

My Story, Our Story, God's Story:
Storytelling as a Means of Faith Formation
and Community-Building in College Students

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By Jenny Frazier Call
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Dedication

This work is dedicated with thanks and love to the many who made it possible, but in particular,

-To John, my love—our story is my favorite.

-To my kids, Brady and Maryn, who changed my story for the better. I can't wait to see what the next chapter brings for you and for our family.

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Chapter 1: Where the Story Begins

(Context and Problem)

“First, each one of us has the capability (some would say the responsibility), if only we are willing to make the choice, to craft our own stories of meaning, no matter how rebellious and heretical they may seem to others. Second, each of us is potentially a creative artist because, in the absence of any objective, context-independent truth, it is up to us to invent new ways of seeing, understanding, and transforming our worlds. We are not passive observers; we are active agents in the creation of our realities. Each of us is on a journey, individually or collectively, to create meaning.”¹

Perhaps it’s the commencement of a new academic year or turning forty, but lately I have found myself in a reflective frame of mind. Sitting in my office, I can choose between two different views as I gaze thoughtfully off into space. Beyond my computer screen, the view outside my window captures a garden whose tranquil beauty transforms with the seasons. If I swivel my chair to the right, my focus narrows on the doorway and old armchair where students sit as they seek out pastoral care.

That armchair, worn and faded, is a holy place, a holder of sacred stories told through fear and doubt, tears and laughter. I have listened to heartbreaking tales of loss and grief, and have celebrated new jobs, engagements, and spiritual epiphanies. I have felt God’s presence in the quiet in-between phases as students have struggled to find their way through uncertainty with hopeful wonder.

I sat in that chair eighteen years ago as I began discerning my call to ministry. I am profoundly grateful for the sacred space and the holy listening my campus minister

¹ Nash, Robert and Michele C. Murray. *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 43.

offered as I strained to understand the still small voice of God whispering to my heart a calling my mind had never considered. Seven years into my ministry as university chaplain at Hollins University, I have become that guide for others on their journey of discernment. As the seasons have passed outside the window and the students have cycled in and out of my office, I have come full circle. Now I sit in discernment again, alongside my students, considering the next step of my vocational path. When I become distracted by the changes outside my window, dismayed at the time that passes all too quickly, or wonder if the grass is greener in other gardens, I am drawn back to the present by the ministry that takes place in that holy armchair through reflection, prayer, and shared stories.

My D.Min. studies and this thesis were inspired in part by discernment conversations I had with students as I realized how providing the space for reflection and contemplation allowed our shared stories to be transformative. In verbalizing their stories, sometimes for the first time, students frequently would be surprised by insights as they were speaking. They began to recognize their values and motivations from their experiences, developing a greater sense of their identity. When I asked theological questions about where students found God and themes of faith throughout their journey, their narratives helped to define their emerging theology. As I related my own stories, relationships of trust were built, as my students and I grew in empathy and connection through the commonalities of our experiences. This led me to research the power of story, and made me curious about how I could use narrative techniques more intentionally to help college students with identity development, faith formation, and building community with others.

We are our stories, and they begin from before we are born; the foreword being the chapters written by those that nurture us into being. Our stories do not stand alone, but become a part of the larger story of the communities that form us, even as the communities' stories become part of our own. For people of faith, the stories we share are crucial to our faith formation as we place our experiences in the context of the narratives of our ancestors in the faith. The consolations and desolations of our great cloud of witnesses have literally written the book on how we begin to approach and follow God. They are part of our own genesis story, answering the questions about where we have come from and why, and offering a guiding vision for where we are heading.

There is something transcendent about the words "once upon a time." Whether they carry us back to our childhood or offer us an escape from an increasingly complex world, stories immerse us in an alternative world in which we can observe and learn. Telling stories is more than pure fantasy or a factual accounting of events; it is how we make meaning of our lives. As we engage in written or spoken stories, we reflect on our own experiences to find our place and purpose in the world. The process of narrating our life, by creating order and making meaning of our experience, is the way we construct our identity.

As I write these words in my favorite coffee shop, I can't help but overhear a woman in her 50s having a conversation with the 5-year-old daughter of a friend. Cuddled together up in an armchair in front of a fireplace, the woman is asking the little girl the story of her unconventional name, Evvie. The child tells about the relative she was named for and how she got her nickname, Ebbie, from a younger sister who can't

pronounce “Evvie”. I think about how my own children ask about the origin of their names, even though we have told the stories countless times. I reminisce to when we were anticipating these new lives and wondered who our babies would be. Would they grow into their names and their meanings? As my children, Brady (“spirited one”) and Maryn (“of the sea”), listen again and again to the familiar stories, they are seeking belonging that will help them find their place within our family and their purpose within the world.

How we tell our stories, which stories we choose to tell, and which we decide to leave out reflect our view of the world, our roles within it, and our sense of our own agency. This process is a necessary step in our identity development, which generally begins in early adolescence and gains urgency during young adulthood. I began formulating my story in college, compiling fragments of my experiences into a more coherent account that I could share with the strangers who were becoming my community. Every time I answered the question, “Where are you from?”, I was proclaiming my roots while also moving farther away as I began to establish my own separate identity.

My Story

As I was growing up, my unexamined goal had been to assimilate my story into the larger communal story of my family or my church. It was not desirable to stand out, and my conservative evangelical faith taught me to conform to their rules and norms and to their fundamentalist interpretation of biblical truth. Leaving my small southwestern Virginia town for college was one of the boldest moves I had ever made. I was not

starting at the community college or attending nearby Virginia Tech or Radford like my high school classmates, but driving four hours to Williamsburg to attend my dream school, The College of William and Mary. I was the first in my family and my church to attend college. Church had been my second home and family growing up, and my spiritual leaders questioned my decision to leave the familiar. Wasn't what I had learned and gained there enough for me? There were concerns that the secular environment would change me, and the professors would be out to dismantle my faith. My church family was right in part; the experience did change me, and it greatly impacted my faith. As they feared, college did cause me to question what I believed by removing some of the barriers to and limitations of what I had known. Yet it expanded rather than diminished my faith. Interacting with students of different backgrounds, beliefs, and faiths both inside and outside of the classroom broadened my own nascent faith. I was able to see more of the vast mystery of God, a God that could not be confined in the black and white box I had constructed in my childhood. I experienced a boundless and colorful God who showed love and mercy to all people, not just those who looked and believed like me.

Sharing faith and life stories with college friends who were both very different and somewhat like me was freeing and transformative and led to my desire (and later calling) to work with college students. I understood the importance of having mentors to guide young adults through a time that is rife with uncertainty as they begin to differentiate, questioning all that is familiar in order to find their own way. Having the space to articulate and share stories is for college students, as it was for me, vital to understanding identity and purpose as we seek belonging within community.

The Setting

Likewise, stories also shape the identities of the places that form us. At Hollins University where I serve as university chaplain, the most commonly touted story is about the closeness of our community. Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Roanoke, Virginia, Hollins was founded in 1842 as Valley Union Seminary on the site of the former Botetourt Springs, a hot springs resort on 475 acres of land.² As the downtown area is a 20-minute drive away, the campus becomes its own insular community for our 700 undergraduate women and around 200 seasonal and mostly commuter co-ed graduate students. There is a joke about the “Hollins bubble” that students regret leaving when they graduate, realizing that we offer something unique in the sense of security of being in a place where women’s voices are valued and students are protected from the harsh realities of the outside world. It is a place to which parents feel comfortable sending their daughters, and it is known for the strong alumnae network that provides mentoring and often internship and career connections for students. These attributes are used in our marketing efforts to reach prospective students and they are the reasons given by many alumnae, current students, faculty, and staff when asked why they chose Hollins. We are proud of our low student to faculty ratio and our ability, because of our small size, to get to know students by name and adapt programs to fit an individual student’s needs and goals.

² From Institutional Study, pp. 8, 19.

Our mission statement emphasizes community (both our own and our initiatives for the greater surrounding community) and the values we promote such as civility, integrity, concern for others, equality, and social justice:

Hollins is an independent liberal arts university dedicated to academic excellence and humane values. Hollins University offers undergraduate liberal arts education for women, selected graduate programs for men and women, and community outreach initiatives. The Hollins curriculum and cocurricular programs prepare students for lives of active learning, fulfilling work, personal growth, achievement, and service to society.

The Hollins community sustains talented students engaged in challenging study, and productive scholars and artists devoted to teaching and to the advancement of knowledge. Experiential learning, study abroad, and internships enhance the academic program. The hallmarks of a Hollins education are creativity and effective self-expression, problem solving and critical thinking skills, and independent inquiry and the free exchange of ideas.

Hollins nurtures civility, integrity, and concern for others, encourages and values diversity and social justice, and affirms the equal worth of women and men. Our university motto, *Levavi Oculos*, calls us to leadership and service in accord with the Hollins values and traditions.³

The Problem

While many students affirm our sense of community and our adherence to our mission statement, several factors point to a growing disconnection. On a social level, we have experienced an increasing racial tension over the past few years as evidenced by student protests over microaggressions⁴ in the classroom and racist comments posted on social media. Additionally, campus events have had low turnouts as students prefer their personal space or connecting online rather than gathering in groups. Spiritual struggles

³ <http://www.hollins.edu/who-we-are/history/>, accessed 3/16/15.

⁴ Defined as unintentional insults or stereotyping based on a person's race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. An example given on our campus was a faculty member expecting a student of color to represent their entire race by explaining to the class how black people feel about a certain issue.

were evidenced in a swastika that was painted on a prominent campus landmark on Easter Sunday 2016, as well as students' complaints that we do not welcome open and respectful dialogue about faith allowing for differing viewpoints. In particular, students who have spoken up about their Christian faith have felt silenced and shut down by disparaging comments and stereotypes depicting them as ignorant, hateful, and closed-minded. On a personal level, students increasingly presented mental health issues that affected their functioning both inside and outside the classroom and demonstrated a lack of coping skills for stress, anxiety, and failure. Our culture of busyness created anxiety for all constituents of our campus life and prevented healthy opportunities for self-care and reflection.

This disconnection was exacerbated by students' reluctance to communicate face-to-face about the sources of their discontent and their unwillingness to assume accountability for enacting their own solutions. Instead of working through conflict together, students took to social media to complain about situations or call out one another, admonished the administration to "do something" to fix the tensions within our community, or withdrew (either socially or from the university itself). Students reported feeling "unsafe" because of the tensions on campus, and when pressed, they explained that it felt uncomfortable to talk about such charged issues such as racism or faith (therefore it was more of an emotional vulnerability than a fear of physical harm). They were worried about offending one another or were concerned that no one would respect their own feelings and experiences, particularly if they were contrary to the few louder voices that did speak up or the majority opinion. Consequently, there were assumptions instead of understandings, and our differences divided us instead of bringing us together

to learn from and with one another. The reluctance to engage across our differences further separated us from building the relational and engaged community that we espouse.

The university has undertaken numerous initiatives over the past couple of years to address the issues of our racial tension and disengagement as a community. Prompted by student activist protests, we have participated in listening sessions, group dialogues, and surveys. A consultant was called in, which led to diversity and inclusivity trainings as well as a new program called *Sustained Dialogue* that works to teach colleges how to respectfully engage in active listening and sharing across differences.⁵ A new position, special advisor on inclusivity and diversity, was added to the president's cabinet. I have been involved, as have others in my student affairs team, in creating programs to bring students together in discussion and community building, and I have collaborated with faculty, staff, students, and administration in creating a proposal for a well-being initiative that will guide the upcoming curriculum and strategic plan.

Throughout these efforts, though, I have been disheartened that our religious diversity has not been a part of the larger institutional discussions and interventions. Hollins' administration has spoken about our issues of diversity regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation, but when I asked if religious and spiritual diversity would be included in trainings and discussions, I was told that "It's not a problem we need to worry

⁵The Sustained Dialogue Institute (<http://sustaineddialogue.org>) consults with organizations and helps them to develop a plan to address the issues they identify within the system. At Hollins, we used the Sustained Dialogue process to create opportunities for us to dialogue about racial tension with faculty, staff, and students serving as trained moderators of these conversations. We had three sessions in fall 2016: one as an introduction to the process (which emphasizes setting ground rules, listening and responding respectfully, and staying on topic), one in response to public outcry over a student's hung Salem Witch Trial witch Halloween costume, and one to discuss reactions to the presidential election results.

about right now; the racial tension is our big issue.” But our students who are well-versed in the intersectionality of identity remind us that it involves the conflation of numerous factors including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status. While I understand the need to prioritize our strategies, religious faith also plays into the way we view and interact with our racial diversity. We cannot overlook spirituality as a vital part of our identity, particularly when addressing it could lead to the betterment of our community.

Religious faith has had a tenuous prominence on our campus throughout our history. Although we were founded by a Baptist minister, we have never had a religious affiliation. This was intentional to make the school welcoming for everyone, a rarity in a period when many American colleges were church-affiliated. Yet even so, there was a strong Christian tradition from the beginning. Early presidents and religion faculty served as chaplains, and religion courses and chapel attendance were required (the latter until 1970). Charles Lewis Cocke, credited as our founder (although he came later and rescued the college from near financial failure), helped to found a church across from campus, granting Hollins land for the effort. Enon Baptist Church and the school maintained a close relationship for many years, with several of Enon’s pastors serving as chaplains at Hollins, and the church being the site for early commencement ceremonies.⁶

Over the years, religious emphasis and identity has shifted. Former chaplain Alvord Beardslee wrote,

⁶ Institutional Study, 12-13.

“Up to 1936, the college catalogue described Hollins as ‘non-sectarian, but distinctly Christian in atmosphere and influence.’ In 1936, ‘distinctly’ was dropped, in 1944 ‘atmosphere’ vanished and in 1950, ‘Christian’. Now the college is ‘non-sectarian’.”⁷

As our current chapel was being built in the 1950s, students were already protesting mandatory chapel. When my predecessor left after a 24-year tenure (plus 4 years as an undergraduate student), the chaplain’s job description was re-written so that the chaplain would no longer have teaching responsibilities and would not be a faculty member, with the goal of separating the practice of religion from the academic study of religion.

Although there are vestiges of our Christian heritage such as prayers at convocation and graduation and the persistence of the chaplain role, some on our campus question and oppose any religious elements in academic functions. I struggle with what is acceptable given our identity as a private non-sectarian academic institution, and my own role as an interfaith chaplain ministering to the entire campus. As the only religious life staff, I have the responsibility of ensuring that all have the opportunity to practice their faith, a difficult task given our diversity and our limited resources. On a regular basis (sometimes within the same day), I receive complaints that either *all* that is offered through the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life is for Christian students...or that there is *nothing* offered for Christian students. Our traditional festival of lessons and carols service for Advent is the latest event to come under scrutiny. Even though there are observances for holy days of the other major religions represented on our campus, the White Gift Service, as a Hollins tradition, is the largest gathering and requires the choir’s

⁷ Alvord Beardslee, “Time for Chapel”. *Hollins Alumnae Bulletin*, Spring 1961, p. 8 (as quoted in *Institutional Study*, p. 14).

participation (as a requirement for their class grade) in a distinctly Christian worship service regardless of their own personal beliefs. While these issues deserve thoughtful consideration in our changing religious landscape (both at Hollins and on a national level), particularly regarding our mission as a secular institution, they have provoked some anxiety and division on our campus.

