

Spring 5-31-2019

Self-reflective Journaling: A Practice for Achieving Self-Understanding and Acceptance, Overcoming Creative Resistance, and Moving Toward Ideal Self

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Recommended Citation

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SELF-REFLECTIVE JOURNALING:
A PRACTICE FOR ACHIEVING SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE,
OVERCOMING CREATIVE RESISTANCE, AND MOVING TOWARD IDEAL SELF

by

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SYNTHESIS*
MASTER OF ARTS
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

May 2019

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Abstract: The Critical and Creative Thinking synthesis course provided an opportunity for me to begin a process of self-transformation, using all that I had learned in the program about metacognition, reflective practice, and creativity to inspire goals for my personal growth. As part of my work in the synthesis course, I rediscovered a consistent practice of self-reflective journaling that I had abandoned some years ago and used my synthesis paper to document my process in hopes that others may learn from it and perhaps be inspired to take on a self-reflective journaling practice of their own. As my paper reveals through excerpts of my journal writing and creative writing, journaling has been a way for me to understand the source of my creative resistance, confront that source, and work through it to begin writing poetry again. I demonstrate how self-reflective writing allowed me to distance myself enough from my experiences to channel them into creative flow. I conclude my paper by exploring future pathways: as I move

beyond the course, I will continue journaling as a lifelong practice and share the experience with others by facilitating a creative writing group in which members take on a self-reflective journaling practice alongside their creative work. My hope is that others may discover, as I have, the potential journaling holds as a tool for creative thriving and movement toward our ideal selves.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

I. Introduction

It may not feel as though we have much time or space in a day for thinking thoughts that are just our own. We are surrounded by distractions and encouraged to believe that observable productivity is the most valuable measure of success. But while we are so focused on being productive and consuming all that the world pushes toward us, we often forget to look within, and thus forget that the most rewarding form of success may show itself through mental and spiritual growth. Daily or almost daily written self-reflection is a way to make space, to be alone with oneself amongst the noise of a busy world, and to learn. Some people may believe the most meaningful learning happens while we are taking in information offered to us by others. But another equally if not more valuable type of learning can occur when we have conversations with ourselves; we process the world, we process the things we think we know, and we come upon thoughts, ideas, and opinions that we may never have openly expressed before. David Boud, in his article “Using Journal Writing to Enhance Reflective Practice,” explains that “reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred. It involves exploring often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them.” He continues, “This working with events is intended as a way to make sense of the experiences that result, recognize the learning that results, and build a foundation for new experiences that will provoke new learning.”¹ Reflection brings what is in our minds out to the surface—it makes our experience tangible. It gives us the power to know ourselves and to form a concrete self-concept, to begin to envision what our growth might look like, to understand our struggles and see a way beyond them, to

¹ Boud, 2001.

move toward a place of contentment, self-acceptance, and inner peace, and, over time, to fall into alignment with our vision of ideal self².

The focus of my synthesis project is a deeply personal one. At the start of my enrollment in the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I expressed goals that I hoped to achieve over the course of my time as a CCT student: to rediscover my voice as a writer, and to grow on a personal level toward greater confidence in myself and my ability as a leader and catalyst for change. At the time I did not realize how connected those goals were, but as the CCT program winds to a close for me, I recognize how much of my work has had these two goals at its core and how connecting them is a way of seeing them through. For my synthesis project, I set out to rediscover the practice of self-reflective journaling, which had once been a daily practice for me. I started a journal when I was a young teenager, and although at the time I did not have a full understanding of self-reflective practice or the benefits journaling could have when approached with explicit intentions for growth, I was unconsciously practicing daily self-reflection by using my journal as an outlet to work through my adolescent troubles. I admit that at times I was unable to write myself out of negative thinking patterns, but the release of the negativity I held within was immensely therapeutic and kept me, in my worst times, from being swallowed into the darkness. Alongside my journal writing, I wrote creatively; I had been writing poetry since I was about nine years old, and my creative voice matured and developed because of the self-awareness and understanding of my own experience that my journaling practice cultivated. About five years ago, though, the frequency with which I was writing began to diminish. Though I did not understand it at the time, circumstances and events in my life were creating a resistance

² A concept put forth by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers suggesting that there is a disconnect between ‘ideal self,’ who a person would like to be, and ‘real self,’ who a person actually is in the present moment. Source: McLeod, 2014.

toward writing, both reflectively and creatively. I felt frustrated by my struggle to write, but I was unable to name the cause of my struggle until about a year ago when I was introduced to the concept of ‘creative resistance.’ Coming to understand the idea of resistance toward writing was a breakthrough for me. The first step in being able to write again was to recognize that there were certain truths about myself and my life that I had been unable or unwilling to face. It was time to face them.

I resumed my journaling practice with intentions in mind to overcome the resistance that led me to stop writing, to process the events of my past, to understand myself better in the present as a means toward self-acceptance, to open myself up creatively, and to move toward my vision of ideal self. As part of my synthesis work, I have immersed myself in self-reflection and self-examination by using a personal journal to write through my present experiences and revisiting old journals of mine to face the resistance that held me back from writing anything substantial, reflectively or creatively, in more recent years. This practice of ‘doing’ is one half of the work of my synthesis, and the other half is to document what I have been doing and explain my process in such a way that others may be able to learn from it and perhaps develop their own self-reflective journaling practice as a means toward personal growth.

II. Explaining My Resistance

I came to understand the resistance behind my extended writing hiatus when I read Susan Kolodny’s *The Captive Muse: On Creativity and Its Inhibition*. The stories she shared about people she had encountered throughout her life and her illuminating explanations of resistance and defenses that kept those people from embracing their creativity resonated with me on a deep level. As she examined the root causes of those individuals’ (and her own) creative blocks, I felt as though she was examining mine as well, and the answer behind my struggle to write

reflectively and creatively for several years seemed not to be so elusive. It became clear to me that my prolonged writing block could be traced back to events that took place over the almost twelve years I spent in a relationship in which I tolerated treatment that I could not justify tolerating. In the earlier years of that relationship I was still immersed in creative and reflective writing practices and used writing as a way of coping and as an outlet for self-expression. But as the patterns of that relationship became increasingly unhealthy and my dependency on the relationship and fear of the unknown continually overruled the voice in the back of my mind telling me to walk away, I stopped writing, as I could no longer face the reality of what was happening—what I was allowing to happen. There was no way that I could face the truth and still allow myself to live inside that truth. There was also a resentment toward myself working unconsciously—journaling was a place for conversing with myself, but I no longer cared to hear what I had to say. I had stopped believing in the value of my thoughts and experiences, and so I disconnected from myself.

