for further analysis. The first list of potential themes covered many pages, and I had to really narrow my focus, which means that there is a wealth of information here that I or someone else may be able to build on in the future.

In addition to uncovering more themes and being able to discuss them in more depth, I think another real implication of this research is that interpersonal communicative events may inform and impact sexual orientation formation and maintenance, an idea that if explored has huge implications, both positive and negative for individuals, families, religious organizations and society at large. The best case is: (a) people who are personally involved with this struggle might gain a fuller understanding and appreciation for both their religious and sexual identity, (b) their family members, especially parents, might gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of how their interpersonal interactions with their son or daughter impacts his or her religious and sexual identity, (c) some religious organizations may reconsider their stance, and (d) people in the larger society

might be helped to become more understanding of the struggle for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, as well as consider how they themselves impact this struggle.

However, in my opinion, it is much more likely the implication that sexual orientation is at least in part formed and maintained within interpersonal communicative acts, would only add to the struggle for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals because, though it may seem that society is becoming more accepting, we are still a society that approaches the topic of sexual orientation from a binary perspective of nature vs. nurture, and an interpersonal communicative component seems to lean toward the nurture side (he or she chooses to be lesbian, gay or bisexual) of that binary and away from the nature side (he or she was born lesbian, gay, or bisexual). Such a leaning would likely bolster most religious organizations condemnation of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, would likely bolster community and political entities to continue to deny equal rights for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and would likely add to the pressure placed on families and individuals to meet the expectations of society, to 'fit in', and continue to deny one's sexual identity. But such concerns should not prevent the question from being asked, because not allowing science to fully explore this topic seems just as problematic as a religious organization asking a first-grader not to return to Sunday School for asking why it was okay for Christians to sacrifice animals thousands of years ago when they do not condone it now; the question is not the problem, it's the reaction that can lead to rejection, and scientists, even the human scientists, should not allow potential negative reactions prevent questions from being asked or explored.

Additionally, there are other people who may also be impacted in similar struggles. Consider a heterosexual female who is sexually active with one or more partners and who thoroughly embraces and is engaged in exploring and meeting all of her sexual needs. It is likely that some females in this category may also struggle with sexual and religious identity integration because Western religions and society generally seem to condemn women who embrace their sexuality and/or who actively pursue sexual encounters.

A social construction perspective begs for that question to be asked. Not asking would be tantamount to putting blinders on, and hence not allowing oneself to consider the broad scope of experiences and yet to be formed and maintained truths and realities. There seems to be only one guarantee: by not asking questions that explore the ways in which sexual identity, religious identity, and the integration of the two are impacted within interpersonal communicative events, ensures that the struggle that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals experience while integrating his or her religious and sexual identities will continue for me, for Aaron, for Nancy, for Grace, and for Sam and Gary.

I said, “ Interesting. Life journeys.

“Yeah” she replied.