There are some who believe that we have drifted too far away from our religious connections and that Christians on our campus have been forced into being a silent majority, not allowed to practice or speak of their faith openly without derision or being labeled as narrow-minded. In one of my conversations with a student, she suggested that all our problems would be solved if we as a campus would only “turn back to God.” While my theology and methodology differ, I did begin to reflect on the spiritual nature of our issues and what my role as chaplain should be. Thus, I have come to view our symptoms of disconnection as a spiritual issue.

I define spirituality as our connection to the most integral part of ourselves, our soul; our connection to something greater outside ourselves (whether that be God, the Divine, the Holy Other, or whatever mystery inspires our sense of awe and wonder); and our connection to the people and world that surrounds us. Our struggles with feeling disconnected can be of an intrapersonal nature (mental health struggles or a loss of purpose and meaning), an interpersonal issue (lack of community or conflict with others), or a crisis of faith (where one is seeking but not finding transcendence).

There is untapped potential for guiding students to consider their spirituality as a means of connecting beyond our differences. Spirituality can be a helpful though often

overlooked component of holistic well-being and overall growth and development, particularly as many of our students struggle with an intrapersonal sense of disconnection. With students' escalating mental health struggles evidenced in the increased utilization of our health and counseling staff and the chaplain as pastoral counselor, the need for coping skills to deal with the stress and anxiety is crucial. Through my work, I have witnessed how spiritual practices can be a source of resilience and stress relief for students. Part of my job as the spiritual leader on campus is to help teach these skills and to be a resource for the well-being of our students through raising awareness of spiritual health needs.

During the Institutional Study I completed for the second residency of the D.Min. program, I was inspired by the narrative section, in which I interviewed current students and others affiliated with Hollins. Many students told stories of how they found healing through sharing their personal stories in counseling, with their peers, and in contemplative writing exercises. While questioning them about their faith journeys as a way of assessing the spiritual climate at Hollins, I was surprised by how the interview process became a spiritual practice in itself. It was a holy experience both to be able to share and to listen to such moments of sacred transformation in my students' lives. In their pauses, I could see them making connections for the first time, framing their experiences in light of God's unfolding work in their lives. That which is unseen as we are in the midst of our journey can only be understood through hindsight reflection. But through these interviews and in my pastoral counseling with other students, I recognized that this reflection did not always have the time and place in which to happen.

Most participants commented that they had never reflected on such questions before and that they really appreciated being able to talk about their faith, particularly our Christian students, who commented that they had not felt free to speak about their beliefs while at Hollins. In order to be engaged in the spiritual and religious life of campus, students have to be proactive in joining one of our student groups (*Better Together*, Christian Community Fellowship, or Student Chaplains) or attending our weekly spiritual gathering, *Sanctuary*, to find the space to discuss and engage in their faith as it is not welcome in other areas of campus life.

Additionally, it is difficult to find the time for reflection in the midst of heavy academic demands, particularly as higher education has moved away from the formation of self-aware critical thinkers to focus on specific career preparation.⁸ This shift has created deficits for students' personal growth and also for their ability to form relationships and community. As Sherry Turkle writes in *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, "In self-reflection, we come to understand ourselves better and we nurture our capacity for relationship" (Turkle 79). Without reflection, the process of identity formation is stunted, and the ability to build relationships with others is more difficult.

My calling at Hollins has been to encourage our students to find sanctuary, creating spaces for personal renewal, connection with the spirit, and building community with others. Through the chapel programs and outreach to students, faculty, and staff, I provide opportunities for spiritual reflection, growth, and service in conjunction with the

⁸ Elaborated upon in chapters two and four, particularly through the writings and research of Nash and Murray, Parker Palmer, Astin et al, and Chickering et al.

Office of Spiritual and Religious Life’s motto, “seeking connection, exploring spirituality, and serving in faith”, and the university’s motto, “*Levavi Oculos*”.⁹ But how can we find sanctuary on our campus and within ourselves in a time of disconnection and tension? How can we create sanctuaries for one another where we can feel safe (or brave) to be authentic, to wrestle with our conflicts and questions, and to share our stories while receiving the stories of others? We need methods that will address the interpersonal and intrapersonal disconnections Hollins is experiencing, helping our students to build inner resilience in terms of their mental and spiritual well-being, and fostering a more inclusive community as students establish stronger relationships with one another. As many other college campuses are experiencing similar issues with mental health concerns and community divisions, such interventions could have far-reaching effects.

Seeking Solutions

The Office of Spiritual and Religious Life can be a key resource in addressing issues of well-being and community building at Hollins University. If our personal and communal disconnection are viewed as spiritual issues, as I believe they are, then spiritual interventions will be invaluable in fostering well-being. Interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective include interfaith dialogue and building community across our differing beliefs and values (both religious and secular), and story sharing and attentive listening,

⁹ Taken from Psalm 121, *Levavi Oculos* is Latin for “I lift up my eyes”, and the scripture continues, “to the hills, from whence does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (NRSV, Psalm 121:1-2).

As Hollins seeks to build a more inclusive and connected community, creating the opportunity for constructive conversations across our diversity is crucial. Opening up dialogue about faith, religion, and spirituality on our campus that does not talk often or well about these issues will be beneficial in helping us to embrace our diversity in order to heal and learn from painful incidents of racism and religious discrimination. Respectful conversations based on a desire of mutual learning can build connections on our campus and break down harmful stereotypes that lead to disconnection, hatred, and fear. Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) data shows that students who have knowledge of and relationships with students from different religious backgrounds than their own are more likely to have positive attitudes toward pluralism.¹⁰ As Hollins works toward being a community that better engages our diversity, involving our non-religious students in interfaith interactions is important as this is the growing demographic on our campus.¹¹

Storytelling offers us the potential to both learn about ourselves as we frame our experiences in faith, as well as helping us to build community with others as we learn to actively listen to their differing experiences, learning respect and finding connection across our diversity. Many authors and researchers have explored how the act of telling our story is also an act of meaning-making.¹² Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own narratives will help them to find their place in the larger story of Hollins and of the world. Self-reflection is a crucial developmental process that has been lacking for many of our students, particularly those majoring in classes outside of the

¹⁰ See <https://www.ifyc.org/about> for more information on IFYC (accessed 1/21/17).

¹¹ See appendix p. 193 for religious demographic data.

¹² See works by Palmer, Parks, Magolda, Baker, Long, and McAdams, elaborated upon in chapter 4.

humanities. Meaning-meaning is a deeply theological work as we discern how our stories fit inside a greater narrative outside of ourselves, understanding our relationship to the Holy Other in which we “live, move, and have our being.”¹³

Through my weekly interfaith gathering, *Sanctuary*, I have witnessed how the act of one person sharing a testimony has helped all participants reflect on their own faith and create bonds with one another, even those from very different traditions. Yet *Sanctuary* reaches just a small number on our campus. How would our campus be impacted if more students could learn how to engage in respectful dialogue across lines of diversity through the act of sharing and receiving stories (a practice of holy speaking and holy listening)? How could I teach the art of conversation to students who tend to avoid face-to-face interactions?

Training Student Leaders

As Hollins encourages student-initiated programs, the best place to start something new is to engage the student leaders. I work alongside two groups of student leaders within the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life: Student Chaplains and student religious club leaders. Student religious clubs have been in existence since the early years of Hollins when all students were automatically members of the Religious Life Association (RLA), which organized the regular worship services and community service projects of the college. In 1997, the service component of the RLA was separated into a new secular group called S.H.A.R.E. (Students Helping Achieve Rewarding Experiences), which is now facilitated through a different department), and the RLA

¹³ Acts 17:28, NRSV.

became a voluntary group called the Spiritual and Religious Life Association (SRLA).¹⁴ The SRLA served as an umbrella group of all our religious student interest groups, which varied depending on need and available leadership, but have included various Christian fellowship and prayer groups, the Divine 'N Motion Praise Dance Team, a Muslim Student Association, a Jewish Student Association, the Bodhi Path Buddhist Group, and the Bell Book and Candle Pagan Club. In spring 2017, SRLA underwent a name and mission change to become a single interfaith group called *Better Together*, with the mission of creating the space for faith dialogue and community regardless of religious tradition or lack thereof. They operate alongside (but separately from) our Christian Community Fellowship group (CCF) that was started in fall 2016.

The Student Chaplain program was created in 2006 by my predecessor, The Reverend Doctor Jan Fuller. Interested students were interviewed and selected to be peer mentors in faith, and were tasked with the responsibility of creating religious life programming and serving as listening ears for students who wanted to talk about matters of faith. They were trained in classes on pastoral counseling, ministry skills, and interfaith competency, and received academic credit for their work. Student Chaplains had clear goals and responsibilities¹⁵ and were generally well known around campus.

¹⁴ Fuller, Jan. "Letting go of the familiar: changing religious practices on college campuses." *Hollins Magazine*, Spring 2008, p. 22.

¹⁵ From the former chaplain's application for Student Chaplains: "Student Chaplains are students of faith and practice who actively seek to nurture campus spiritual life and walk with others on their spiritual journeys. They will receive training in pastoral, leadership, and ministry skills throughout their service. All Student Chaplains must register for Chaplaincy Studies I, II, III or IV (2 credit courses which may be taken multiple times.) Chaplaincy Studies meets on Monday and Wednesday from 2:50- 4:20 and includes peer ministry training, team building, and program support. A weekly 20 minute meeting one on one with the Chaplain is also required."

When I was hired and the chaplain position was shifted to a staff instead of faculty status, the Student Chaplain internship class went away, and I had to find new means of garnering students' interest and finding the time to develop their skills. While students continued to seek out the opportunity to serve, it has been a challenge to prioritize their commitment with the competing demands of school and work responsibilities, and scheduling training and meeting times has been a hassle. We have toggled between weekly and bi-weekly meetings, usually over dinner, and have added a planning retreat each semester. There has not been enough time for teambuilding as in most years the Student Chaplains haven't been friends outside of the group (or there has been a clique of friends within the group, making the others feel left out).

My student leaders have already been involved in leading interfaith dialogue, education, and service on our campus and several attended an Interfaith Leadership Institute sponsored by Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) in summer 2015. We have been discerning new ways of being more effective in our outreach to the Hollins community and how to create space for open dialogue about faith, spirituality, and religion on our campus.

A challenge has been differentiating the separate goals of the student-led religious clubs that I advise from those of the Student Chaplains. While the groups have operated separately, they both have similar missions in creating religious and spiritual programming and support for fellow students. In the 2015-2016 academic year, I experimented with incorporating the SRLA/*Better Together* leaders into the bi-weekly Student Chaplain meetings, renaming the effort as the chapel student leaders meeting, with the shared mission of spiritual growth and support, learning about different faith

practices and journeys, and planning events for our campus to learn and grow in community. Bi-weekly joint student leader meetings helped the two groups with coordinating on planning and helping to better support one another spiritually, but it didn't help to refine the groups' separate functions and missions.

Leading up to fall 2016, I decided to take the student leader meetings in a different direction. At an evaluation retreat at the end of spring 2016 and over that summer, I talked to the five Student Chaplains and two *Better Together* leaders about their perspectives on the lack of engaging and respectful spiritual dialogue on our campus and their wishes for a stronger spiritual community. I shared my developing thesis ideas and asked if the Student Chaplains and *Better Together* leaders would be willing to join me in testing out a story circle process¹⁶ of sharing their personal faith narratives in order to determine whether it helped them in their individual faith formation and supported their growth as a community, and to discover how it affected their openness to faith traditions different from their own. With their affirmation and support, the students (Rei, Indiana, Ruby, Sam, Shalan, Rachel, and Mary) and I decided to meet weekly in fall 2016 to test out the thesis and evaluate whether these student leaders could facilitate the story circle process with the greater campus.

¹⁶ The story circle model process will be explained in chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2: Constructing the Thesis

“Scientific discoveries happen not through method or magic but from being open to discovery, by listening to one’s emotions, and responding to intuition. Like a poet, the researcher as well as the therapist needs the ability to imagine what the truth might be. Each tests it, but in a different way. The poet words a couplet, the therapist tries and strategy, and the researcher tests hypotheses. A theorist, however, must be aware of all three.”¹⁷

The Story and Finding My Place in It

The trend in superhero movies is to explore the origin stories of the characters. Likewise, human stories have their own genesis moments. This thesis project found its origin with my beginning at Hollins. Coming to Hollins was an answered prayer for me and the continuation of a calling that started during my own college journey. Although I had served as a campus ministry intern for a year during seminary and as a chaplain at a group home for at-risk youth and developmentally disabled adults for 8 years, my entry into university chaplaincy was a whirlwind of on-the-job training that left little space for planning and implementation, much less reflection and meaning-making.

It was not just my transition and adjustment that was making it difficult to think clearly, but being in a system that chose reacting over proactive planning, with a broad focus to meet many needs instead of specializing.¹⁸ I learned through experience the maxim shared by a colleague, “anxiety in the system here is translated as an enthusiasm for over-functioning.”¹⁹ Another called it our “culture of never enough”, referring to our

¹⁷ Boss, Pauline, “The Myth of Closure”, *On Being* Podcast 6/23/15 (46:10).

¹⁸ See our lengthy mission statement quoted in Chapter 1 for an example of this.

¹⁹ Institutional Study, 48.

busyness and tendency to continually add new programs without subtracting existing responsibilities.²⁰ While staff warn students against overcommitting, often we model an unhealthy, unbalanced, and unexamined productivity. As a result, there is a high level of stress and anxiety, and many students are without adequate coping skills or well-being practices to counteract the weight of their own high expectations.

Some of the pressure comes from shifting priorities in the academic realm, such as students' drive to excel to reach a desired career goal. While the original aims of a liberal arts education leaned more towards the development of a well-rounded individual growing in perspective and understanding of the world and the self, starting from the maxim "know thyself",²¹ the focus grows ever narrower in a consumeristic model that goads parents and students to consider the return for their financial investment and which school can best prepare them for a "successful" career and specific job placement.²² This is a challenge to the holistic education to which we aspire, one that develops mental, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity and well-being, and that forms a community that models "civility, integrity, and concern for others" and "encourages and values diversity and social justice" according to our mission statement.²³ To grow in these values as individuals and as a community, students must be able to synthesize their

²⁰Institutional Study, 48.

²¹Chickering, Arthur, John Dalton, and Liesa Stamm. *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass, 2006, vii.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ <http://www.hollins.edu/who-we-are/history/>, accessed 3/16/15.

learning and experiences both inside and outside of the classroom and be self-reflective in order to make connections and meaning.

According to Erik Erikson, young adults must progress through the task of identity formation before they are equipped for developing strong relationships with others (moving from the stage of identity vs. role confusion to intimacy vs. isolation).²⁴ In my conversations with students, I realize that the self-reflection necessary for identity formation and spiritual growth is stunted in students who have not integrated their spiritual nature and are being pushed to focus exclusively on higher education as a tool for finding a job instead of for personal growth, reflection, and transformation. The neglect of the spiritual life in college is evidenced in students' comments that they are too busy to engage in or prioritize religious or spiritual pursuits. Although our campus self-reports as being very interested in spirituality,²⁵ religious and spiritual engagement in terms of program attendance is low. A senior said the following about the spirituality of Hollins:

“We all believe in something—the ethereal vision of Hollins keeps us believing in something; busyness prevents and discourages us. We want to be spiritual but we are exhausted by life. The spirituality of Hollins is waning. It’s not that we’re not interested, but we are burned out on religion; the presence of an organized

²⁴ Erikson, Erik. *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1968, 135.

²⁵ According to the following annual or biannual surveys: Your First College Year (YFCY), the National Survey for Student for Student Engagement (NSSE), Religious Preference Survey, and Student Satisfaction Survey. See appendix p.191-192 for YFCY data.