While this disconnect was happening, I was aware of the fact that I had stopped being a writer but not aware of the true reasons why. I felt as though I had lost a part of my identity and as if I had run out of words. At times I did try to write poetry or the occasional journal entry, but writing felt forced and inauthentic, similar to Kolodny's struggle with writing about a past relationship of her own. She describes, "I was working on a poem about a man I'd once been foolish enough to love; the relationship ended badly. While the poem was rather clever, a poem of revenge, a teacher pointed out to me that my revenge had backfired; I'd failed to show the attraction that accounted for the bitterness which the poem contained. I had to go back into the poem and the experience, to revise or re-see it. . . . I hadn't been letting myself in on my own more complex experience—my resistance to acknowledging my own experience had been in the

way.”³ Her analysis perfectly encapsulates the difficulties I faced when trying to write, both creatively and reflectively, in my blocked state. To write from a place of truth I would have had to acknowledge all pieces of the relationship, good, bad, and in-between. I needed to see the whole picture, but I was too lost inside the picture to see it as a whole quite yet. Kolodny addresses this resistance to writing our truths: “This is part of what makes creative work scary. We may not feel ready or able to confront the charged material, particularly since, when we set out, we probably don’t even know what that material is, what unconscious wishes it may express, or meanings it may have for us.” Indeed, after silencing my writer’s voice for so long, it was frightening to face the unknown of what might come out when I put pen to page.

In *The Captive Muse*, each anecdote Kolodny shares has one of two outcomes: (1) person suffers from creative block, source of creative block is identified, person faces source of block and creativity thrives again; or (2) person fails to face the block and cannot move forward. Kolodny describes two individuals who had experienced different traumas; one was able to write poignantly about her traumatic experiences while the other remained blocked and unable to embrace creative work. I was in a state like the latter for quite some time, even after I found my way out of the relationship in which my resistance toward writing originated. Over time, though, my past experiences became distant enough that I began to see them as not only inspiration to write but *reasons* to write. One of the greatest pieces of advice I take from Kolodny is that creative expression can be used to “master” a traumatic experience rather than to repeat it. As she says, “Content may be resisted because it is associated with traumatic experience. We can hope that addressing such content in creative work, giving it form and shape, will enable us to distance ourselves from it and master the trauma.” I wanted to write as a means of confronting

³ Kolodny, 2001.

myself, understanding myself, accepting myself, and improving myself, and so that is the project I took on for my synthesis work. Kolodny says, “Each of us has the opportunity, in confronting a poem or painting, . . . to discover some truth about ourselves.” I committed to writing my truth through self-reflective journaling, which has led me back to creative writing, as a way to move beyond my past and immerse myself in a process of personal growth.

III. Defining Growth, and the Purpose of Journaling

There is extensive literature on philosophies of personal growth and development, and experts offer many paths toward enlightenment, actualization, spiritual awakening, and inner peace. In my synthesis, I take the wisdom behind those paths a step further by suggesting that writing about oneself can propel a person forward on a growth path toward lasting personal change. Taking on the practice of self-reflective writing with a goal of personal growth means investing time in yourself and making a commitment to your own improvement and empowerment. It is important to note that there is a significant difference between keeping a journal to write down daily occurrences and keeping a journal to perform daily reflections. A self-reflective journal is not focused on surface-level daily events; it is a place for one to dig deeper within and to work through daily thoughts, questions, emotions, ideas, musings, learnings, and understandings. Through this focus on coming to know oneself, personal change becomes possible. But the intention must be clear and strong: to write the things that are difficult, that resonate as most significant, and that expose the truest and perhaps most uncomfortable parts of ourselves and our lives so that we can break through that discomfort, learn in depth about ourselves, and own who we are. In his book *The Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck puts forth the idea that we must be willing to “suffer through” the work of thinking about what is difficult now if we wish to minimize suffering in the future: “To willingly confront a problem

early, before we are forced to confront it by circumstances, means to put aside something pleasant or less painful for something more painful. It is choosing to suffer now in the hope that future suffering will not be necessary.”⁴ Reflective journaling offers a place to practice this ‘suffering through’: Only once we know ourselves fully and accept ourselves wholly can we potentially overcome what holds us back from growing toward our ideal self.

Haemin Sunim, a Zen Buddhist teacher, writes in his book *Love of Imperfect Things*, “When difficult emotions like loneliness, sadness, and fear well up inside you, the most courageous thing you can do is to spend some time with them. Rather than trying to escape them by turning on the TV or calling a friend, sit next to them and look at them quietly. When you pay attention to them, they will either change their shape and disappear, or make you see that they’re not that terrifying.”⁵ Sunim’s wisdom has resonated with me as I have immersed myself in journaling practice. Releasing my most difficult emotions onto the page allows me to spend the time with them necessary to understand them for what they are—fleeting and so much less significant than they had seemed in the moment. Sunim continues: “[T]houghts are only fleeting responses to specific circumstances, which are themselves constantly changing. When we step back and observe a depressing thought, we can see how insignificant it is in the grand scheme of things.” Writing down my troubles allows me to gain control over them and over my own mind, so that I can shift my focus toward what I can do to improve my circumstances or begin to change my way of thinking so that the darkness clouding my thoughts is lifted.

⁴ Peck, 2006.

⁵ Sunim, 2016.

In an entry I wrote in the journal I developed as part of my synthesis project, I purposefully faced negative emotions I was experiencing at the time as a way of accepting them and moving forward from them:

i've written about the restless feeling i've been having a little in previous posts, but i finally came to understand it fully and i think it is important to write it out, if for nothing other than future reference.

first of all, it has nothing to do with anything that is happening in the present moment. that is so important to remember, but so easy to forget.

second, it is the product of conditioning. i was trained to expect that every time i allowed myself to be vulnerable and open and trusting, the person i became those things for would shut down toward me.

i woke up each morning fearful that would be the day i'd blink my eyes and things would crumble again. just when things had never seemed better is right when they'd become worse than ever before. there were no good reasons—there was no sense to make of it—chaos became a way of life.

so now i have this lingering fear. it is a protective fear, and it will take time to understand that it is unnecessary in my present, nonchaotic relationship.

i want to make clear to myself that it is OK to feel this way. i have felt ashamed for it, but it makes perfect sense to have certain mental and emotional reactions coming out of over a decade of turbulence. this is the aftermath, and on most days i am strong enough to surrender to what's happening now despite the fear.

i will be easier on myself.