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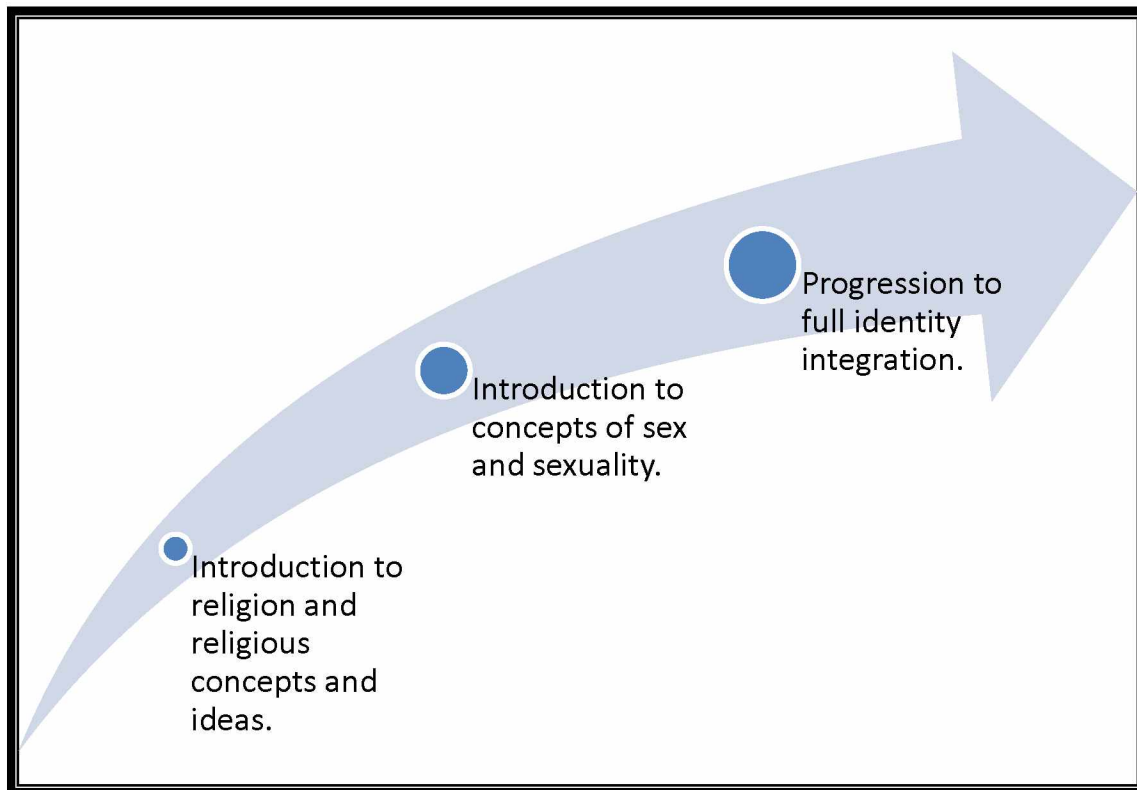
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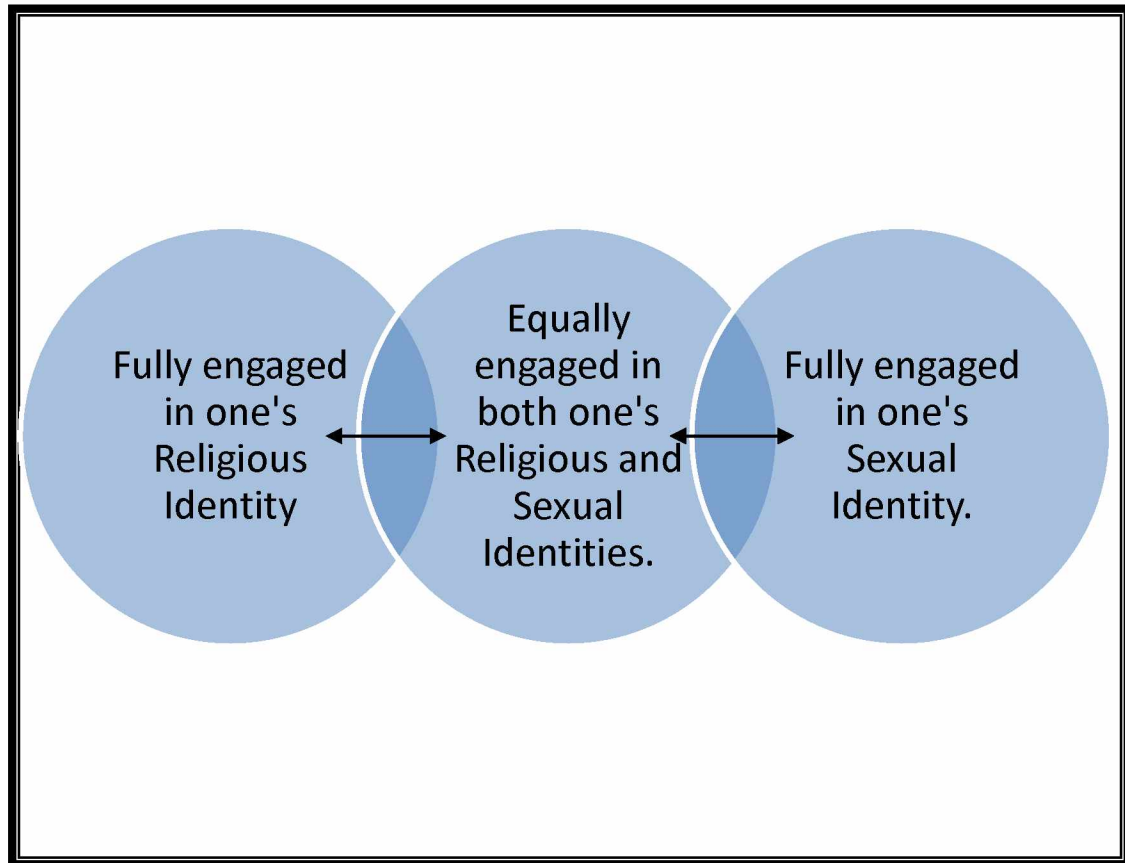
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Figure 1.1