*spirituality is waning, but the interest is not. We care about diversity [of beliefs].*²⁶

Finding myself as the sole religious life staff in a secular, diverse, and busy setting in which participation in religious events was declining while mental health concerns were increasing prompted a new focus and direction for the chaplaincy. From early in my six-year tenure here, I have viewed the lack of attention to spiritual health as a concern, and a renewed focus on lived spirituality to be the remedy for our overburdened schedules and disconnection. Alongside being outspoken about my concerns about the unreasonable levels of stress on our campus, I have used my role as chaplain to advocate for holistic self and community care. I have sought ways to minister to students, faculty, and staff through modeling and teaching spiritual practices, whether it be through a January term class on “Spirituality for Busy People”, inviting students to do a breathing meditation during a weekly student government senate meeting, or leading faculty and staff in a time of reflection (a modified Ignatian Examen).

My catchphrase is “Find sanctuary”, which is an advertisement for students to come to our weekly service (named *Sanctuary*), but also an injunction for them to find rest, renewal, and connection (in essence, Sabbath) in whatever ways are meaningful for each individual. Whether it is in a quiet and reflective walk on the road that encircles our campus, conversation over a meal with friends, or creating art, I encourage our community to make time and space for activities that renew their spirit and disconnect for a while from the activities that drain them. I regularly check in with students to ask how

²⁶ Institutional Study, 39.

they are finding sanctuary moments in their busyness, and emphasize through my programs and trainings with student leaders (including resident advisors and orientation team leaders) how neglecting their spiritual needs can take a toll on their physical and mental energy and well-being. I teach that by scheduling their own “find sanctuary” practices and creating healthy habits to nurture their spiritual well-being, they can gain more energy, find meaning and purpose in their tasks, and avoid burnout.

Sanctuary as a weekly interfaith gathering was initiated when I came to Hollins in 2011 as a means of using my limited resources to reach out to the widest audience and gather the people of faith and seekers on our campus into community. My goal for the space and the program was to allow participants to find a sacred pause from the busyness of campus life and renewal through our shared spirituality, breaking down boundaries and stereotypes that separate us in our differences and focusing on our integral connectedness. Instead of seeking a unity that requires agreement, I aimed for a learning community that valued “wholeness over division”, moving towards creating closeness that Parker Palmer refers to as “the intimacy that does not annihilate difference.”²⁷ I wanted students to understand that educating them about other faiths was not an attempt to change their beliefs (as some initially feared), but a way for them to gain empathy for others, connecting on a personal level through hearing their stories. Our differences, then, would not be barriers, but opportunities for celebrating and strengthening our unique faiths as we shared a common life together.

²⁷ hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge, 2003, p. 49.

To make the space more welcoming, inclusive, and conducive to sharing, the altar is draped with prayer flags with different religious symbols, and the chairs are circled up in the rear of the chapel, creating a sharing circle. We start each semester by writing our own guidelines for creating sanctuary, our ground rules which are read weekly as a reminder of how we will speak from our own experience, listen respectfully, and enter with curious minds and open hearts.²⁸

A different member of the community shares a faith story each week (some are nominated by students, some volunteer, and some are invited by me) based on a prompt. Past ones have included, “This I believe...”, “How do you find sanctuary?”, and “The story that has shaped me”. This is followed by a time of discussion when listeners can ask questions, share points of connection, or reflect upon what they have heard. They are asked to write a brief sticky note response weekly about “what will stick with them” from what they heard, and paste it in a book that we are compiling together.

I expected that there would be openness to gather and learn from one another, a comfort in talking about faith regardless of our differing faith traditions, backgrounds, or beliefs, particularly on our outspoken, open, and liberal campus. It has been successful, but not as I had imagined. The discussions have been rich and meaningful for those who have attended, creating space for reflection, learning, and community-building. Surveys show that it has contributed to participants’ individual faith formation as well as in growing an appreciative understanding of others’ faiths.²⁹ Students have appreciated

²⁸ An example of our ground rules can be found in the appendix, p. 157.

²⁹ After each *Sanctuary* gathering, attendees were asked to respond to the question, “What will stick with you this week?” on a post-it note that was then added to a collaborative journal. A *Sanctuary* final evaluation questionnaire was distributed at the end of each semester with questions such as, “What did you

engaging in spiritual practices together such as meditation, prayer, music, art, movement, and lectio divina. But even though students seem interested in the idea, the attendance has been low, reaching just a small number of people on our campus with fewer than ten participants most weeks, and the openness to faith dialogue has not extended beyond chapel programs.

I realize that there are multiple things hindering our weekly worship experience's effectiveness: 1) meeting in the chapel is a barrier for some that may view it as exclusively Christian as the exterior of the building is marked by the cross and steeple, 2) limitations of students' schedules and not being able to gather at that particular time each week, 3) the vulnerability involved in sharing faith stories, 4) speaking of faith in some circles is done with the intention of converting others, which may cause concern and discomfort, and 5) some of our more conservative Christians are not comfortable with the idea of interfaith engagement and view it as counter to their faith. I began pondering new channels for similar deep sharing and learning through spiritual dialogue that would build community on campus, guide students in their faith formation and openness to plurality, and help us to normalize talk of religion and spirituality.

New possibilities opened as I found sanctuary for my own self-care and growth in my third year at Hollins, when I asked for and was granted the time to pursue my D.Min. It was a much-needed period of critical reflection, and one of the most helpful tools besides the case studies was the Institutional Study project, my ethnographic study of

learn? What would you like to learn more about? How have you connected with the faith stories that were shared? What surprised you? What challenged you?" The entire campus was surveyed regarding religious and spiritual life in 2012, 2014, and 2017 and *Sanctuary* was a frequent answer to the question, "What would help you or has helped you in your spiritual growth as a college student?"

Hollins University. The research provided the data to evaluate the local theology of Hollins through our history, our curriculum and programs, and interviews with our students, faculty, staff, and alumnae. One student in particular, a leader of our Spiritual and Religious Life Association (SRLA) unwittingly became a source of inspiration for this thesis project. As she shared her passion for stories, she introduced me to the quote from the Dr. Who television series, “We are all just stories in the end. Make it a good one.” It planted the seed idea that stories could be a tool of transformation both individually and collectively, helping us to gain insight and resilience through our struggles, and building community as we learned how to share them with one another. But as with all stories, ours had to encounter conflict before we could find a way towards resolution.

An Inciting Incident in the Hollins Story

Akin to many American universities, the past two years have been difficult at Hollins, filled with racial tension as students have responded to multiple national incidents of police violence against black victims. Racist comments seemingly posted by our students appeared on the now defunct anonymous social media site *YikYak*. Students of color staged die-ins, spoke out about microaggressions they have experienced on our campus, and expressed their feeling that administration has not done enough to address their concerns. They also demanded an acknowledgement of our slave-holding history. We have had multiple open forums for discussion as well as a climate survey, diversity and inclusivity trainings, and a Founder’s Day event devoted, in part, to sharing the stories of enslaved people on our campus. Hollins administration contracted with a consultant to guide us through the next steps of building community through our diversity

and creating a more inclusive campus. Despite these thoughtful efforts, our work on diversity is far from over.

On Easter Sunday 2016, I had just returned home from leading an alternative spring break trip with students serving with Habitat for Humanity's Collegiate Challenge in Hilton Head, South Carolina. In between attending church and an Easter egg hunt with my family, I glanced at Facebook and was shocked to see a post and picture of a beloved Hollins landmark, Senior Rock, covered with a spray-painted swastika. A popular tradition, seniors can paint colorful messages on this large chunk of shale located near the science building and student center. The rock is used to welcome visitors, express grief and celebration, announce our community traditions, and has been the site of a least a few marriage proposals. But on this holy day, it had been defaced with hateful graffiti.

While pondering what to do in response, I received a phone call from my supervisor, the Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, who asked me to coordinate a campus response to this hate crime. It was the first time I had been asked to lead an initiative of this magnitude. I had half an hour to draft a plan to mobilize and bring comfort to a campus that had already been divided by racial tension and a hesitancy to speak about religious and spiritual matters. Although Hollins administration assumed our Jewish students had not been specifically targeted (we only have three and one was abroad), we all recognized the distinct horror of the symbol for the Jewish community in our area, as well as its painful use as a general symbol of hatred and intimidation, particularly for our black students and LGBTQ+ community.

Later that afternoon, I went to campus and joined the Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students and some students in painting over the rock with our colorful handprints and the words, “Take Back the Rock”. The following day, I unveiled a #LoveNotHate social media campaign and campus event in which students, faculty, staff, and administration chalked positive symbols and inspirational messages on the sidewalks framing our front quad. I wanted to show that the hateful vandalism was not representative of our community, but by uniting through the creation of positive symbols we could choose to build the inclusive community that we espouse and desire to become. The message I shared promoted empowerment through action and concern for one another and our response garnered the attention of the local media. I was encouraged to see references to scripture and spiritual symbols among the many expressions of peace and solidarity in this central spot on our campus. Students created their own #WalkWithMe campaign, pledging to physically walk with any student who felt threatened on campus. Although the instigating event was a divisive symbol, it provided the opportunity for our broken campus community to come together in loving and healing ways. This, for me, exemplified the power of the Spirit among us, drawing us back together.

The administration, faculty, staff, and students had demonstrated our ability to come together in support of one another in difficult times, but how could we move forward, making real and intentional our spirit of interconnectedness and dependence on one another to create the community we desired? How could we collectively address the tension while also fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for all, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion? How could we support the holistic well-

being of each individual and also build needed coping skills? How could students be empowered and motivated to seek the solutions for their conflicts and tensions? With such large problems, there did not seem to be one simple solution. The more I read for my D.Min. program, however, the more the pieces seemed to come together into an idea with a potentially broad impact on growing and nurturing our community.

Reading the Story

The books I read throughout my Visions of Transformation courses and in preparation for my thesis proposal pointed to the intersection of meaning-making, storytelling, and spirituality in identity formation, whether it was Joseph Campbell's description of the Hero's Journey monomyth³⁰ that undergirds so many of our tales, or works talking about the process of development in young adulthood. Sharon Daloz Parks wrote about the importance of young adults wrestling with the "big questions" of meaning, stating that faith as "the activity of meaning-making in the most comprehensive dimensions of our awareness"³¹ is an action in which all people engage. Marcia Baxter Magola built on her work, researching the process by which adolescents cultivate the skill of "self-authorization," developing the inner voice to narrate their own lives instead of looking to others to define them.³²

³⁰ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1968, c1949.

³¹ Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 10.

³² Baxter Magolda, Marcia B. *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges*. Stylus Publishing, 2009.

Higher education practitioners such as Astin et al,³³ Ammerman,³⁴ and Chickering et al³⁵ discussed the shift in educational goals from formation to specialization and the resulting divorce of spirituality from academia. They called for a return to critical reflection and spirituality, what Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc called the “heart of education”³⁶, a synthesis of cross-disciplinary learning that emphasizes connection over fragmentation, allowing students to incorporate spirituality and contemplation as ways of integrating meaning. Nash and Murray explored how this type of experiential and integrative education benefits from stories, which help students move from the abstract to the concrete in their learning, helping them gain context and dimension, as they grow in awareness of their adaptive strengths and maladaptive weaknesses.³⁷ Stories situate our experiences in a framework in which we can find understanding of ourselves and our world.

Two readings (Baker³⁸ and Mercer³⁹) explored models for how a story-sharing process might work in young adult identity and faith formation. Dori Baker’s work gave

³³ Astin, Alexander, Astin, Helen, and Lindholm, Jennifer. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives*. Jossey-Bass, 2010.

³⁴ Ammerman, Nancy. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

³⁵ Chickering, Arthur; John Dalton, and Liesa Stamm. *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass, 2006.

³⁶ Palmer, Parker and Arthur Zajonc. *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. Jossey-Bass, 2010.

³⁷ Nash, Robert and Michele C. Murray. *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, 128-129.

³⁸ Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005.

³⁹ Mercer, Joyce. *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls and Their Parents*. Jossey-Bass, 2008.

me a vision of how a similar process might work at Hollins, and I benefitted from collegial conversations with Dori while she was a chaplain at another nearby all-women's college. Mercer's book helped me to reflect on how we make meaning through the act of talking through our experiences, referred to as "Finding out by telling."⁴⁰

Others went deeper into what our stories can teach us, and how they can heal and connect us, such as Robert Coles, who used stories in his therapy practice.⁴¹ Dan McAdams⁴² explained how exactly we make meaning from the act of formulating and telling our stories and gave me a way to think about how I might evaluate a student's growth through the act of writing and sharing a personal story. Thomas Long⁴³ wrote eloquently on the power of testimony in reminding us of who we are in faith, which took me back to my own story roots in the Southern Baptist church, where sharing testimonies was a regular occurrence.

I learned that postmodernism shifted the focus on story as our locus for understanding scripture, leading to story theology or narrative theology, and I dove into the work of Richard Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas,⁴⁴ Choan-Seng Song,⁴⁵ and Terrence

⁴⁰ Mercer, Joyce. *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls and Their Parents*. Jossey-Bass, 2008.

⁴¹ Coles, Robert. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

⁴² McAdams, Dan. *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. William Morrow and Co, 1997.

⁴³ Long, Thomas. *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*. Jossey-Bass, 2004.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones (eds). *Why narrative? : Readings in Narrative Theology*. W.B. Eerdmans, 1989.

⁴⁵ Song, Choan-Seng. *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology*. Cascade Books, 2011.

Tilley.⁴⁶ I reflected on how our personal stories fit into the larger stories of our community and our faith and how we strive to find the place where our stories intersect. I wondered about the story of Hollins and how students were finding their place within it (or not) and how sharing our stories might facilitate strengthening our communal bonds and opening us up to realizing that we are connected on a spiritual level.

Story became the theme that defined my ministry, whether it was in the diversity trainings I took part in that emphasized bonding through sharing personal stories, or my student leader group's interfaith training with the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), whose founder, Eboo Patel, said, "Building interfaith bridges starts not with knowledge or skills, but with exploring your own story and narrating your identity."⁴⁷ I resonated with Nash and Murray's claim that "Effective educators understand that helping students to make meaning is directly related to the ability to tell their own personal stories of meaning-making."⁴⁸ I had experienced this, after all, in conversations with my students in my office and in *Sanctuary*.

I am grateful for the ways in which these authors (and others) informed and stretched my understanding and research, and I say more about their work and how it guided my own in chapter four. My background reading helped to frame my question, "How can I provide the opportunity and facilitate a method of story sharing so that I

⁴⁶ Tilley, Terrence W. *Story Theology*. M. Glazier, 1985.

⁴⁷ Patel, Eboo. *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*. Beacon Press, 2016, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Nash, Robert and Michele C. Murray. *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 116.

might guide students in the process of faith formation and community building, in the hopes of creating the space for increasing the spiritual dialogue on our campus?"

Thesis

The above questions helped to frame my goal, process, and thesis. Through my project thesis, I will address the personal and communal disconnection at Hollins by engaging my student leaders in story circle dialogues about their religious and spiritual experiences. By creating a model for story circles and training my student leaders, first as participants and then as facilitators of the method, students will become connected through a much-neglected discussion of our religious and spiritual diversity on campus. Student leaders will be presented with the opportunity to reflect and make meaning of their experiences, and will also learn to respectfully listen to and dialogue with others who share their stories. As they make meaning through their stories, they will progress in identity and faith formation. They will also have the opportunity to learn from one another and build appreciative knowledge of different faith and spiritual expressions. Hearing another's stories will be an effective and transformative way to break down barriers and stereotypes and help to build community on our small but increasingly diverse campus.