In the process of writing this journal entry, I overcame a mental hurdle and came to better understand the emotions that had been causing me distress. I had a conversation with myself and approached it as if it were a conversation with a friend, to come to conclusions and lay out an approach forward. Through self-reflection I was able to process a feeling that for a while I had great difficulty articulating: I tried to explain the restlessness I was feeling many times to my significant other, who noticed I was feeling that way, and no explanation I gave felt quite right. Writing down what I was experiencing internally helped me to understand the source of my emotions, and by understanding the source, I was able to forgive myself for dwelling in the

negativity of my past. I needed to listen to and nurture my emotions so that they could dissipate and make way for my path forward.

IV. Going into the Past to Understand the Present

One of the greatest benefits journaling provides is the ability to go back and read what we wrote on days past. It enables us to see patterns in our thinking or actions, to recognize how we could have done things differently, and to identify areas for growth or to understand our motivations and desires that we may not, at the time, have been consciously aware of. There seems to be an element of intuition inherent in knowing the meaning underneath our own words, and in knowing when it is the right time to go back and read what we have written. It may be when we are at a loss for what to write in the present—when we are experiencing a block. There may be something that has occurred that we have not fully processed or that we are having trouble facing. Going back to read our own words from that time can help us to recognize the sources of our blocks, confront them, and move past them. In his book *Embracing Contraries*, Peter Elbow suggests that it is essential to focus in on the parts of our writing that illuminate tensions: “It turns out that in your normal round of thinking and perceiving—especially if you are trying to write—you drift into conflicts and contradictions all the time. If you don’t seem to, it merely means you have trained yourself not to see them. Follow streams of thought, metaphors, and associations better—drift better—and look for disagreements rather than agreements.” By identifying these ‘disagreements’ when we look back and read what we have written, we may come to understand the causes of our blocks in a new way—from the outside—and then we have the opportunity to take ownership, to write them into the past, and to use our new insight to live in the present moment with peace of mind and clarity.

When taking on the self-reflective journaling piece of my synthesis project, I had the unique benefit of being able to read journals I had kept in my younger years to help me rediscover my writer's voice. Going into the past can provide an opportunity to recall lessons you learned but may have forgotten along the way. Sometimes wisdom does not stick. Sometimes we may know things only halfway, and after some time passes, what we halfway knew becomes lost. I had journaled consistently from when I was a young teenager up until about five years ago and still have access to everything I wrote, so I took on the task of going into the past and reading it all, looking for an answer to a question I was not quite sure how to articulate yet. By doing so I began learning lessons from my past self; even a decade ago my mission was much the same as it is now: to grow, to move beyond. I have been able to see how writing helped me during those years in the short-term by providing an outlet to express myself; I was often able to experience joy, peace, and a sense of freedom by writing out my truths, documenting my inner experience, and living in tune with my inner world. I also have gained insight into how journaling over the years helped shape me in the long-term as a person who has the capacity for deep self-awareness and understanding. When I stopped journaling as a consistent practice, no longer having that outlet caused me to lose touch with my inner self—going into my past has been a way to reestablish a relationship with myself. I wrote the following in a journal entry a little over a year ago, when I was still in a state of resistance but was becoming anxious to break through it:

i've been speechless for a long time and i'm still speechless.

something feels different, i feel different, i feel like

you can run, but you can't hide, and the past caught up to me. i used to talk to myself, but we don't talk anymore, not about anything real. i don't talk to anyone about real things; i don't even think real things anymore. i became so afraid, or maybe i was just ashamed,

there are certain lines of certain songs that will always stick with me, “you’ve left me with nothing but i’ve worked with less⁶,” and you didn’t leave me with nothing, you left me with so much, actually, but you left me with it alone and maybe that is worse. there is nothing to rebuild; the walls are built, the windows don’t open, the rooms echo with the sound of your absence. this doesn’t feel right anymore: i don’t like reading my thoughts, i don’t like knowing the things i already know. i am not sure where to go, mentally or physically, from here. my mind pulls me in a million directions. i have never felt so disconnected from myself.

Having access to the troubled words I wrote gave me the power to look back upon my experience from the outside and take ownership of it. I was ready to move forward in the present, but I was only able to do so fully by looking back and understanding the blocked state I had been in and the feelings accompanying it. Haemin Sunim says in *Love of Imperfect Things*, “What distresses us is less the circumstances we find ourselves in and more the energy we expend in resisting them. Once we actually do the work, we are often surprised that it was not as hard as we imagined it to be. But when we resist, we become preoccupied by an endless cycle of negative thoughts, and in turn feel harried and stressed.”⁷ When I finally broke through my resistance and embraced the work of self-examination toward self-acceptance, the negative emotions began melting away.

This practice of self-examination may sound a lot like what takes place in therapy, and often psychologists suggest keeping a journal in conjunction with attending therapy sessions as part of a patient’s healing process. I believe that for some people self-reflective journaling can even stand in place of therapy, as it may provide the outlet necessary to understand one’s past and use that knowledge to work on oneself in the present. In an article titled “Uses and Benefits of Journal Writing,” Roger Hiemstra cites the perspective of a psychologist on the value of journaling: “As early as 1965, psychologist Ira Progoff and his colleagues began seeing the value

⁶ A line from a song by musician Ani DiFranco, titled “Dilate.”

⁷ Sunim, 2016.

of personal journals in enhancing growth and learning. Progoff believes what he called an ‘intensive journal process’ could ‘draw each person’s life toward wholeness at its own tempo It systematically evokes and strengthens the inner capacities of persons by working from a non-medical vantage point and proceeding without analytic or diagnostic categories.’ (Progoff, 1975).”⁸ Progoff suggests that journaling gives people power over their own healing and growth while avoiding the diagnoses and prescriptive labels that often come along with formal therapy. There were times when I was younger during which I considered giving therapy a try, but I was able to get through my lowest times without it, and I attribute that in large part to my journaling practice. I was already taking on a form of self-directed therapy without realizing it.