Identity Integration – Linear Model (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Figure 2.1



Identity Integration – Communicative Flow Continuum

Appendix 1

Co-Researcher Information and Consent Form

Description of the study:

You are invited to participate in a study. The study is about religion and sexuality. I am a graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. This study is part of my graduate thesis. I am interested in learning about how people experience their religion and their sexuality. Each person has a story to tell about this process. There are three key areas of people's experience that I am most interested. First, I am interested in learning about how people felt and thought about God when they were young. Second, I am also interested in learning about how people felt and thought about sexuality when they were young. Finally, I am interested in learning how these feelings and thoughts about God and sexuality affected them as adults.

Description of the Interview:

The interview itself will last between 1 to 2 hours. The interview may take place anywhere that the participant feels most comfortable. This may be at a private residence, or at a University facility, or even at a participant's religious meeting place. The interviews will be audio recorded. If the participant agrees, the interview can be video recorded also. The questions will not ask for simple "yes" or "no" answers. Each question will ask the participant to tell personal stories. Possible questions include:

- I have heard many views about a person's beliefs about God when they were young. Tell me about your beliefs about God when you were young.
- Tell me about a time when you were young and when you remember hearing or experiencing messages about sexuality from your family or church.
- Tell me about a time as an adult when your sexuality directly influenced the decisions you made.
- How do you think your sexuality and religion have affected each other?

*** Participants can refuse to answer any question for any reason ***

Confidentiality and Consent:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. I will not ask for personal information such as your address or employment information. A participant can withdraw at any time by sending an email or a letter to Alan Fredericksen. The letter or email should indicate the participant's desire to withdraw from the study. There are no penalties for withdrawing from the study.

The recorded information will be confidential. The recorded information will be kept in a locked room at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Only the Project Chairperson, Dr. Jean Richey and I will see and/or listed to the recorded information. The information will be destroyed in five years. The findings of this research will be printed in a report. The findings of this research will also be presented in at a Thesis Presentation. Participants can get copy of this report before the presentation. Participants are also invited to the presentation. Your presence will also be kept confidential.

Benefits of being involved in this study:

Participants may find relief by telling their stories. And participants may find strength by sharing their experiences. Also, this study can help other people to understand issues about religion and sexuality. This can help because these stories can create understanding between people. They can also build appreciation for other people's experiences with religion and sexuality.

Risks of being involved in this study:

It is possible that some people may not like to talk about religion and sexuality. Some people may have painful memories when they talk about these things. Others may experience emotions that they were not aware of or that they are not prepared to experience. In this case, here is a list of places that can help...

Fairbanks, Alaska

Samaritan Counseling Center; 3504 Industrial Ave. #202, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701; 907-452-4673; samaritanalaska.com

Hope Counseling; 926 Asper St., Fairbanks, Alaska 99709; 907-451-8208; 866-831-4673 (toll-free)

UAF Center for Health and Counseling; P.O. Box 755580, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775; 907-474-7043; fyheaco@uaf.edu

Fairbanks Memorial Hospital Counseling Center; 1650 Cowles St., Fairbanks, Alaska 99701; 907-452-8181

Anchorage Alaska

Good Samaritan Counseling Center; 4241 B St. Ste. 100, Anchorage, Alaska 99503; 907-565-4000; goodsamcounseling.com

UAA Center for Health and Counseling; 3211 Providence Dr., Rasmuson Hall, Ste. 116/120; Anchorage, Alaska 99508; 907-786-4040

Anchorage Community Health Services; 4020 Folker St., Anchorage, Alaska 99508; 907-563-1000

Contact Information:

Please contact me if you have any questions. My name is Alan Fredericksen. My phone number is 712-251-9505. My email address is acfedericksen@alaska.edu. Or you can contact the person in charge of my committee. Her name is Dr. Jean Richey. Her phone number is 907-474-6591. Her email address is jarichey@alaska.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Research Coordinator in the Office of Research Integrity at 907-474-7800.

Request for Information:

Let me know if you would like to have a copy of the final report. And let me know if you would like to be present at the Thesis Presentation. I can send the report and presentation information to you either physically or electronically. This information will be kept confidential. It will only be used if you would like to receive this information.

Address: _____ . OR Email Address:

Please keep a copy of this for your records.

Thank you for your time, consideration and input