Students need the space, incentive, and guidance to reflect on their developmental journey, ask the big questions, and ponder how what they are learning fits in with their values and goals. They need guides and mentors that can help them address these developmental faith questions, regardless of their religious practice (or lack thereof) and practices that will help ground and center them in stressful times. Our campus, and the

office of spiritual and religious life and its student leaders, in particular, can provide space and opportunity for spiritual growth, reflection, and dialogue about faith, religion, and spirituality.

This intervention will help students to be more spiritually engaged as they make meaning of their experiences, increasing their ability to articulate their faith. The process of sharing their stories within small groups will help to build community and group cohesion, even across lines of religious and spiritual difference. Secondary benefits of the process will be increased active listening skills, empathy, and an exposure to different faith perspectives.

Process

I developed a story circle method that engaged my seven student leaders (five Student Chaplains and two *Better Together* club leaders) in dialogue about their faith and spirituality. Functioning as the facilitator of this group of students, I guided the process and kept the discussion progressing in a reflective and appropriate manner. Student leaders received training on active listening and empathy, and discussed the importance of stories in our meaning-making process at a retreat prior to the story circles. During the retreat, I modeled the story process through sharing my own faith narrative, responding to the same prompt they were given: “Tell about a transformative time in your life and how faith guided you through it.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The retreat outline plan can be found in the appendix, pages 191-192.

Before each student shared in the story circle, they were interviewed separately using the initial questions⁵⁰ to gauge their current spiritual and religious awareness and engagement, their openness to pluralism, and their connection to the student leader and Hollins communities. These questions were synthesized from Your First College Year (YFCY) and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) surveys administered to first year students, and the Interfaith Youth Core Pluralism and Worldview Rubric,⁵¹ along with additional questions that inquired about their religious background, current understanding of spirituality, and their definition of community and how they have experienced it (or not) at Hollins. At the end of this interview, students were instructed to write a narrative on a turning point in their life and how they experienced faith through it. They were limited to two pages or 500 words and were asked to share the story verbally at one of our weekly meetings.

At our weekly meetings, usually held in a private meeting room in the dining hall during dinner, we shared community concerns and prayer, had a brief time of learning about a relevant topic (e.g. conflict, empathy, faith development, elements of a story), and one student shared their story aloud in our story circle. Those not sharing during a particular session responded after the story sharing with thoughtful questions to stimulate dialogue and shared their own points of connection (see weekly meeting outline on p. 184 for examples). The stories and the following discussion were recorded. After each discussion, participants (both sharers and listeners) reflected on the process and how it helped or hindered their ability to make meaning personally and how it affected their

⁵⁰ The questions can be found in the appendix, p. 180.

⁵¹ found at www.ifyc.org/resources/engagement-rubric and accessed on May 23, 2016

sense of connection with one another. Listeners responded with the words, phrases, or themes that stood out to them in the story and discussion.

The participants were interviewed a final time after the end of the story circle process (when all students had shared a story) using the same initial questions plus additional questions to evaluate their thoughts on the process and how we can use it in the future (see appendix for final questions). I also observed my student leaders' engagement in the greater campus community to note any "ripple effects" of increased connection with spiritual themes in their other campus activities (such as their willingness to initiate conversations involving faith and spirituality with those outside of the group), and consulted with faculty and staff who advise them to get their feedback as well.

For qualitative analysis, the interviews and story circles were recorded, transcribed, and coded using narrative personality theory categories⁵² (coherence, openness and vitality, differentiation, reconciliation, generative imagination, and vulnerability). Interview data were compared for measurable change in understanding of faith, openness, and community connection. After a discussion on Westerhoff's Styles of Faith⁵³ during one of the weekly meetings, students identified their individual faith style and this self-evaluation was compared to their narratives and interviews for consistency and self-awareness.

Through this project, my goal was to help students in their process of faith formation by reflecting and sharing their personal stories with others and making

⁵² See Schieb p. 117 and McAdams; known as "T/truth criteria" in Nash and Murray p. 45

⁵³ Westerhoff, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Morehouse Pub, 2012.

meaning of their experiences through the process. In reflecting on their past experiences in light of their beliefs and their understanding of God's presence on the journey, my expectation was that student leaders would grow in their faith development (moving beyond experienced faith towards owned faith according to Westerhoff's Styles of Faith), become more engaged in their spirituality, and build community with other students as they saw their common interests and struggles and learned from and with one another. As student leaders completed and felt confident in the process, they were invited to become facilitators of new groups in the following semester, teaching other students the process and helping these new students to make meaning of their stories and to connect through their shared narratives. I hope spiritual discourse will eventually become a normative and transformative act on our campus, building bridges of connection across our differences of race, gender, sexual orientation.

Predictions

A valid thesis will be supported through marked improvement between pre- and post- interviews and story circle discussions in terms of spiritual engagement, connection to community, and openness to plurality. The coding of narratives and discussions will reveal religious and spiritual themes and symbols, which will deepen in the written narrative and final interview as compared to the initial interview. The thesis would be challenged if there is no change or a decrease in spiritual interest, faith development, or openness to pluralism, and a decreased connection to the student leader community after the study circle process.

Potential Pitfalls

Proposing spirituality as part of a solution to our disconnection could be a barrier for some Hollins faculty, staff, and administrators, as I have previously mentioned that spirituality is not seen as a priority by many of them. Discomfort has been expressed by numerous people on campus about the vestiges of our Christian traditions in our secular setting (such as prayers at convocations), and there is a noticeable hesitancy to cross the line of our non-sectarian mission by incorporating anything that would be considered spiritual. I have not been included in many of the planning discussions about diversity trainings and dialogues on campus, even when I have made suggestions and showed interest in the process by attending all the open meetings and trainings and specifically asked to be included.

Another potential barrier for my work is that my project will be countercultural in our system in aiming to get students to slow down and reflect, particularly on spiritual and faith questions. In our busy system, students are pressured to be leaders and take on as much responsibility as possible (even as we give lip service to the phrase “don’t overcommit” and model the opposite). Therefore, another issue will be getting student involvement and follow-through. Our students are generally busy in a variety of clubs, leadership positions, jobs, and classes. While they are interested in and passionate about many things, their schedules do not allow for anything that is not viewed as immediately beneficial or related to their course of study. I have a small number of student leaders and sustaining their commitment through the process will be challenging, especially with students’ time constraints.

I am confident, however, that these obstacles will be overcome and that the story circle method will bring transformation within our campus community. Hollins students

have demonstrated their compassion for one another in how they have responded in solidarity to potentially divisive acts on our campus (such as the swastika painting). Sharing our stories with one another will continue to help us build empathetic connections across our differences as we engage in the reflective process of finding meaning in our personal stories and the stories of those with whom we live, work, and learn.

Chapter 3: Telling Our Stories

(The Method)

Blessing the Story

*You might think
this blessing lives
in the story
that you can see,
that it has curled up
in a comfortable spot
on the surface
of the telling.*

*But this blessing lives
in the story beneath
the story.*

*It lives in the story
inside the story.*

*In the spaces
between.*

*In the edges,
the margins,
the mysterious gaps,
the enticing and
fertile emptiness.*

*This blessing
makes its home
within the layers.*

*This blessing is
doorway and portal,
passage and path.*

*It is more ancient
than imagining
and makes itself
ever new.*

*This blessing
is where the story
begins.*

– Jan Richardson⁵⁴

⁵⁴ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/11/04/where-the-story-begins/> (accessed on 1/23/17).

Introducing the Characters

A good story is only as strong as its characters, and for my study, I had an impressive cast. They are introduced here by their chosen aliases as well as the demographic information that they provided in their initial and final interviews. I have added anecdotes about how and when they came to join the group. Two groups of chapel student leaders were invited to participate in this study: my five Student Chaplains and the two leaders of the *Better Together* student interfaith club. I was encouraged that all seven student leaders volunteered to participate in this study, which became the focus of our weekly meetings, and our ongoing work, training, and planning for the duration of the fall 2016 semester.

Student Chaplains

Rei has the longest tenure within the student leader group as a senior who became a Student Chaplain two years ago owing to the influence of having a couple of close friends in the group at that time. Rei self-identifies as a “white, disabled, working-class poor, Unitarian Universalist, 21-year-old college senior, and aspirant minister.” As a non-binary queer individual, Rei uses “they” pronouns in speaking and writing. They are a political science major with theater experience and serve as the Head Resident Advisor (RA) for new student programming.

Ruby, a junior, joined the group as a Student Chaplain her sophomore year after working as a chapel work study student and making it through a difficult first year due to struggles with depression. She is now a junior psychology major who identifies as a

Latina woman and demi-sexual⁵⁵. Her background religious tradition is Catholic, although she is currently searching for a non-denominational Christian religious community.

Rachel classifies herself as a “Methodist, white, cisgender,⁵⁶ heterosexual college student.” She is in her sophomore year and became a Student Chaplain in spring 2016. She is the quietest member of our group and often had to be drawn into discussion through directed questions, although she is more talkative one-on-one. She is one of only a couple in our group who attend church on a regular basis and is still closely connected to the religious tradition of her upbringing.

Joining the group as Student Chaplains for fall 2016 were sophomores Shalan and Mary. Shalan spoke of her biracial identity as the daughter of an African-American and Indian dad and a mother who is mixed African-American, white, and Indian. She said that others would see her as a nondenominational Christian, but she’s always thought of herself as “a citizen of the heavenly kingdom”, not a religion, but a way of life, a part of who she is. She found a connection to the group through her participation and leadership in SRLA (now *Better Together*), so she knew Sam and Indiana (the *Better Together* leaders) better than the other group members.

Mary reached out to the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life as a prospective student, and was active in religious programs (*Sanctuary*, SRLA, and my J-term class) in her first year. After struggling to find Christian community on our campus, she sought

⁵⁵ A demi-sexual one who experiences sexual attraction only within an emotionally-connected romantic relationship.

⁵⁶ Cis-gender means that the individual’s personal identity and gender expression conforms to their sex at birth.

me out for mentoring, then started a Christian group (named Christian Community Fellowship) and asked to be a Student Chaplain. She identifies as a female Caucasian (with some Native American), and grew up Southern Baptist in a very conservative religious household in North Carolina.

SRLA/*Better Together* leaders

As previously described, the Spiritual and Religious Life Association (SRLA) until recently served as the umbrella group of all our religious student interest groups. In fall 2016, SRLA underwent a name and mission change to become a single interfaith group called *Better Together*, with the mission of creating the space for faith dialogue and community regardless of religious tradition or lack thereof. They operate alongside (but separately from) our Christian Community Fellowship group (CCF) that was started in fall 2016. Sam, a senior, has been the leader of the group since fall 2015. Indiana served as a senator (representative on behalf of the club to the student government association) in spring 2016 and as treasurer for the 2016-2017 academic year. Sam and Indiana have become friends through the club and through taking classes together in the religion department.

Sam was part of the student leaders group in 2015-2016 as the leader of SRLA. Describing herself as a white, spiritual, Christian, she has come to the Christian identity on her own as her parents were former Catholics who left the church and encouraged their children to explore other faiths to find their own path. Sam discovered SRLA as she was seeking a way to integrate her faith identity on a campus where she felt discouraged being a Christian. She is a business major preparing to graduate and is engaged to be married in the fall of 2017.

Indiana is a 19-year-old sophomore, a white female who grew up in a Catholic family and who has grown both closer to and farther away from the church at various points during her spiritual journey. In her story, she proclaims herself to be the “least Catholic Catholic” you will meet due to feminism and her advocacy for female ordination, a passion that has basically excommunicated her from her home church. She still clings to the Catholic tradition, however, and longs for a church community that believes as she does.

Process

Planning and Training

After applying for and receiving approval from Hollins’ Human Research Review Committee (HRRC) to conduct my project, I sent out letters in August 2016 inviting my student leaders to participate. According to the research guidelines I established in my HRRC application, students were required to sign a form affirming their involvement, detailing how I would protect their information, and directing them to resources to whom they could confide if the process felt too emotionally difficult.⁵⁷ Students would be able to self-select what information they wanted to share and could be identified by an alias. Although they would not be completely anonymous as they were all known as chapel student leaders on campus during this time period, they could establish the boundaries of confidentiality in what demographic and personal information they chose to share. Participants could also opt out of the study at any time or refuse to answer any questions that were asked.

⁵⁷ HRRC research application including guidelines, letter, project plans, and consent form are found in the appendix, pp. 158-179.

Once I had their consent forms and realized my fortune in having all my student leaders willing to engage with me in the process, we set a date for a planning and training retreat. Ruby was the only student who was unable to join us at the set time, so I met with her separately to go through the information about the study and talk through the personal and group goals she had set. The other student leaders joined me on Saturday, September 3, 2016, during orientation week, for a time of team-building, training, and planning (see pp. 182-183 for an outline of our training). Our introductions took place over lunch off-campus. Although it had not been planned, we ended up eating at a downtown food court where many of our new first year students were taking part in an orientation activity. We spoke in passing with the Vice President of Student Affairs/Dean of Students and the Director of Student Activities while also observing the nervous, excited energy of one of the largest classes Hollins has seen in almost two decades. It gave us a renewed sense of the work ahead and the hopes that we would have an engaged student population within which to share our work.

Around the lunch table, we took time getting to know one another, as only four of the students had been student leaders together in the previous year. I updated the group on new and recurring events planned and handed out resources that they could share with other interested students such as program flyers, a Student Chaplain flyer with their contact information and bios, and information on student clubs (*Better Together* and CCF). Students were also asked to fill out a form indicating their best times to meet and their group and personal goals for the semester. Leaders fill out these forms at the beginning and end of every semester to help us assess our progress and evaluate our effectiveness.

After lunch, we adjourned to a local coffee shop that has become a “third place”⁵⁸ for our group. While Hollins has many meeting spaces on campus, they are more commonly formal conference rooms instead of student lounging spaces. *Sweet Donkey Coffee* has a large and light-filled meeting room with tables, a wall-sized white board, and access to free trade coffee and locally baked treats. It is a comfortable space that many students use for studying and hanging out, even though (or maybe because) it is about a 20-minute drive away from campus.

As we settled in for the last couple hours of our meeting time with coffee and dessert, I asked students to decorate the cover of notebooks they had been given with words or pictures that completed the phrase “I am...”. This gave us the opportunity to continue getting to know one another while setting up the narrative framework that the group would employ. As they finished their crafting (and the general introductory conversations that took place while they were working), I had them share their handiwork and give us a brief description of where they were in their faith journey. I was impressed with the trust that the two seniors and four sophomores present displayed in being honest about their faith struggles. All but two related stories of moving away from the faith of their childhood into something that was more complicated and uncertain, and the two that remained in their original denominations (Rachel and Indiana) shared of the trials that had beleaguered them despite their commitment. Everyone professed the Christian faith,

⁵⁸ Oldenburg, Ray. “The Character of Third Places.” *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Marlowe, 1999, pp. 20-42.

which has historically not been the case with all my student leaders, and in particular, Rei has recently converted to Christianity from a humanist Unitarian Universalist stance.

This sharing naturally led us into a discussion of our campus climate concerning religion and spirituality. Sam shared her opinion that the Hollins environment is resistant to open dialogue, particularly in relation to faith. She said that students “put up a wall”, and might listen to others, but are inwardly thinking, “I’m right and you’re wrong.”