If we can understand the whole of the emotions and thoughts accompanying our experience, as uncomfortable with them as we may initially be, we may begin to move beyond them. This is part of the practice of ‘letting go,’ which is only made possible when we confront the personal truths we may want least to confront in the given moment. There are layers of letting go, and the first unfolds as we embrace acceptance of self. We can accomplish this self-acceptance through journaling, but the intention is not to rid ourselves of negative or difficult emotions—instead, it is to accept ourselves for feeling them so that we can feel at peace and move beyond. Sunim asks, “[W]hat should we do if we want to let something go?” and answers by saying:

“[A]ccept ourselves just as we are. If we accept the struggling self, our state of mind will soon undergo a change. . . . When we regard our difficult emotions as a problem, and try to overcome them, we only struggle more. In contrast, when we accept them, strangely enough our mind stops struggling, and . . . it becomes possible to leave our emotions behind and look at them warmly from the outside. Rather than trying to change or control difficult emotions from the inside, allow them to be there, and your mind will rest. When

⁸ Hiemstra, 2001.

this happens, you can more easily detach yourself and look at your emotions calmly, as though they belong to someone else.”⁹”

Journaling allows us to detach in a unique way; we begin as writer, and we release what we have to say onto the page. But then, once that release is complete, we can look back on the words that came out and use them as a tool for understanding and accepting. The on-page version of you may have been consumed by negative thinking, but off-page you can observe this thinking, accept that it is a valid part of your experience, learn the lesson inherent in that experience, and move forward. I see myself as two separate people on and off the page, trying to understand each other, to be more in sync, to become almost one—but not quite. Because to gain anything from self-reflection, we must be able to see ourselves from the outside, to maintain a level of objectivity, to go back and learn from ourselves, to take our own advice, and most of all to have positive intentions for ourselves and remain cognizant of them.

In his book *The Power of Now*, Eckart Tolle talks about the practice of ‘surrendering’ to one’s reality: “It is the quality of your consciousness at this moment that is the main determinant of what kind of future you will experience, so to surrender is the most important thing you can do to bring about positive change. Any action you take is secondary. No truly positive action can arise out of an unsurrendered state of consciousness.”¹⁰ We sometimes struggle to surrender in this way, but journaling is a way to actively practice surrendering by examining ourselves deeply to get to the full truth of our thoughts and experiences. The more our on-page and off-page identities understand each other and merge toward almost-oneness, the more power we will feel over turning our intentions into reality. Sunim offers further insight into the benefit of surrendering—of observing the past and accepting it as an outsider looking in: “Your life is

⁹ Sunim, 2016.

¹⁰ Tolle, 2007.

difficult not because the past is holding you back, but because you keep thinking about the past and lingering there. Rather than haggling with your past, let it be, so that it can flow like a river. Your true self is not the river of memory but the one who stands beside the river, quietly observing its flow.¹¹” As Sunim says, your true self is not reflected in the river of memory that flows through the pages of your journal; your true self is the observer of the pages. Once we understand that we can visit the river because we are not the river, we may begin paying attention to what the rivers of our lives reveal to us; we may learn the truth of ourselves and start envisioning a path for growing past the parts of our truth that we are unsatisfied with.

V. Releasing Toward Growth

Sometimes self-reflective journaling is simply a practice of releasing: On certain days I write from frustrations or letdowns or dissatisfaction, and the act of writing it out is half the battle of not feeling the negativity anymore. It is one thing to feel unhappy, but when we write out the truth of our unhappiness, suddenly it is a thing that exists outside of us, and it loses much of its power as it is written into the past. It is especially important to recognize that outside forces are not to blame for the way we feel. We can write about all the things that have happened and are happening, but we must not lose sight of the fact that we are in control of how we react to those outside forces. We can use self-reflection to reclaim or hold on to that control. Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, describes the flawed thinking of a fixed mindset and the benefit of developing a growth mindset:

“Many people with the fixed mindset think the *world* needs to change, not them. They feel entitled to something better—a better job, house, or spouse. . . . When people drop the good-bad, strong-weak thinking that grows out of the fixed mindset, they’re better able to learn useful strategies that help with self-control. Every lapse doesn’t spell doom.

¹¹ Sunim, 2016.

It's like anything else in the growth mindset. It's a reminder that you're an unfinished human being and a clue to how to do it better next time."¹²

Journaling allows us to release all the flawed, fixed-mindset thinking that might happen out of habit and to practice developing a mindset focused on growth. We may write, *Here are the things that are happening, here are the reasons why those things might set me back, and here are the reasons I won't let that happen.* Sometimes we must release the negative thinking surrounding certain moments we cannot see outside of quite yet. We admit all the things we might never say out loud; we blame other people; we say the ugly truth of the way we are feeling and thinking in the moment. But writing it out allows us to see that it does not define us: It is momentary, and by allowing it to be written we make it OK to be imperfect, to have counterproductive thoughts, and to take steps backwards. Once we get it all down—once the release is done—we can forgive ourselves and refocus our energy toward exercising the control we have over our own perception and actions.

In *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, Peter Elbow talks about this practice of treating a diary as a place to have conversations with oneself:

“A principle value of language . . . is that it permits you to *distance* yourself from your own perceptions, feelings, and thoughts.

Try, then, to write words on paper so as to permit an interaction between you and not-you. You are building someone to talk to. This means two stages: first put out words on paper as freely as possible, trying to be so fully involved that you don't even think about it and don't experience any gap between you and the words: just talk onto the paper. But then, in the second stage, stand back and make as large a gap as you can between you and the words: set them aside and then pick them up and try to read them as though they came out of someone else. Learn to interact with them, react to them. Learn to let them produce a new reaction or response in you.

One of the functions of a diary is to create interaction between you and the symbols on paper. If you have strong feelings and then write them down freely, it gives you on the one hand some distance and control, but on the other hand it often makes you feel those feelings *more*. For you can often allow yourself to feel something more if you are not so

¹² Dweck, 2016.

helpless and lost in the middle of it. So the writing helps you feel the feeling and then go on to feel the next feelings. Not be stuck.”¹³

The practice Elbow describes is a sort of critical thinking about the self; it is a practice of examining one’s thinking to come to a greater understanding of self and ultimately to exercise control over one’s own thinking and the path forward. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, founders of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, describe in an article on their website titled “Becoming a Critic of Your Thinking” the difference between ‘good quality’ and ‘poor quality’ thinking. They say, “[T]o maximize the quality of your thinking, you must learn how to become an effective ‘critic’ of your thinking. And to become an effective critic of your thinking, you have to make learning about thinking a priority.”¹⁴ While ‘poor quality’ thinking is, as Paul and Elder say, “vague, muddled, inconsistent, inaccurate, illogical, or superficial,” thinking of a higher quality puts individuals in charge of testing their thinking, enables them to identify problems in their thinking and consciously work through them, and strengthens the ability to articulate their thinking processes. And as Elbow explains, self-reflective writing is a way to practice critical thinking about the self through self-dialogue. This distancing of oneself from what is written on the page calls to mind the separate on-page and off-page identities I earlier described. Once we have written freely all that is coming up from within, we can take a step back and examine our words as if someone else wrote them, and we can begin to practice good-quality thinking as we approach our journaling practice metacognitively.

In her book *Writing Your Authentic Self*, Lois Guarino addresses the idea of using a journal as a way of communicating with oneself and alludes to the many pieces of ‘self’ that journaling enables us to access: “[A] journal is an inward journey, a record of internal life . . . It

¹³ Elbow, 1986.

¹⁴ Paul and Elder, 2012.

is a place where you can go one on one with your mind, where you can commune with rarely explored parts of yourself and where those parts can answer back. What are those other parts? Your intuition, your alter ego, your subconscious, and your spirit. We all have these answering voices . . . and through journal writing, we can access them.”¹⁵ One particular strategy I use to release these parts of myself and distance myself enough to communicate with them is to make what I call a ‘truth list.’ Whether it comes out as a numbered list or simply lines of text structured in list format, writing your thoughts as if they are items ‘to do’ creates a sense of urgency. I tend to create these lists when I am feeling something difficult or having negative thoughts that I do not yet fully understand. Even if I am feeling resistant toward writing them out, or *especially* if I am feeling resistant, I force myself to sit down and write the things that are resonating as true for me in the moment. They may start out as more obvious statements, but eventually I move toward writing my deeper-level thoughts and emotions. I continue pushing deeper, trying to understand better the things that are coming up and what they are trying to tell me. I communicate with myself through these lists, each item bringing to the surface a deeper awareness of my own experience.

By the end of writing a truth list, I usually come to a new understanding of myself and the difficulty I had previously felt. It may not bring to light all the solutions, but it draws attention to where the problems lie, and by examining what I am writing along the way, I am able to distance myself from the problems, accept them as part of my current reality, and envision a way through the problems rather than around them. In the following truth list of mine,

¹⁵ Guarino, 1999.

I sat down to write with intentions to practice mindfulness during a time when I was having difficulty calming my thoughts, especially thoughts about my past. I wrote:

1. *today i got out of bed.*
2. *today i got out of bed like someone, somewhere, was waiting for me.*
3. *now i'm here alone in a crowd. i don't like crowds, but when i'm alone in them the noise is more than just noise. life sounds like this.*
4. *this room is one of my favorite places. everything is brown and green, like outside, but inside, and with coffee.*
5. *today i ordered crumb cake just to look at it. just to feel the sensation of reward.*
6. *sometimes the past taps my shoulder until i pay attention to what it has to say. the last three days it was tapping; i kept swatting it away,*
7. *today in the car i let it be. i let it ride with me. the past will sometimes visit like an old friend, because i choose not to make it my enemy.*
8. *i notice how i fluctuate between now and then.*
9. *i visit the present the way the past visits me. sometimes i'm a guest in my own life, my own reality.*
10. *i notice myself blinking. i notice myself looking at the door, wondering who the next person to walk in will be.*
11. *she's wearing blue, royal, the brightest thing in here,*
12. *i notice how the room changes as people enter and leave. their energy has so much more power than they realize.*
13. *today i woke up feeling powerful, wanting to take my energy out and get to know her better.*
14. *here we are, breathing in sync, listening to the radio voices, the music snapping its fingers, one moment passing into the next.*

Writing this list was a way of centering myself. Though much of the items in the list functioned to bring my awareness to the present moment, which I had been struggling to do, I also took ownership of the reasons why I was struggling to be present. I wrote about my difficulty letting

go of the past, and the simple act of writing it enabled me to refocus my energy on the present. I went through the rest of the day feeling a sense of peace and forgiveness toward myself. In *Writing Your Authentic Self*, Guarino says, “You must develop a taste for truth-telling if your journal is to be effective. Half truths won’t work; neither will false assumptions. Only accuracy, sincerity, and integrity will do. After all, it takes honesty to reach understanding, and it is understanding that gives you the power to grow.”¹⁶ Once I embrace my truths, especially those that have been most difficult to face, I am able to accept them, work through them, grow from them, and eventually channel them into creative flow.

VI. Reflecting Toward Creativity

Reflection has the power to open us up, mentally, spiritually, and creatively, because it challenges us to access our deepest truths, to think them through, and to come to understand them—to bring them out so that they exist in the outside world and not just our internal world. And those truths are what art is made of. Artists, whether they make art out of paint or words or clay or fabric, are in touch with their innermost truths and channel them into creative practice. Julia Cameron, in her book *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, says, “in order to retrieve your creativity, you need to find it,”¹⁷ and offers the “morning pages,” a daily practice of “three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness,” as a way to find the creativity buried within. In essence, she is promoting a self-reflective practice to open up creative flow: the inner truths that come up in the uncensored, stream-of-consciousness morning writing potentially hold the keys to overcoming creative blocks and finding creative inspiration.

¹⁶ Guarino, 1999.

¹⁷ Cameron, 1992.

Natalie Goldberg, in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, offers wisdom along similar lines as Cameron’s thinking that writing without censoring oneself ignites creative flow. She says, “The ability to put something down—to tell how you feel about an old husband, an old shoe, or the memory of a cheese sandwich on a gray morning in Miami—that moment you can finally align how you feel inside with the words you write; at that moment you are free because you are not fighting those things inside. You have accepted them, become one with them.”¹⁸ As Goldberg says, the crucial thing is to get the words onto the page. By writing what is inside of us, we are in a way freeing ourselves by accepting and taking ownership of the stories of our lives. Self-reflection enables us to know our stories inside and out and, once we have mastered the stories of our past, to realize the control we have over our present and future stories. This mastery makes way for creative thriving: not only are we in control of how we tell our story, but we are in control of the story itself as we are simultaneously living it and writing it.