Rachel, who came from a conservative background, shared that Hollins’ liberal environment engendered a difficult transition for her. When she initially couldn’t find a Christian community on campus, she considered transferring to another school where she could practice her faith more authentically. Shalan added to this that Hollins’ openness and acceptance to so many different paths sometimes cause tension for her in her faith saying that, “Like God, I love everyone, but don’t accept all beliefs or actions.” Several expressed the “double standard” of acceptance on our campus where minority faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Pagan) are supported and have been represented by student interest clubs in the past, and yet Christianity is viewed with suspicion or derision. While we have had Christian groups in the past before the genesis of CCF, they were not well attended and have not had active status or student leadership since spring 2014.

Other student leaders viewed the openness of our campus as a positive attribute, especially considering our support for students who have been marginalized in other places (particularly faith communities) due to their gender or sexual orientation. Liz professed, “There is no right or wrong when it comes to a person’s identity.” I talked about the importance of respecting others and the differences between tolerance, respect,

and acceptance, particularly as I realized the issue of sexual orientation and identity could lead to divisions within our group. Tolerance was defined as co-existing without harming one another, but also without closely engaging. While our campus can tolerate a lot of differing identities, practices, and beliefs, upholding the rights of others while maintaining our personal distance, we struggle with developing a respectful engagement born of curiosity about what we can learn from one another because of our differences. This respectful engagement does not require that we personally accept beliefs that go against our own internal values, or that our community must come to uniformity and agreement about the issues that raise tension. The importance is to accept that while individuals may believe and behave differently, we respect and affirm the right of others to discern and follow their own values and practices.

We discussed our vision for making the campus a more open place for religious dialogue, in the same way that our institution has progressed in our ability to discuss our diversity struggles and work for inclusivity in the areas of race, gender, and sexual orientation over the past few years. One thing working in our favor is that spirituality is valued by many of our students, even those who do not profess a religious affiliation. I shared with these student leaders our religious preference data for the class of 2019 which showed a Christian majority (52%), with the next highest category being the religiously unaffiliated (34.5%).⁵⁹ We also reviewed the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey

⁵⁹ See appendix p. 193 for Religious Preference Survey form and data summary

data, which revealed a large spiritual interest among our student body, reflecting the growing prominence of the “spiritual but not religious” category.⁶⁰

The student leaders expressed concern that despite students’ interest in spirituality, the importance of spiritual support and growth is often overlooked by students and faculty on our campus. Because of this, student leaders desired to normalize spiritual dialogue and reflection at Hollins, providing space and encouragement for students to grow in faith and connect it to their other areas of learning and development.

We progressed on to our goals for the semester. The commonly held group goals were to create community within our student leader group and among the students of faith on campus, to create safe spaces and invitations for religious (and interfaith) dialogue, to support one another and to be a supportive resource for our campus, and to change the misconceptions about religion on our campus that make it difficult for us to live together and communicate effectively.

These group goals meshed well with my personal goals for my project: to help students in their process of faith formation through reflecting and sharing their personal stories with others and making meaning of their experiences through the process. Through this development, I believed spiritual discourse could eventually become a normative and transformative act on our campus, building bridges of connection across our differences of faith, race, gender, sexual orientation.

⁶⁰ YFCY data was analyzed for the 2013-2016 academic years pertaining to a question in which students were asked to self-rate their degree of spirituality as compared to the average person of their age. In fall 2013, 44.4% of Hollins students rated themselves above average or in the highest 10% for spirituality, which was higher than at comparable schools. In the 2015-2016 year, the numbers were much lower in the fall (28.4%), but increased over the course of students’ first year to 32.5% in the spring, showing their self-perceived growth in spirituality. See appendix pp. 191-192 for this data.

As we had noted the reluctance to engage in religious dialogue on campus, we discussed how to create space to facilitate such conversations grounded in respect and trust. When asked for suggestions, students said that such spaces of sharing should not involve people barking scriptures, but should allow participants to reflect on what they are feeling, include active listening, and move beyond times of listening to action and transformation. Being aware that some students on campus have experienced hurt and exclusion from faith communities, we should work to provide an alternative to the hateful faith rhetoric they have encountered, providing positive and warm conversation grounded in God's love.

Empathy and compassion would be critical, as well as learning how to truly and actively listen to one another without judgment. To illustrate what empathy means, we watched a video⁶¹ that shared the inner thoughts of different characters in a hospital setting through subtitles. We caught a glimpse of the characters' struggles and joys that would otherwise remain unknown to bystanders. In the same way, we all have our stories beneath the surface and all need someone who can receive them, understanding what it feels like to walk in our shoes.

Active listening is vital in helping others feel heard and valued when sharing their stories. After reading and discussing two articles⁶² and our own experiences of feeling heard (and not), we agreed that active listening looks like:

⁶¹ "Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care" by the Cleveland Clinic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8&index=21&list=PL9rElhgN9AL2y26odw-Va8jQrFYknivTd)

⁶² McHugh, Adam. "How to Be a Bad Listener." *Quiet Revolution*. 8 Dec. 2015. Web. Accessed 17 Feb. 2017. (<http://www.quietrev.com/be-a-bad-listener/>)

- reiterating what we heard
- reflecting on what someone might be feeling
- maintaining eye contact
- putting down devices and maintaining focus on the person in front of us
- verbal and visual cues (nodding, saying “mmhmm”)

In terms of requirements for safe space within our student leader group, students expressed a desire for the following:

- Upholding our own integrity as leaders
- Having people with whom we can be authentic
- Not having to have the answers
- Starting small, positive, and comfortable; asking the easy questions first
- Making others feel comfortable and normalizing the interactions
- Creating a framework for our meetings and interactions

THE PROJECT PLAN

After this time of sharing, I gave the student leaders an overview of what I hoped to accomplish in my study and our work together. I explained that we would set up a schedule for weekly meetings in which a different person would share a story each week based on the prompt, “Tell about a transformational time in your life and how faith

Mathes, Benjamin. “How to listen when you disagree: a lesson from the Republican National Convention.” *Urban Confessional*. 27 Jul. 2016. Web. Accessed 17 Feb. 2017. (<http://urbanconfessional.org/blog/howtodisagree>)

guided you through it.” Prior to the day on which they were to share their story, the featured student would have an interview with me and would submit a written version of their story to me. During the group meeting, they would share their narrative aloud, followed by a group discussion on the faith themes it contained, employing questions to help us dig deeper and make connections. After the completion of our story circle weekly meetings, we would assess the process and set our next steps at an evaluation retreat. Following the retreat, final interviews would take place with each student. Participants were advised that the story circle meetings and interviews would be recorded and transcribed with their permission, and I would be determining whether and how the process of sharing and hearing stories affected their ability individually to make meaning of their own experiences, to connect to one another as a community, and to be open to plurality of religious expression.

Initial Interviews

The interviews took place in my office in the chapel using the questions provided in the appendix.⁶³ While I had prepared the students to set aside thirty minutes, there was variation in the length of the interviews depending on how much they chose to share, ranging from a minimum of ten minutes (Sam) to sixty-eight minutes (Shalan). The interviews were either transcribed by me or by an online transcription service.⁶⁴

My goal from the interview data was to evaluate student leaders’ changing understandings and experiences of community, mark any growth in their faith development, and measure their openness to people of differing faith traditions by

⁶³ Appendix, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁴ www.rev.com

comparing responses from the initial interviews (which took place before each student shared in the story circle) and those at the conclusion of the study. In the initial interview, I sought to establish beginning definitions of community and the extent to which each felt connected to the student leader group. I also asked about their religious background, their experience of community and spirituality at Hollins, and descriptions of their current religious and spiritual life.

I was also interested in observing how the students' openness to sharing varied between their interviews with me, their written story, and their spoken story shared in the story circle meetings. For example, Rachel was really quiet in our group meetings, but was more open to talking one-on-one with me during her interviews. Shalan shared vulnerably with me in her lengthy interview, but her story didn't reveal her struggles. She said that others shared about bad things that had happened that had transformed them, but she felt God working through her much more in the good times. She did also admit several times to the group that she was having a difficult time building trust with them. I was surprised by Mary's vulnerability in sharing with the group as she had missed several of our meetings, but I knew from her interview and my interactions with her that she is highly self-reflective and had processed through a lot of her story already.

The initial interview provided the students an opportunity to begin reflecting on the different chapters that make up their story so that they could decide which part to write about and share with the group in their story circle session.

Weekly Story Circle Meetings

Each weekly meeting had a similar format that included an opening prayer or meditation, a check-in with students on how they were feeling in general and about our

progress within the group, and a time of learning together. Each week had a different focus for this educational piece, giving me a chance to teach an aspect of narrative theology, dialogue techniques, or conflict resolution. Here are the themes we addressed:

TABLE 1: STORY MEETING TOPICS

<i>Date</i>	<i>Learning Theme</i>	<i>Storyteller</i>
Week 1 September 8, 2016	What is narrative theology?	Jenny (example)
Week 2 September 15, 2016	The Hero's Journey	Rei
Week 3 September 22, 201	Conflict Resolution	Indiana
Week 4 September 29, 2016	Community and engagement	Ruby
Week 5 October 6, 2016	Community, active listening and responding	Sam
Week 6 October 20, 2016	Going deep and wide in stories and connection	Shalan
Week 7 October 27, 2016	Westerhoff's Styles of Faith	Rachel
Week 8 November 3, 2016	Community check-in	Mary

While I had planned in advance the topics that I wanted to address over the course of the semester, going deeper into models of faith development and narrative theology, issues arose in the story circle sessions that dictated alternative topics that required addressing. We spent two weeks talking about community concerns because the two *Better Together* leaders (Sam and Indiana) felt that the Student Chaplains received an inordinate amount of the group's attention and support while they did not feel that the Student Chaplains reciprocated attention to *Better Together's* needs and concerns. For example, while Sam and Indiana helped Student Chaplains brainstorm ideas and supported their programs, Student Chaplains did not attend *Better Together* meetings and did not require the

additional outside planning time that Sam and Indiana needed in order to plan their events and weekly club meetings. When Sam and Indiana came to me to discuss their frustrations and admitted that their resentment had been building for some time, we decided to devote enough meeting time to work through their concerns as a community. This became an unplanned but important model in how to work through conflict as a community and provided an opportunity to grow closer together through building the trust to speak openly, honestly, and respectfully with one another. Even though the students admitted that addressing the tension through face-to-face discussions initially provoked anxiety, in the final evaluation most of them pointed to this as a positive turning point for group growth.

Following the time of learning together, I read the ground rules that we had agreed upon in our planning and training retreat as a segue to our story circle time:

- respect
- confidentiality
- radical vulnerability
- questions and curiosity are welcome
- assume we are all seeking understanding and will not always get it right
- knowing it's their story; not to take their attention or make it ours
- empathy
- active and engaged listening
- “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 114.

I asked for the participants' permission to record the session, and then the featured student told her or their story without interruption from the others. At the conclusion, I invited everyone in to a time of discussion, suggesting the following questions to help us go deeper:

- What did you not understand? (clarify)
- What would you like to know more about? (deepen)
- What connected with your story? (connection)
- What does this make you think about in your own life? (reflect)
- Where do you see God in this? (theology)
- What will you take from this? (action)

I tried to let the discussion proceed naturally, but would occasionally ask a question when conversation stalled for more than a minute. To wrap up the discussion time, I asked each person to share in a few words "what will stick with you from what you have heard?" We closed each meeting with prayer requests and prayer.

Two of the story circles stand out because of the genuine discussion that was prompted around specific issues that the students drew out. Rachel's focus on evangelism as a core tenet of her Methodist faith was interesting because of her connection of evangelism to community service instead of witnessing, as some of the students with exposure to more conservative evangelical backgrounds had experienced. The students picked up on this and began questioning the definitions of evangelism and the differing ways they had experienced it. They were encouraged and inspired by Rachel's understanding of it that motivated her many acts of serving others in the name of faith.

Mary's story was the final one presented. It contained sensitive themes such as the breakup of her church, her struggles with self-harm, being told that her depression was a sin, and her evolving faith that moved away from her parents' more conservative beliefs. Other students connected with her mental health struggles, and there was a fruitful discussion on her understanding of depression not as sin but as a temptation towards loneliness and hopelessness that draws her away from God. Her realization that over-commitment is a new type of self-harm for her provided me a lasting image to ponder as I work with other students with similar issues.

There were differences in how the students presented their stories. Sam and Rachel merely read theirs off the page with few changes, while Rei, Ruby, and Mary did more storytelling, embellishing what they had written and being more expressive in the telling. Indiana read her story almost verbatim, but added character in her telling that showed her emotion. Shalan's style was between the two, reading verbatim, but adding inflection as well as expanding slightly on the text. Though the student leaders were encouraged to share the story in their own words instead of reading it off the page, Sam and Indiana prefaced their reading by saying that they were concerned that they would go off on tangents if they didn't stick to the script.

I also noticed specific roles the students took on in listening and responding to the stories. Shalan often became a "defender" of God, reminding the others that God is not the source of our hurts, but people hurt us and we place the blame on God. Ruby was the encourager that was always the first person to thank the sharer for their vulnerability and remarking upon their strength. Sam sometimes had trouble connecting with others' experiences in faith, but worked to affirm their story and share what she had learned from

it. Ruby, Indiana, and Rei connected and empathized about struggles with the Catholic church. Mary was quick to tell a self-deprecating joke to defuse the tension of uncomfortable moments. Rachel was a quiet but engaged listener that usually had to be prompted for feedback, but always had a connection to share.

Final Interviews

The final interview had a similar set up to the first with some repeated questions and with the same focus on community and connection, faith formation, and openness to students from differing faiths.⁶⁶ They were conducted in my office, with the exception of Mary's, which took place in the crowded, noisy dining hall during lunch due to scheduling issues. However, the space didn't seem to affect her openness to sharing. The final interviews were all transcribed by the rev.com online transcription service due to time constraints.

Additional questions were added in the final interview for students to gauge the efficacy of the process and how it affected their sense of community within the group, their understanding of themselves and others, and their willingness to initiate and engage in conversations regarding faith with others.⁶⁷ The student leaders were also asked to reflect on what they would take from the experience, what they hoped others would take from it, what they felt our group mission should be moving forward, and their understanding of their role (Student Chaplain or *Better Together* leader) following the training process. These interviews tended to be much shorter (10 minutes to 21 minutes),

⁶⁶ See appendix p. 181 for final questions.

⁶⁷ See appendix p. 181.

not due to fewer questions, but because the questions didn't tend to go as deep personally since the bulk were reflecting on our process.

Evaluation Retreat

An end of the semester retreat took place on November 11, 2016 to evaluate the efficacy of the story circle model and assess the students' progress on the goals set for this project. We met in the Gordh Room, a lounge space in the chapel, which prompted conversation about how our weekly meetings had been less comfortable due to meeting in a private dining room of the student center during dinner.

After an opening prayer and a time of checking in with one another, we wrote affirmations of each individual group member as a community-building activity. Reflecting on the good we saw in one another put us in a positive frame of mind to talk about our connectedness as a community and how we still hoped to grow. The students' responses were not always connected to the planned project process, but community was found outside of regular meeting times in the prayer requests that students shared on our Facebook messenger chats, and their thoughtfulness in checking on one another throughout the week. Liz mentioned a strength being that the group is one "outside of the normal function at Hollins" allowing them to "step outside of social dynamics and build community with intentionality." Because this organized group is one that perhaps wouldn't have organically gathered, participants found that they had been transformed from people who didn't know each other well to seeing each other around campus and feeling that they had a sort of nominal community.