Many well-known creative people have taken on a practice of self-reflection alongside their creative work. One of them, poet Mary Oliver, begins her collection of self-reflective essays *Upstream* by recollecting a time before she was in touch with her deeper self and refers to the self-reflective writing of another creative person, William Wordsworth. She says:

“In the beginning I was so young and such a stranger to myself I hardly existed. I had to go out into the world and see it and hear it and react to it, before I knew at all who I was, what I was, what I wanted to be. [William] Wordsworth studied himself and found the subject astonishing. Actually what he studied was his relationship to the harmonies and also the discords of the natural world. That’s what created the excitement.”¹⁹

Oliver cites Wordsworth as someone who practiced self-study, and Daniel Robinson, in his book *Myself and Some Other Being: Wordsworth and the Life Writing*, examines deeply

¹⁸ Goldberg, 2010.

¹⁹ Oliver, 2016.

Wordsworth's "life writing" practice. Wordsworth speaks of "two consciousnesses" that call to mind the on-page and off-page identities that form and interact with each other when we develop a journaling practice. Robinson quotes Wordsworth: "A tranquillizing spirit presses now On my corporeal frame: so wide appears The vacancy between me and those days, Which yet have such self-presence in my mind That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself And of some other Being." Again we are presented with this idea of two selves, present and past self, communicating with one another. Robinson goes on to analyze the meaning behind Wordsworth's words:

"In these lines from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth explains the relationship between the remembered past and the active, creative present—that is, the life writing—as his experience of seeming to be 'two consciousnesses': 'Myself,' he writes, and 'some other Being.' This 'being' is basically a now-self seeking to define itself in relation to a then-self that does not really exist (perhaps never did). When he thinks back on his former self, he is struck by the distance between himself now and what he thinks is his past. The 'I' here consists of a double consciousness—only one that is identifiable as 'myself.' The 'other Being' is part memory, which, for Wordsworth, necessarily involves invention. The writing of *The Prelude* begins in the discovery of the 'two consciousnesses'—the remembered (and, therefore, partly imagined) past self and the present self writing that past self onto paper, fixing it into form. Writing *The Prelude* Wordsworth more fully explores his sense of himself and of his past self as 'some other Being.'"²⁰

Wordsworth treats his past as the past of another being entirely, reflecting upon his experience as an outsider and onlooker. Robinson goes on, "[W]hat made Wordsworth especially uneasy was the writing—that is, the thinking, the remembering, the ruminating that writing required of him. But unpleasant associations abutting him no doubt occasioned the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' that Wordsworth describes as being essential to the creation of verse." As evidenced through Wordsworth's *Prelude*, holding our past and the accompanying emotions at a

²⁰ Robinson, 2014.

distance has great potential to spark creative flow if we can lean into the discomfort that may arise.

Mary Oliver writes in a similar manner about the reliance of creative work on embracing whatever emotions may be brought up in self-reflection. Oliver says, “[T]he poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and in which to feel.” These words have rung true for me as I have used my self-reflective practice to find my creative voice again. Though the consciousness with which I look back upon previous journal writing is distinct from the consciousness through which the initial thoughts came to be, the ‘outsider’ consciousness recognizes the emotion in the initial writing and is able to feel it again, this time through a new lens. Creative work can be drawn out of this second round of emotion—emotion now accompanied by understanding and perspective. I experienced this process for myself as I journaled throughout the semester, revisited my older entries, and found inspiration to write creatively. The following is a poem that I never would have written had I not been journaling my way toward understanding my creative resistance.

Because

*maybe i stopped writing because how do you make words out of emptiness?
there were no reasons left. every day was fog
and the low murmur of self-fulfilling prophecy.
something like knowing better but doing it anyway; something like insanity, but
insanity wearing a dress and keeping her chin up and staring, longingly, at anyone.
devotion and dependency are
kissing cousins, i know the story well,
blame is a thing you can
break apart in your hands
to place the pieces everywhere but where they belong. once
i believed that bodies could touch
without breathing in parts
of each other; i believed this because lies are easier
than realities, sometimes. we walked
in circles and talked in circles and forgiveness is a thing
you can form with your hands from thin air and*

*package up like a gift, as if the recipient wanted it.
he didn't, but the story goes like this:
time has a mind of its own. energy flows
and spits out tomorrows. every tomorrow looks the same for a while
and there is nothing to say about it. some tomorrows are for waiting
without knowing what you are waiting for. when it shows up,
though, all of a sudden you find language again.
there are words for this and that and everything, words for
where you've been. the reasons why. the reasons without any reason. and then
there are words for what comes after.*

The start of this poem came to me as I was thinking of nothing in particular; the first few lines wrote themselves into my head, and I knew I had to write them down because they were the beginning of something. I kept writing and discovered that this was a poem about the experiences that had led to my creative resistance and kept me from writing for a very long time. Once upon a time I believed a lie even though somewhere deep inside I knew I was believing not out of trust but out of desperation; I was unable to let go of a person who deep down I knew did not care enough about me to even be faithful. I found out the truth for certain two years later and never wanted to speak or write another word again. I was exhausted by myself, by my inability to be angry enough, by all the things I might say to justify forgiveness. I did not want to hear it.

I read about this time in my life when I was reading my old journal entries from the year 2014. I had almost forgotten these things ever happened. If you are going to forgive unforgivable acts, you almost have to erase them from your memory. So I almost did. But the pain lingered—mostly the anger toward myself lingered. By reading about this difficult time and through the rediscovered practice of self-reflection, I was able to confront all these emotions and turn them into a poem. Reflection opened up the possibility of owning something painful and turning it into art rather than hiding it away as an ugly part of the past. In *Embracing Contraries*, Elbow proclaims that to move toward 'wholeness' we must accept all parts of ourselves: "An inevitable

though often ignored dimension of the quest for ‘wholeness’ is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of. That is why the poet says, ‘ask me my mistakes I have made.’”²¹ During the years I had stopped writing, I was failing to confront the whole of myself and unwilling at the time to face my mistakes. Through self-reflection I have learned to tell the truth of those mistakes and channel them not into negative energy but into creative energy. I am once again a poet.

VII. The Importance of Setting and Reviewing Intentions

Some may argue that if reflective journaling is not approached carefully, it can have negative effects and hold one back rather than aiding the growth process. Steven Stosny, in his article “The Good and the Bad of Journaling,” lists potential negative effects of writing about oneself: “[It m]akes you live too much in your head; makes you a passive observer of your life; makes you self-obsessed; becomes a vehicle of blame instead of solutions; [and] wallows in negative things that have happened to you.”²² In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker J. Palmer addresses concerns that self-reflection can become a practice driven by ego:

“Some may say that this embrace is narcissistic, an obsession with self at the expense of others, but that is not how I experience it. When I ignored my truth on behalf of a distorted ego or ethic, I led a false life that caused others pain—for which I can only ask forgiveness. When I started attending to my own truth, more of that truth became available in my work and relationships. I now know that anything one can do on behalf of true self is done ultimately in the service of others.”

As Parker says, when self-reflection is approached as a journey toward one’s inner truth, a transformation may begin to take place that starts from within and then reflects outward. When we listen to our truths, come to understand ourselves, embrace the things that are difficult, and find a sense of peace in accepting the whole of ourselves and our lives, we may find it easier to

²¹ Elbow, 1986.

²² Stosny, 2013.

accept others and react to the world around us in a kinder, gentler way. Building an understanding of ourselves seems to help us to understand others better as well and to feel deeper empathy.

Once we have accepted our past self and the experiences that led us to be who we are in the present moment, we can begin thinking about our ideal, future self. I believe articulating in your journal what your ideal self looks like can help you stay on a guided path toward aligning with that ideal, even if your ideal changes along the way. At the start of my synthesis project I defined my ideal self as someone who embodies confidence and takes on roles of leadership effortlessly. As my project has progressed and my concept of personal growth has taken a more defined shape, those long-term goals have remained important to me but have been joined by a perhaps even stronger desire to become more present and mindful and to work toward peace within. Alongside these longer-term goals for personal growth, I identified the shorter-term goals of overcoming my creative resistance and finding my way back to creative flow. It is by articulating these goals, long-term and short-term, in my journal writing that I have been able to document and evaluate the actions I have been taking and the thought processes that have been working toward or against my goals. Through journaling I can keep myself in check, observe my progress, own my challenges, and maintain a focus and commitment that I otherwise may not be able to sustain.

It is important not only to set intentions for your journaling practice but to review those intentions periodically to evaluate whether you are meeting them. Just as we may declare resolutions for a new year ahead and forget them in a few weeks' time, we may set intentions at the beginning of our journaling practice and lose sight of them as we become absorbed in the emotions and thoughts coming up for us. In my own journal writing, I sometimes find myself

being my own worst critic and making self-deprecating statements to make light of my experiences. One of my intentions when taking on self-reflection was to work toward greater confidence in myself, so I must continually remind myself of that goal and identify patterns of thinking and writing that are counterintuitive to reaching my vision of ideal self.

We may also involve others in our self-reflective journey to hold us accountable for remaining true to our intentions. You might let the people close to you in on what you are doing through your journaling practice and what you are hoping to accomplish, asking for their support along the way and their honesty if they notice the intentions and the reality are not aligning. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer says, “[I]nner work, though it is a deeply *personal* matter, is not necessarily a *private* matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct.²³” Asking others, whether in a formal community setting such as a support group, or informally within our close relationships, to be a part of our self-discovery and growth may provide an extra safeguard against getting lost in the work we are doing. It may not always be easy to work our way toward our inner truth, but leaning on others for support may give us the strength we need to remember our intentions and keeping pushing on.

VIII. Flexible Discipline

In a conversation with Luanne Witkowski, a professor of Creative Thinking at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Luanne remarked that “discipline is extremely freeing when you surrender to it” and advocated a “continual doing of it.”²⁴ I have found that

²³ Palmer, 2000.

²⁴ Witkowski, 2019.

maintaining my self-reflective writing practice even when I do not feel an immediate need or desire to write is, as Luanne says, freeing—it is something that is uniquely mine and that I can use to fill whatever need I have at the time or to fill no need at all and to simply write myself into a state of flow. Luanne continued, “just the act of doing it is a meditation in itself,” and often the practice of journaling moves me toward a state of peace by releasing the commotion of thoughts and emotions that accumulate along the way of living.

Natalie Goldberg, in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, addresses the difficulty we sometimes face in getting words onto the page:

“The problem is we think we exist. We think our words are permanent and solid and stamp us forever. That’s not true. We write in the moment. Sometimes when I read poems at a reading to strangers, I realize they think those poems are about me. They are not me, even if I speak the ‘I’ person. They were my thoughts and my hands and the space and the emotions at that time of writing. Watch yourself. Every minute we change. It is a great opportunity. At any point, we can step out of our frozen selves and our ideas and begin fresh. That is how writing is. Instead of freezing us, it frees us.”²⁵

As Goldberg says, we may at times feel paralyzed by the perceived permanence of our written words. When we perceive what we write as defining us in an irreversible way, a fear may arise that what we write must meet a certain standard of excellence, accuracy, or profundity. Once we begin to see that what we write only reflects what we feel or think in the present moment—that our truth is constantly shifting, the river of time is ever-flowing, and our past words are the words of a past self, no longer in existence—we are free to approach creative practice without inhibitions or fears. We are not our thoughts and not our words; we are the consciousness ever-present, ever-observing.

²⁵ Goldberg, 2010.

A reflective journal may in this way become an extension of self—a second mind with which to practice higher-level and more focused and intentioned thinking. But growth at a psychological and spiritual level is a deeply personal process and perhaps should not be guided or disciplined too stringently. I believe there is a benefit in writing without a forced structure: Write when thoughts are flowing, and stop when they are not flowing anymore. Skip a day if you need to. Read instead of writing—read your own words or other people’s words—or, lose yourself in moments, live them fully and wholeheartedly, and do not write about them until you are ready to turn them into memories. Discipline is important, but following the flow of your own life is also important. You cannot force a story out of each day—some days are for escaping the stories you usually tell yourself, some days are for feeling without putting words to the feelings yet, and then there are days for writing. Maybe every day for you will be a writing day. Maybe some days you will write a few lines, and maybe some days you won’t stop until you’ve got a dozen pages. Listen to yourself; build a friendship with yourself. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer says: “[T]he words we speak often contain counsel we are trying to give ourselves. . . . At those moments, we need to listen to what our lives are saying and take notes on it, lest we forget our own truth or deny that we ever heard it.”²⁶ We must pay attention to the voice within, whether it is calling for immediate strides toward change or calling for rest and self-care so that we can renew our energy and reinvigorate our passion for the work we are doing.