Discussion turned to how conflict had affected the community, providing the opportunity for building trust and authenticity through speaking out about the hurt, while some tension still lingered. Sam spoke up about her initial fear about addressing her resentment that the Student Chaplains didn't reciprocate the support that the *Better Together* leaders offered them, but felt empowered through naming her concern to the group. Meaghan added that the issues created some resentment, frustration, and a divide for her because she felt that nothing was resolved after bringing it up. Shalan and Sam agreed that there were still issues in some people putting in more work than others. While Shalan attended all the meetings, other students missed multiple meetings in which they were not sharing (even though the meetings were considered mandatory). She added, "No one has heard everyone else's story except for me." Sam replied that "some people aren't putting in the work." Others mentioned the fact that some students being on cell phones or iPads during meetings (including at the retreat) showed a lack of respect and active listening. Mary and Rei, who had missed multiple meetings and were on devices at the time, each addressed the concerns, admitting difficulty juggling workloads and using screens as a deflector for anxiety. Through their honest sharing, others seemed to gain empathy and understanding, and I was impressed with how the discussion felt respectful and honest instead of attacking and defensive.

Next we considered how the story circle model was beneficial in helping the students learn about themselves and one another, and whether it helped them open up to more conversations about faith with others. This evaluation of the story circle model led

to a discussion on faith formation, and I had the students fill out a worksheet⁶⁸ where they did a self-assessment of their style of faith according to Westerhoff's model.⁶⁹ These self-assessments will be discussed in the results section.

We closed the retreat with a craft as we discussed together what we would like to see as our next steps. The group was eager about being more outwardly focused for the following semester and using their experience with story sharing to create opportunities and invitations for other students on campus to share their faith stories, leading to more dialogue on religion and spirituality at Hollins.

Reflections on the Results

Methodology for Assessing Personal Theology from Story

The data for my study came from observations of the group sessions and students' interactions outside of the group, and from coding interviews, narratives, and discussions and assessing them based on the following criteria: coherence, openness and vitality, differentiation, reconciliation, generative imagination, and vulnerability.⁷⁰ Coherence was exemplified in stories that made sense and unfolded in an orderly way, revealing meaning, purpose, and the teller's sense of identity and agency. Openness and vitality related to the energy of the story: were there times of transition and change? Did the story allow for ambiguity and growth? Differentiation was a marker of how the subject

⁶⁸ See appendix p. 194.

⁶⁹ Westerhoff, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Morehouse Pub, 2012.

⁷⁰ These were taken from Karen Schieb (117), although I didn't use her criteria of credibility, and I substituted vulnerability for truth value.

wrestled with their faith on their own terms, questioning and developing an expression of faith of their own apart from the tradition in which they were raised. Reconciliation is the next step of differentiation: were they able to find resolution between their past and present selves? Generative imagination is thinking and caring for others beyond the self, “expressed in loving acts that promote the overall well-being of the entire created order.”⁷¹ Brené Brown defines vulnerability as the “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” we face in order to have authentic and wholehearted engagement with ourselves and others⁷² and in this study, it was measured in the openness students had in sharing the difficult and emotional stories of their lives.

In addition to these criteria, I took note of the religious themes embedded in their stories, as well as their transforming definitions of community and openness to plurality of faith and belief. In the following section, I have summarized each student’s written story and the ensuing discussions and assessed them according to the listed criteria and embedded themes.

Rei’s story

Summary:

Rei shared about their journey moving away from the Catholic faith into which they were born, and being decidedly unchurched for a while before finding a humanist community within Unitarian Universalism. The transformational moment in their journey came during Rei’s junior year of high school, when it was discovered that Rei’s

⁷¹ Scheib, 118.

⁷² Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly*. Gotham Books, 2012, 2.

mom’s partner, Jim (whom Rei called “Dad”), was dying of cancer. Due to conflicts with Jim’s family, Rei and their mom were kicked out of his home and would have been homeless had it not been for the hospitality of their church community, who offered them a place to live, shoulders to cry on, and a job for Rei’s mom. In the caring community that showed up, surrounded them, and carried them through the toughest time of their life, Rei understood something of the Divine and “listened to the good around me that guided me forward.”

Rei’s favorite word is “grace” and in their story this was exemplified in the community of love that cared for them when they were in need and in realizing God’s provision in this. From a humanist starting point, Rei came to see that “universe was going to take care of us.” As their theology continue to develop, Rei came to understand “the universe” to be God, the divine being revealed in the “intense moments of grace and perfection” within the struggles. Rei began exploring Christianity this year.

Grace was also touched on as Rei discussed the desire to forgive Jim one day for the way Rei’s mother was treated and for them not having a chance to say goodbye. Rei believes that their story won’t be finished until Rei meets Jim in heaven to have the conversation and closure they never had at the end of Jim’s life.

Criteria:

TABLE 2: REI

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Coherence	Very clear, orderly progression, cause and effect, found meaning through experience
Openness and vitality	Grew in openness and vitality through this experience; saw the divine for the first

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
	time in their church community who showed up which prompted Rei to do the same for others
Differentiation, reconciliation	Moved away from the Catholic faith of birth and away from church; rediscovered church as a UU humanist; found God through this experience (which opened them up to rediscovering Jesus this year)
Generative imagination	The experience of community opened Rei up to a new vision of faith that has inspired their calling to social justice ministry and helping others (particularly the marginalized, disabled, LGTQB+) find their place within communities of faith
Vulnerability	Shared about a deeply traumatic time personally; opened up more about it in the sharing of the story and in the interviews; remarked that this was the first time they didn't cry in sharing it
Religious Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Finding community within faith and that guiding their discovery of the divine that works in our lives to rescue us -seeing God in other's actions and events of their personal life -defining their new life as a Christian -journey from Catholicism to humanism to Christianity -faith=community=love= grace= being carried; things not falling apart as they should have -“I know I will see Jim again” (in heaven)

Indiana's story

Summary:

Indiana's story is about her evolving journey of faith and finding it on her own terms as her family didn't place much value in religion even though her father was Catholic and her mother converted before marriage. She became more active in her faith upon coming to Hollins, realizing that having a "close relationship with God" made her life feel "fuller and more complete" and it shifted her from her pessimistic viewpoint to be the happier person she wanted to be.

This shift wasn't without conflict, though, as she couldn't ignore the faults of the Catholic Church, including their exclusivist positions on divorce, abstinence, and their views on the primacy of the Catholic faith over other faiths. As a feminist, Indiana personally struggled with the Church's opposition to women's ordination, and she was denied communion and basically excommunicated from her church when she shared her dissension with the priest.

Even with these frustrations with the Church, however, she's "always come back to it" and feels called to work within it for change. Calling herself the "least Catholic Catholic you will ever meet" distinguishes her liberal theology in a conservative tradition, but also reveals her longing to find a Catholic community with similar beliefs in which she can find her place. This tension has situated her to be a strong interfaith leader on our campus, prompting discussions on feminist theology in Christianity and other faiths in *Better Together* and creating a welcoming space for other students to find their place within a faith community.

Criteria:

TABLE 3: INDIANA

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Coherence	Clear progression and growth; personal struggle with some resolution, but understanding that it is an ongoing process; good self-reflection and theological development
Openness and vitality	Wasn't afraid to stand up and fight for what she believes in; continues to fight and to keep coming back; works to make the Catholic Church more inclusive and to make inclusive spaces for people of all (and no) religions on our campus
Differentiation, reconciliation	Definitely created her own path from the religious indifference of her family; decided that her faith would help in her personal growth and well-being; continues to seek her place in a community that doesn't quite accept her theology as she works to change theirs
Generative imagination	Feels called to work for change within the church to make it more inclusive, particularly to women; creates inclusive spaces for interfaith discussion on our campus; dreams of women's ordination within the Catholic Church even if she won't be able to realize it for herself
Vulnerability	Shared her hurt from the church but also didn't let it stop her; connected with others who have experienced similar trauma within the Catholic Church
Religious Themes	-Good life= life close to God -seeking community within the Catholic Church...but on her terms. Finding community when the community doesn't accept you as you are -Anger at church after parents' divorce due to church's stance on divorce as a mortal sin

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Religious authority (not in priest, but in self) -“I’m the least Catholic Catholic” but I always come back, have a calling—it’s the only place I feel at home -Feminism and faith

Ruby’s story

Summary:

Ruby described her journey with faith as a “war” of up and downs, from following Catholicism blindly in childhood as she didn’t know there were other options, to disconnecting entirely from the church after her parents’ divorce. She said, “I believed there was no God. He was not kind, not merciful, just hateful and wanting to destroy my happiness.” She was depressed and angry, blaming God for the bad things that had happened in her life without reason. She did, however, have a transformational moment one day when her mom forced her to go to church. Although Ruby’s anger grew throughout the service, when the passing of the peace came, something within her shifted. She felt the presence of God as her anger subsided and peace overtook her. She began to cry, realizing that there was a God and that he was “going to be there for me.”

Later, through a dating relationship with a boy who derided God, Ruby began to fully claim Christianity as her religion, saying, “Hearing [my boyfriend] banter on about how there’s no God strengthened my belief in God.” Although she later fell away from the church again during a period of mental health struggles, she still feels connected to

God in quiet spaces and empty churches and hopes to one day find her place in a non-denominational Christian community.

Even apart from church, faith gets her through difficult times as she believes that “everything happens for a reason” and that “If I’m going through this pain, it’s not because [God] doesn’t love me, it’s because it’s going to help me become a better person in the end. He has a plan, and even though I might not know it, it’s for a good thing, and it’s helping me. It’s where healing starts. And I knew I had to get some pain to get a better me.”

Criteria:

TABLE 4: RUBY

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Coherence	More written coherence than spoken; she denied the existence of God yet claimed God was not merciful; there was disconnection when she talked about her transformative church experience followed by a mention of leaving the church again without explanation, but still claims Christianity as her own
Openness and vitality	Very open about her struggles and her desire to learn and grow in faith
Differentiation, reconciliation	She is intentional about finding her own spiritual path although she is still searching. After leaving her childhood church, she returned, was transformed, and left again
Generative imagination	She is more open to different faith traditions due to her experience and her frustration with the exclusive attitudes of her Catholic tradition

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Vulnerability	She was very vulnerable in sharing her mental health struggles and encouraging others who shared the same
Religious Themes	<p>-another person who struggled with the Catholic faith of their childhood, particularly around the issue of divorce (like Indiana)</p> <p>-God as the source of all good and bad— “everything happens for a reason”</p> <p>-seeking to reconnect with a church community (but one different than where she started)</p> <p>-grew in openness to other faiths and sharing/creating space for others’ faith stories</p> <p>-feels connected to God in the quiet of church, in passing the peace; God as presence, peace, feeling</p> <p>-“war” with faith, up and down, giving up vs. giving her all; followed blindly at first as she didn’t know there were other options, left when personal life was falling apart (blamed God)</p> <p>-faith and mental health</p>

Sam’s story

Summary:

Sam wrote about her belief in guardian angels, saying, “God places certain people in your life for the sole purpose of guiding you” and that perhaps we are all guardian angels for others. After growing up in a family in which the children were encouraged to

find their own religious path, Sam and her siblings found their way to Christianity. Yet Sam always felt that something was missing, like there was a hole in her life, and she couldn't find her place, even though she had a stable and supportive family. She tried to fill the void with academics and work, and then turned to God, but reading scripture didn't seem to make sense, and it was just another place where she didn't feel like she could fit in.

The turning point came when she met her fiancé, whom she describes as her guardian angel. Through him, she learned to let go of grudges and give second chances like Jesus does. As she and Joe built their romantic and spiritual lives together, she began to read the Bible with “an open heart instead of an expectant heart”. While Sam and Joe sought guidance on how to build a faithful relationship together (including abstaining from sex until marriage), she worried as there was little biblical guidance. Through Joe's influence, though, she began to see the biblical narratives not as lessons, but as people to journey with and tools to help her understand her own life. Ultimately, she came to understand that she previously couldn't see herself in the stories because “God is busy writing my own story with me.”

Criteria:

TABLE 5: SAM

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Coherence	There was coherence, but not much detail about how she came to her conclusions
Openness and vitality	Found her way to Christianity in a family open to differing paths.
Differentiation, reconciliation	She finds it interesting that her parents, lapsed Catholics, wanted a religious openness for their children, but that she

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
	and her siblings have all found their way to being unstructured Christians.
Generative imagination	Her view of guardian angels is not a mainline Christian belief, but may come from her Catholic roots and her spiritual seeking
Vulnerability	While she hints at her struggles to find her place, she does not go in depth about this and is not one who shares much of her story with others. She did express hurt through some of our meetings and admitted in her story that she is “notorious for holding grudges” so I feel her issues within the group were not fully resolved.
Religious Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -guardian angels -reading the Bible with an “open heart, not an expectant one”—was echoed by others in later meetings as something they resonated with -God is writing her story -learning to give second chances like Jesus -building a relationship with fiancé with God in it (and saving sex for marriage)

Shalan’s story

Summary:

Shalan is the daughter of a pastor and calls herself a “citizen of the heavenly kingdom”. She grew up always feeling personally close to God and yet “yearned to have His voice rain down on me, wash peace over me, and envelop me in a wave of love.”

After believing that only church leaders could hear God speak, she learned that anyone with an open heart could hear and feel God. During a worship service, she sang and prayed, “I breathe you in. I breathe you out. Rein [sic] throughout me.” She experienced a prophetic vision of golden rain all around and a voice saying, “I am here. I have always been here. I will forever be here.” If her prayer had been for God to *reign* within her life, it was an extraordinary play on words and fulfillment to see a vision of rain revealing God’s presence surrounding her. She realized that she had always known and felt that presence of God. For her, having this experience as a child showed that “from the world’s perspective I was young and ordinary [but] in His eyes I was truly extraordinary in my faith.”

Shalan’s interview provided much more depth and theological insight as compared to her story and the other student interviews. She expressed that her faith has always been her own even though her dad is a pastor, saying, “I think I’ve always been saved” in terms of being baptized by the Holy Spirit. She shared her tension with following his spiritual leadership as he is making questionable moral decisions. This became even more complicated as her church is her definition of community (a group of like-minded believers who are pursuing spiritual growth together) and she felt the need to withdraw from it.

For Shalan, faith is equated with righteousness, doing what is right in order to please God. She is frustrated that so many people (particularly Hollins students) justify actions that Shalan believes hurt God. Her story and interview contained themes of feeling like a minority in her quest for righteousness when others try to discredit her for her faith or when others don’t fully live up to what she believes it means to faithfully

follow God. She was quick to say that she has never questioned or blamed God for the struggles in her life and believes that people too quickly turn on God when it is people who are often the source of the hurt in our lives.

Criteria:

TABLE 6: SHALAN

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
Coherence	Her story detailed a specific experience where she prayed for and received a prophetic vision, which she realized had been present with her all along
Openness and vitality	She talks purely about her own journey in the story and discussion and how others have tried to discredit her. She seems to judge others when they don't live up to her ideas of what God views as faithfulness and righteousness. Saying "I don't believe in every religion. I don't believe all of them are right." Doesn't seek out conversations with people of other faiths but is becoming more open to listening and sharing her story while learning from the stories of others.
Differentiation, reconciliation	She says that her faith has always been her own despite growing up in the church and as a pastor's kid. In her interview, she did discuss her attempts to differentiate from her father and trying to reconcile her view of him as her spiritual leader and the head of the house while he is doing things that are immoral and not of God
Generative imagination	Her visions are a gift that allow her to speak God's truth to others
Vulnerability	While her story does not reveal much vulnerability, her interview was the most lengthy and vulnerable of all. She said

<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Evaluation and Evidence</i>
	<p>that she wanted to share a positive story instead of a struggle story as most everyone else did because she grows more when she's "in the spirit than when [she's] trying to get back to it."</p>
<p>Religious Themes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -“citizen of the heavenly kingdom” instead of Christian -community is defined as strictly Christian; she has only experienced community in church and believes that people have to be growing in a similar faith in order to build community and friendships -“I think I’ve always been saved”; not baptized by water, but baptized in the Holy Spirit -prophetic visions as revealing God’s presence and favor; using them as God’s way of speaking judgment and blessing to others -not questioning God, but questioning her dad as a spiritual leader/father figure -separating what people do from what the church/God does -God doesn’t agree with everything that people do. People justify, but not everything is justifiable to God. She gets angry when she feels people are hurting God through their actions. -having ears to hear what God says and not being blocked by bitterness

Rachel’s story

Summary:

Rachel detailed her journey of her commitment to her Methodist faith which she has made her own by finding and regularly attending a church since coming to Hollins. In her interview she elaborated on her growing faith, saying, “I definitely see [faith and religion] as my strong suit now, instead of it being, like, a title that I had as a Christian. That it’s actually a part of me that I have, that it has always been a part of me, but now I have like actively taken on the agency of claiming it as who I am. I think that definitely came in part of me finding my own church once I moved to Hollins. That was a big step of me taking on that agency as an autonomous person.”

She also expressed her difficulty in finding community as a Christian at Hollins and was at first taken aback at our liberal climate. She said, “I did realize that religion and I guess specifically *Christianity* isn’t *held highly* here.” Although she initially considered transferring, she was able to find connection at Hollins and through her church.

The important things she noted about her faith are community fellowship and evangelism, and she gave examples of these through the mission trips and youth group experiences she has been a part of. In her stories of church, community was key as she described the engaged work of many people both inside and outside of the church with fundraising events, fellowship dinners, providing food for the hungry, Bible studies, and community yard sales and breakfasts. She wrote, “Of course we nurtured our personal relationships with God, but fellowship is how we grew in our faith alongside our brothers and sisters.”

Criteria:

TABLE 7: RACHEL

Coherence	Her story details a continuity between the church of her childhood and the faith she is developing as a result.
Openness and vitality	Her church's missional engagement developed Rachel's values of community and evangelism. Her view of evangelism is more in line with serving others in need than witnessing, which provided a good discussion for the group. She has also helped her friends to become more open about talking about their faith and faith struggles.
Differentiation, reconciliation	Although her faith is the most similar in terms of her family's faith, she has been intentional about exploring it on her own and finding a church home and community for herself at college.
Generative imagination	Her views of community fellowship, service, and evangelism are hopeful and engaging and inspired the rest of the group who had encountered less positive examples of those in their own churches.
Vulnerability	<p>There was very little vulnerability expressed in her story, and she was the least talkative member of the group. She had to be drawn into the conversation, but was always a thoughtful listener.</p> <p>In her final interview she shared that she had almost transferred because she felt like an outlier as a Christian. Elaborated more in her answers than in previous settings.</p>
Religious Themes	<p>-the importance of community and fellowship within the church</p> <p>-evangelism as serving others/mission</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -prioritizing finding a church helped her to grow in faith while transitioning to college -the agency of claiming Christian as who she is -Christianity isn't held highly at Hollins; it's a very liberal place compared to where she came from -faith is active, serving others
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Mary's story

Summary:

Mary's story contained multitudes in a short narrative, and it seems apt that she began by expressing her love for poetry. She used the ocean as a metaphor for her faith: "Sometimes there are moments when the waves continually pound the shore and others where all is calm and above all, it can be predictable but it can absolutely not be controlled."

Growing up in a conservative Christian household and attending a private Christian school, she began feeling lonely and used over-commitment as her coping mechanism. She was told that depression was a sin and felt abandoned by God and by her church when the church, which was like God to her, fell apart due to financial struggles and her beloved youth pastor left without a goodbye. Coming to Hollins was both wonderful and challenging, as she found a close community and yet relapsed into depression and developed an eating disorder. Her turning point came in meeting her

boyfriend who encouraged her to “put the faith [she] put in those [unhealthy] coping mechanisms in God”, recognizing that her busyness is often another form of self-harm.

As a result of meeting people from different faith backgrounds at Hollins, Mary’s faith has grown and differentiated from that of her family. While starting CCF to help build Christian community on campus, she is also open to learning from those with differing beliefs and is reconciled to the fact that her theology now is more liberal than her parents’ theology.

Her life story has taught her about beauty: “Beauty in myself that took me a small eternity to see and beauty in others that I am now so quick to see over flaws and hatred. God is beautiful. I am beautiful. Love is beautiful. Life is beautiful.” She responds in thanks to God who has brought her through by putting beauty and joy back into the world through random acts of kindness.

Criteria:

TABLE 8: MARY

Coherence	Definitely coherent. Shows growth and progression. Over-commitment was her first coping mechanism and remains a form of self-harm.
Openness and vitality	Her faith has grown in an openness to others and how God works in many ways; Her story has taught her about the beauty that comes from God
Differentiation, reconciliation	From the story discussion: “I have learned that Christianity isn’t necessarily what I grew up knowing it to be. My faith is different to me than it is to my family. And that’s ok. My faith is about getting through the hardest days on strength that is not my own and praising God for the

	days that are easier. It is about loving and being loved.”
Generative imagination	She responds to God saving her by doing random acts of kindness for others, putting more joy and beauty in the world to mirror what she has been given.
Vulnerability	Her story is perhaps the most vulnerable in terms of struggle. She is highly self-reflective and was able to show a lot of trust in the group in sharing it even after missing a number of meetings (or is trying to gain connection through vulnerability).
Religious Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -faith and mental health (and the church’s belief that depression is a sin) -trust in God to bring her through tough times -a growing and expansive faith coming from a conservative background -similar to Sam’s “guardian angel”: a boyfriend that helps her faith to transition and mature -Hollins helping her to be more open to people of differing beliefs -starting CCF because she felt there was no Christian community on campus -“the church was God to me”. When it fell apart, it took years to recover.

Measuring Results:

In chapter two I stated the measure for my results:

“A valid thesis will be supported through marked improvement between pre- and post- interviews and story circle discussions in terms of spiritual engagement, connection to community, and openness to plurality. The coding of narratives

and discussions will reveal religious and spiritual themes and symbols, which will deepen in the written narrative and final interview as compared to the initial interview. The thesis would be challenged if there is no change or a decrease in spiritual interest, faith development, or openness to pluralism, and a decreased connection to the student leader community after the study circle process.”

In the following sections, I have assessed my results from the frameworks of community, spiritual engagement, and openness to plurality.

Community

The first noticeable result from this project is the changing definitions of community by the participants and how that affected their sense of connection to the group. In initial interviews, students tended to define community as a feeling of closeness or commonality that seemed to happen organically. But final interviews revealed more thoughtfulness on how community is created through deliberate work and action. It is not something that merely forms around us and is not always easy, but requires wrestling with conflict to build trust. For example, Rei in their initial interview said the following about community:

“So community, for me, doesn’t necessarily have a look so much as it has a feeling of connectedness. For me, community exists when there is trust, and um, when a group operates kind of together without consciousness....So what I mean by that, true community exists when I don’t have to consciously think about being a part.”

Rei goes on to explain that while there is a sort of inherent community just in being a Hollins student, there is a certainty in their connection with their close friends,

“I don’t have to think about their love or their trust or my connection to them anymore. You know, I work in relationship with them, but I’m confident in my love and their love and in our mutual respect for each other.”

For Rei and for most of the group, community starts out as a feeling, a sense of closeness. The use of “inherent community” and “without consciousness” indicate the passive nature of it; it is something that happens to you without having to think about it. This understanding of community shifts to a more active definition in Rei’s final interview two months later,

“Community means a group of people who come together in fellowship with one another. I think community is inherently intentional. In order to form community, we have to give it thought, and give it energy, and attention. Because if not, I don’t necessarily think it’s a community; I think it’s just a group of people. I think that community exists wherever we can find commonality. It doesn’t have to be major commonality. We don’t have to all be exactly the same, but I think that inherent commonality helps foster a stronger community.”

In this case, community involves a group that intentionally “comes together” and gives it “thought...energy, and attention”. Seeking commonality within the group helps to distinguish it as a community.

When asked about their experience of community within our student leader group this semester, Rei responded,

“I don’t necessarily know if people outside of the group of us associate us together as a community, but I think we see each other in community with each other. We see each other in public in conversation outside of meeting time in community. That’s what the experience has been. Just like building another place to exist on campus... We’re closer in that we are definitely being more open with each other. That the community has grown and that’s really exemplified by the fact that we’re having very frank, honest dialogue now that gives us hope and community.”

Indiana’s definition also changed due to her interactions within in the group. She initially noted community as, *“A place where people can come together regardless of their backgrounds...and just unite on things that people should unite on. And even if there’s differing opinions, it’s having the respect for other people and working through conflict, I think.”* In her final interview she defined community as a *“reciprocal environment in which people feel comfortable to share things that in another setting they might not feel comfortable.”* Her use of the word “reciprocal” is notable as this word came up repeatedly in the group’s conflict between the Student Chaplains and *Better Together* leaders. Sam and Indiana were frustrated that the Student Chaplains didn’t reciprocate the work and support to *Better Together* that they shared with the Student Chaplains, and this notion of “reciprocity” became their cry for balance within the group’s focus and attention.

Others noted that the experience of conflict affected their connection to the community. Ruby said in her final interview, *“Our sense of community has grown.*

Especially since the last retreat, I believe, because we got to ask those uncomfortable questions.” Sam disagreed in her final interview, however, saying,

“[My experience of community] was stronger at the beginning of the year, strangely enough. I think we all tried really, really hard to work on community this year and to strengthen those bonds and I think some of the stuff that was happening underneath it all kind of got built up and it may have broken some of the bonds that were there before.”

Yet she is the only one that described it this way and I wonder if she is still carrying personal resentment about not finding the resolution she was seeking. This seems to be a marked difference from her affirmation at the evaluation retreat that working through the conflict had been a source of growth for the group.

Shalan didn't experience growth in connection to the group as a whole, although she did grow closer to individual members (the *Better Together* leaders). Her view of community was more specific than the others, defining it within the bounds of her Christian faith. Community as defined in her final interview was:

“a place, you know, where people who are like-minded come together and people who don't even know what they believe yet come together with a common goal to feel God's presence and to grow together. I feel like community is a place not only of fellowship, but a place to be accountable to one another and to grow, because that's the main objective—to continue to progress in your faith.”

Her stories of experiencing community come from her home church, which emphasizes right belief and ongoing spiritual growth as essential to faith. She was often frustrated

with our group for not being more passionate and motivated in what she saw to be the mission of our group, reaching out to campus, and was less interested in forming bonds within the group as she expressed that she doesn't trust people easily and has a difficult time making friends.

Rachel's beginning and ending definitions were similar, focusing on people with common interests working together to solve a problem or just being together in respect and love. Mary also had similarities, and like Shalan, connected her experience of community to her first church home. She experienced community as people who "check up on" each other, are open and authentic, and are present to one another in both formal and informal settings. This understanding guided her to develop accountability partners for CCF so that they could check in on and pray for one another between group meetings, and she was proactive about sending messages to the student leader group throughout the week to ask how they were doing.

In summary, the growth in an individual's sense of connection to community within our group was dependent on her or their definition of community and how that transformed through the research experience. While the majority of the group members' initial definitions of community were more passive in nature (community is natural, organic, or inherent; it just happens to us or we find ourselves within community), their final definitions included active descriptions of working to create community through frank conversation and working through conflict. Several student leaders stated that working through conflicts within our group strengthened our community by helping them to build trust with one another.

Spiritual engagement

Throughout the project, there was an increase in the student leaders' initiation of and engagement in faith dialogue and story sharing outside of the group. In particular, Rachel, Meaghan, Ruby, and Shalan expressed and demonstrated their willingness to engage in conversations of faith and diversity in other settings whether it was through conversations with friends, or *Better Together* or CCF meetings. The student leaders took on leadership responsibilities and training opportunities outside of our group requirements. Ruby participated in a diversity and inclusivity training on her own initiative and volunteered to lead a CCF meeting, even though it made her a little nervous. Mary volunteered to take a *Sustained Dialogue* facilitator training, which is part of our campus initiative to increase dialogue about diversity and inclusivity. Shalan was the first of the student leader group to lead a *Sanctuary* discussion in spring 2017 and grew in her connection to *Better Together*, planning and co-leading *Better Together* meetings and developing a closer friendship with Sam, the club's leader. Rei used story sharing in a program they created for first year students on homesickness.

I was pleased to notice when group members referred to the process outside of our story circle sessions. At the end of one meeting, Ruby shared a story as part of a prayer request about talking to her dad after a three-month estrangement. It was obviously an emotional subject for her, and I was encouraged by how the other students jumped in to ask her some of the same questions we use in our story circle discussions to help her to talk through her feelings and dig deeper to reflect on what this new development meant to her. Following this group conversation, I watched Ruby grow in confidence as she began reestablishing a healthy relationship with her dad. After setting clear boundaries with

him and building trust through phone conversations, she chose to visit him over spring break and had a good time.

I found that telling my own stories to individual group members inspired them to work through their issues and find effective solutions. Sam and Indiana came to me in frustration that their *Better Together* meetings weren't going as well as they had hoped. After a rebranding of the club with a new name, logo, and mission, they were disappointed not to have a large turnout of students. I empathized with them that this is a common problem at Hollins where an abundance of activities makes it difficult to draw a large crowd for any one event. But it didn't seem to make an impact until I told them a story about my own struggles with starting *Sanctuary* and the many hours of planning that went into the first week only to have six students show up. I was dismayed. But years of students affirming the difference the discussions made in their lives helped me to realize that the attendance alone wasn't an accurate measure of *Sanctuary's* effectiveness. Indiana immediately perked up in response and started sharing about how Shalan seemed to be opening up more and more in their meetings, showing that the club was making a difference in her life. Sam and Indiana left our meeting with renewed passion and energy about the importance of their work through *Better Together* and how it was impacting its members by providing them a welcoming space in which to explore faith.

There were measurable markers of increased individual spiritual growth as well. Rei applied and was accepted to seminary, a continuing exploration of their newfound Christianity and vocational calling. Indiana described the process of finding her own way to reclaiming her Catholic values and realizing she was missing something by not being a part of a church community. Rachel remarked that thinking about others' faith journeys

helped her to find meaning in her own story and provided incentive for her to initiate more faith conversations with her friends. Sam and Indiana's struggles with reworking *Better Together* led them to a renewed passion for the work they were doing once they found a meeting structure that fed their own spirits. Not surprisingly, once they found and exhibited their own delight in it, others were drawn to the meetings as well.

In summary, the increasing spiritual engagement of the student leaders was demonstrated in their greater involvement in the spiritual activities on campus, including volunteering for new opportunities and trainings and initiating conversations about faith and diversity. Engagement and growth in the story circle process was documented when student leaders used the discussion questions outside of a group meeting to help Ruby with processing her feelings about a conflict with her dad. Sam and Indiana found connection through my shared stories in supervisory meetings that helped them to gain a new perspective on struggles *Better Together* was facing. Finally, the spiritual growth of each participant was evident in their deepening connection to and participation in their own faith journeys.