Peter M. Senge describes in his book *The Fifth Discipline* a principle he calls ‘creative tension,’ which is what seems to exist in the space between where we are and where we want our discipline to take us. He writes, “The gap between vision and current reality is also a source of energy. If there were no gap, there would be no need for any action to move towards the vision.

²⁶ Palmer, 2000.

We call this gap creative tension.”²⁷ Indeed, in self-reflective practice, we must lean into the gap between present self and ideal self to drive our energy toward our vision. That energy is what will keep our discipline going and what will carry us through our stagnant moments and lulls in motivation. As long as there is tension between who we are and who we want to be, we must continue our practice. And if we can surrender to a discipline flexible enough for us to listen to and nurture our needs and desires along the way, we have unlimited potential to sustain our practice and uphold the commitments we have made to ourselves.

IX. Reflection on Reflecting: Where I've Come, Where I'm Going

At the beginning of the semester, when I first started journaling again, I had very vague ideas about what direction I wanted my project to take, or what I was even working toward. I was motivated by struggles with self-esteem to look inward, and I thought my project would be focused on working toward higher confidence in myself and helping others to do the same somehow. It was through my journaling practice that I was able to recognize that building self-esteem was only one element of a much larger vision I would come to have for my personal growth. Early in the semester, while I was in the midst of reading words I had written over years past and confronting my resistance, I wrote a journal entry expressing my uncertainty about my story and about my intentions moving forward:

yesterday i was talking about intention—how writing with the intention of growth is necessary for growth. there is no such intention here, not yet. i am just explaining to myself the things i need to understand before i can begin. this might be a prelude, and i am most comfortable in prelude. i used to write stories with beginnings and endings and no actual story. that feels like such a metaphor, but i don't live in metaphors anymore, remember? it is not 2005, it is 2019, and as i write this i realize i still have the same writer's voice i did then, but i can use it to say so much more now. i just have to figure

²⁷ Senge, 2002.

out what i am trying to say, because right now i'm not sure—I have no definitions—there are too many possibilities.

At this early point in my journey, I was barely scratching the surface. I was still working to know myself enough to know what my intentions for growth would be. I had to remember parts of my past that I had buried and face truths about myself that had been so much easier not to see. With each entry I grew a deeper understanding of myself, and the self I wanted to be, by writing my way through the noise in my mind, accepting the noise for what it was, and moving into the quiet. My project took shape as my self-reflective practice opened the doors to creativity that I had unknowingly locked myself out of by failing to look within.

As my time in the CCT program comes to a close, I feel called to share with others the greatest lesson I have learned: that self-reflective practice can transform us in whatever ways we need transforming, if we approach it with patience and thoughtful intentions, even if it takes some time to define those intentions. In *Writing Your Authentic Self*, Lois Guarino says, “A journal is a journey, your journey, and it can take you wherever you want to go. You don’t have to be a writer. You don’t have to fill your journal with literary efforts. You don’t even have to write in complete sentences. All you have to do is be willing to start and see where it leads because a journal, like a journey, is about movement.”²⁸ As Guarino’s words suggest, when journaling we are the navigators of our journey, and we draw the map as we go.

Guarino brings to light another important point: Written self-reflection is not the only way. Not everyone is a writer, and though there may be some specific benefits to keeping a written journal, some people seeking to take on a self-reflective practice may gravitate more toward voice or video journaling, sketch- or drawing-based journaling, or a practice focused

²⁸ Guarino, 1999.

more on meditation and mindfulness, where writing is not the main focus (though mindful writing may be incorporated as part of the practice). The method is not as important as the intention and the outcome.

For those struggling to find or retrieve their creative voice, self-reflection is a way to access our innermost truths, confront them, accept them, own them, and channel them into creative flow. As I think about how I will position myself as a leader and change-maker outside of the CCT program, I envision myself passing along to others the insight I have gained through my own process into how self-reflection can inspire personal growth on many levels and drive creative flow. Over the course of the semester I have been designing a plan to start a creative writing group that will promote self-reflection and mindfulness as part of the creative process and will function as a sort of ‘support’ group for those struggling to maintain a consistent creative discipline. I plan to start my writing group upon completion of my courses in the CCT program in the fall; in the meantime, I have joined an existing creative writing group to begin testing out my ideas, to gain insight into how writing groups run and what challenges they may face, and to keep my momentum toward my own writing goals.

Though we may journal to work toward achieving personal goals, I believe journaling may function best when it is embraced as a lifelong practice and not just as a means to an end. Even once we have achieved specific goals, we continue forward, and new goals emerge. The goal that emerged as most immediate for me as I went deeper into self-discovery was to uncover my creative voice and find my way back to creative flow. Succeeding in this goal does not mean that my journaling has served its purpose and can be abandoned; on the contrary, I must continue coming to know myself so that my creative work can continue to thrive. Suzanne Clark, in her

Critical and Creative Thinking capstone paper titled “Building and Sustaining Connectedness to One’s Musical Creativity and Spirit,” writes:

“By understanding the creative system in relation to the inner self, artists [can] develop strategies to maintain healthy engagement in their work. If artists are better prepared to cope with this aspect of creativity or to anticipate their own needs throughout their personal process, they will be better able to sustain a deeper creativity that more directly reflects their own voice. . . . Understanding and supporting the link to your inner world will enhance your ability to nurture your own creative spark. Developing a more complete view of your engagement in your own work will strengthen your ability to sustain your work.”²⁹

As Clark’s insights from her own process suggest, through continued learning about ourselves (and ourselves in relation to the world around us), we discover new ways in which we can strive toward our ideals and toward creative success. Our concept of personal growth develops as we develop. It is a continual process; we may feel ourselves falling into alignment with our ideal self, but just as we do, our image of ideal self may shift or expand to an even greater ideal. As long as we are on a growth path, the work will continue. I know the work of self-reflection has only just begun for me, and as I look ahead to life after graduating from the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I see self-reflection as an integral part of my continued growth and movement toward embracing my truth, nurturing my creativity, and sharing my experiences with others so that we may accompany each other on this journey.

²⁹ Clark, 2002.

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