Openness to Plurality

Most of the student leaders showed growth in this area. Rei, while already experienced in interfaith dialogue through their previous time as a Student Chaplain, their Unitarian Universalist tradition, and attending an Interfaith Leadership Institute Training through Interfaith Youth Core, still noted thinking deeper about more conservative traditions and coming face-to-face with differing beliefs that are an attack on their identity as a queer person. Rei saw the importance of "learning to hold people in my

heart” even while hearing hatefulness in their words sometimes, but knowing “they are coming from love and compassion.”

Sam witnessed growth in plurality within our group and talked about how Rachel’s story sharing session prompted a group discussion about evangelism. As the student leaders shared their different experiences with evangelism, Sam was inspired by Rachel’s view of evangelism as service and outreach to others instead of a sole concern with witnessing and conversion. Sam realized by talking with Shalan about their differing views on evangelism that “I can have those conversations with people of different faiths who have that very strong voice without ruining a relationship.

Indiana remarked that it would be more interesting to see how this project would work with students from other faith traditions as it happened that all the student leaders this year were Christians and had major similarities. Ruby echoed that thought in wanting to break the stereotype that the student leaders and the chapel programs are all about and only for Christians.

Shalan responded that she doesn’t initiate interfaith conversations because she doesn’t want to bombard people with her beliefs. She would, however, be comfortable talking about faith if the subject came up, and has grown in willingness to talk to people over the course of the project. While she did not have experiences to share of talking with people of other faiths, she said that if she did, she wouldn’t want to either condone or hinder their beliefs or say that they are irrevocably wrong. “I want to have a middle ground where like my opinion is valid to me. Your opinion is valid to you and we can disagree.” This viewpoint demonstrates marked growth for Shalan, who said in the beginning that she liked to learn about other faiths so that she would know how to prove

them wrong. As the first Student Chaplain to volunteer to lead a *Sanctuary* discussion in spring 2017, Shalan shared her faith story and experience and also created space for others to share their different perspectives without judgment through thoughtful questions and open discussion.

Rachel shared stories of talking with her friends about their religious backgrounds, which was a new experience for her. She also expressed a willingness to talk to people of different faiths saying that our different experiences shape us and “that’s important to really getting to know somebody.”

Mary had less experience within the group (missing several story meetings), but expressed through her story her growing openness to faiths outside of her own since coming to Hollins. In her story circle discussion she shared,

“And I believe that we serve a God of love, and a God of love wouldn’t hate somebody because they don’t necessarily believe what one religion believes to be true...Like, where is that? Show me where that is in the Bible. It took me a while to be comfortable with it, but through the support of groups like this group and, um, being more aware of the...like how many different cultures are on this campus, just really helped me grow out of that comfort zone.”

She mentioned also reaching out to Rei to learn more about the Unitarian Universalist faith.

The student leaders demonstrated an openness to plurality that continued to expand throughout the project and was reflected in their increased empathy and understanding for those who were different, in realizing that positive relationships can be

maintained even through difference of perspective and belief, and in an increased curiosity that developed to hear and learn from the stories of other faith traditions. This expanding openness to plurality showed that interfaith engagement through storytelling can help students gain an appreciative curiosity of those who are different and correlates with IFYC's research that shows "by creating positive, meaningful relationships across differences, and fostering appreciative knowledge of other traditions, attitudes improve, knowledge increases, and more relationships occur. These three are mutually reinforcing and backed by social science data, what we call the 'interfaith triangle'."⁷³

Reading the Data (What the story tells us)

Many different themes were picked up in the coding of the data from the interviews, written narratives, and story circle discussions including these recurring ones:

- Changing religious traditions/evolving personal theology
- God's presence/absence in suffering
- Church struggles and joys
- The challenging spiritual and religious climate of Hollins
- Personal vs. communal spirituality (or finding/losing a spiritual community)

Connections were made throughout the sharing process and across these themes as the students discovered their commonalities. Indiana, Ruby, and Rei bonded over their Catholic upbringing and what they held onto even as their personal faiths evolved. Sam, Mary, Rei, and Ruby had all questioned their family's faith to make their own way to understanding and connecting with God and a religious community. And there were two

⁷³ From *the science of interfaith cooperation* bullet point found at <https://www.ifyc.org/about>, accessed on 8/4/17.

students (Rachel and Indiana) who held on to their faith of origin even in times of conflict. Rachel's definition of evangelism prompted a discussion between Rachel, Shalan, Sam, Rei, and myself on our experiences of the negative sense of the word, while her understanding of it gave us a new and inspiring perspective. Sam was moved by Ruby's story to think of the passing of the peace in a new way, realizing how it can be meaningful to others' spirituality even though it may not be to her.

Through their stories, the students sought to understand God's presence in the transition times in their lives, whether it was through special people and community that they saw as a Godsend in difficult times (Rei and Sam), or through prophetic visions (Shalan) that showed God's blessing. Rei's story about her "stepfather" Jim's death and the resulting fight with his children that resulted in Rei and her mom being homeless revealed a God that showed up in the form of her church community that "picked them up" when they couldn't make it on their own. As a former humanist, Rei didn't believe in divine intervention, and yet, they realized through the experience that the universe would take care of them. Eventually "the universe" would resolve itself as God. Sam found God's grace in her fiancé, whom she views as a guardian angel God sent to teach her about giving second chances. Through their relationship, they are learning together how to trust God as a couple.

For Indiana, Ruby, and Mary, the journey through trauma helped reveal God's presence and provision. Indiana struggled after her parents' separation and was further wounded by her Catholic church that preached against divorce and women's rights. When Indiana spoke up to the priest about her views in support of women's ordination, he denied her communion, humiliating her in front of the church. Nevertheless, she

persisted, growing in her personal faith and spirituality outside of the church community, and still longs to find a Catholic church that supports her calling and beliefs. Ruby also experienced God in a new way after her parents' divorce. In her anger, God met her in the passing of peace during a church service she begrudgingly attended. Mary was told by her conservative Christian parents and church that her depression was a sin, and when her beloved church fell apart, her image of God was ruptured along with it. But her understanding of God was restored and enlarged upon entering college and being exposed to new understandings and people of different faith and cultural backgrounds.

Church was a recurring theme, as both a source of conflict and a place of belonging. Rei, Mary, and Rachel talked about the impact on church breakups on their faith. Rachel and Shalan shared about the everyday joys and connection they found in their faith. Rachel explored her growing personal connection to the Methodist faith of her childhood, surprising herself that one of the first things she did after coming to college was find a church home. She spoke about how church community and mission have been the keys to her faith. Shalan expressed that she has always considered herself a "citizen of the heavenly kingdom". To her, faith is not about religion, but is a way of life. Although she grew up in church as her dad is a pastor, she has felt a strong personal connection to her faith from an early age and does not consider it something she has just absorbed from her family. She had always dreamed and prayed of being a faith leader and having God speak to her, "I yearned to have His voice rain down on me, wash peace over me, and envelop me in a wave of love." Her story of a prophetic vision in church in which golden rain was falling around her and the words, "I am here. I have always been here. I will forever be here" was an epiphany that God had always been speaking to her.

She was empowered, realizing that “anyone who opens their hearts to listen and be used by God, His words, and His voice is a spiritual prophet and leader.” Although she was young and ordinary to others, she knew that in God’s eyes she was extraordinary in faith.

As students transitioned from their childhood faiths into their own faith formation, they had to find new faith communities and learn to navigate the challenging spiritual and religious climate of Hollins. Rachel, Shalan, and Sam found it difficult to find room for faith expression in Hollins’ secular culture. Ruby, Indiana, and Mary grew in their personal spirituality but longed to find a community in which they could grow and worship with others of similar belief and practice. Rei’s journey was more internal and personal after finding the Divine within a church community and now exploring their own vocational call to ministry. Chapel programs and the leadership opportunities within them helped these students to explore their faith and grow into a more mature and engaged faith as they also provided opportunities for other students to experience religion and spirituality on a campus that is not considered to be at all religious.

In summary, the participants’ stories contained recurring themes that allowed the students to connect over their shared experiences. These themes were the students’ changing religious traditions and how their personal theology was evolving, God’s presence or perceived absence in suffering and transition, the impact of specific church experiences and how they created conflict or a sense of belonging, the challenging spiritual and religious climate of Hollins, and their personal vs. communal expressions of spirituality.

Style of Faith Evaluations

In addition to the interviews, written narratives, and story discussions, I had participants fill out a Westerhoff Style of Faith self-evaluation. In Westerhoff's model, faith development is illustrated through concentric rings, showing a progression that is not linear, but may vacillate throughout the circumstances of our lives and our interactions with our environment.⁷⁴ The styles are experienced, affiliative, searching/questioning, and owned. Experienced faith is our introduction to a faith community, seeking what meets our basic need (e.g. trust). Affiliative faith is when we begin to find our place in community, fulfilling our need for belonging. There is a time of transition to searching or questioning faith, when a person begins to question what they have been taught of faith and seek their own faith identity. An owned faith is a claimed faith identity that draws us into engagement outside of ourselves and our faith community to wrestle with issues of social justice in the world.⁷⁵ I hypothesized that through the story circle process of finding meaning and connection in their faith stories, the student leaders would grow in their faith development (moving beyond experienced faith towards owned faith).

In the self-evaluations, Rei and Indiana identified themselves as questioning, which makes sense due to their phase of young adult development and the wrestling with faith they described in their stories. Rei added that they found their definition of the divine while at Hollins (their so-called "Jesus Crisis"). Rachel marked that she was half affiliative and half owned, but my reasoning of this combination would place her in the questioning style. Sam marked affiliative, noting that her faith has become stronger and

⁷⁴ Westerhoff, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Morehouse Pub, 2012.

⁷⁵ Explanations are paraphrased from my notes on Dr. Lisa Kimball's Holistic Environments of Faith and Learning class lecture 6/23/16.

more personal, although she struggles to find the time to focus on it with her busy schedule. Ruby was affiliative, moving towards questioning, as she seeks to rely on God more than going on her own. Shalan designated her faith as owned, but from her story, I wonder if she has gone through questioning to bring her to this point of certainty. She noted the struggle of being outside of spiritual community since she is away from her home church and therefore her relationship with God has been more personal. Mary answered that she wavers between questioning and owned, and that since being at Hollins she has asked bigger questions that have helped her to be more comfortable with her faith.

These results (with most of the leaders self-identifying as affiliative or questioning) do indicate that students are progressing in their faith development in a way expected of this phase of their development and that their time at Hollins and as chapel student leaders has nurtured their spiritual growth.

This chapter has reviewed the methodology for my research: introducing the participants, explaining their initial training retreat, and detailing the project plan (initial interviews with each participant, the story circle weekly meetings featuring a different student's story each week followed by discussion, final participant interviews, and an evaluation retreat). I provided a summary of my reflections on each student's story based on my methodology for assessment: coherence, openness, vitality, differentiation, reconciliation, generative imagination, and vulnerability. Overall results were analyzed based on growth in community, spiritual engagement, and openness to plurality and in each student leader's self-evaluation based on Westerhoff's Styles of Faith model.

Chapter 4: Story Framework

(Behavioral and Theological Assumptions)

“What do we know when we know a story? We can know that we fit.”⁷⁶

“But put a spiritual insight to a story, an experience, a face; describe where it anchors in the ground of your being; and it will change you in the telling and others in the listening. In Collegeville, discussion about a large, meaty, theological subject began by framing it as a question, and then asking everyone around the table to begin to answer that question through the story of their lives: Who is God? What is prayer? How to approach the problem of evil? What is the content of Christian hope? I can disagree with your opinion, it turns out, but I can’t disagree with your experience. And once I have a sense of your experience, you and I are in relationship, acknowledging the complexity in each other’s position, listening less guardedly. The difference in our opinions will probably remain intact, but it no longer defines what is possible between us.”⁷⁷

The underlying framework for my research is illustrated in the title of this paper, “My Story, Our Story, God’s Story: Storytelling as a Means of Faith Formation and Community-Building in College Students”. Our identities are constructed as we make meaning of our stories and as we grow in relationship and understanding with others, building community through our differing but intersecting narratives. Our faith is formed and matures as we reflect on how our lives fit into the greater narrative of God’s work in the world throughout time, and recognize how God’s presence and purpose is still being revealed through the storyline of our lives.

In my counseling sessions with students, I regularly ask several questions to help them reflect on their life stories, guiding them to see how their experiences are

⁷⁶ Taylor, Daniel. *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories*. Bog Walk Press, 2001, 25.

⁷⁷ Tippett, Krista. *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Art and Mystery of Living*. Penguin Books, 2017, 22.

connecting to create a larger story of who they are becoming, and to understand how these stories might intersect with the stories of others. These questions became the framework for weekly *Sanctuary* discussions in the spring of 2017. The questions are:

If you were to write an autobiography, what would you entitle it?

What would be the title of the chapter you are currently writing?

What is your Hollins story (or what brought you to Hollins)?

The journey to transformation starts in self-reflection as we begin to narrate our lives, collating the disparate experiences into chapters that form the assembled narrative of our lives. The tales we choose to tell, and those we omit, reveal our foundational values and the framework for how we view ourselves and our world. Being able to articulate our story and to tell it on our own terms is a critical developmental process of young adulthood that Marcia Baxter Magolda terms “self-authorship”.⁷⁸

Self-reflection is not solely an internal process, however. The process of self-reflection and development requires a community in which we can externally process our growing understanding and begin the work of transformation. In our interactions and relationships with others, we recognize that our stories do not stand alone, but that as our lives intersect, so, too, do our stories. There is power in speaking our truth with others and in allowing others’ truths to challenge and shape our understandings. As Richard Niebuhr says, “The history of the inner life can only be confessed by selves who speak of

⁷⁸ Baxter Magolda, Marcia B. *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life’s Challenges*. Stylus Publishing, 2009, 8.

what happened to them in the community of other selves.”⁷⁹ As we share our stories with one another, we begin creating a shared story, “our story”, which helps us to find our place in relation to those around us.

Asking about students’ Hollins story points out that they have chosen to be part of a larger institutional story. When they were exploring colleges, something about Hollins’ story resonated with their own. Many students say that tales of our close-knit community first drew them, and this is our most prevalent narrative. Students who connect with our small suburban campus of 700 undergraduate students appreciate being known by name and having the support to pursue individual goals. They care about the stories of sisterhood and finding lifelong friends.

Yet what happens when that story no longer rings true for some? Hollins’ difficulties over the past few years in relating as a community and the impact on student well-being was discussed in chapter one. The growing social disconnection among Hollins University students demonstrated in complaints about racial tension and religious discrimination, and their inner-personal disconnection exemplified by their struggles with anxiety make me wonder how our challenges in connecting as a community are impacting student growth. Arthur Chickering stresses the influence that a student’s environment has on student development, and notes the importance of a diverse and connected student community in supporting identity development.⁸⁰ If, as I presume, our

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, H. Richard. “The Story of Our Life” in Hauerwas, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones (eds). *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* W.B. Eerdmans, 1989, 36.

⁸⁰ Evans, Nancy J.; Deanna S Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998, 41.

students' disconnection from community is impacting their individual well-being and development, we, as a college community, are responsible for addressing these issues to support individual and communal growth as an essential task in higher education.

In considering an intervention that would be transformative in our setting, I experimented with storytelling as a spiritual practice to counter our students' intrapersonal and interpersonal disconnection. Developing and utilizing a story circle method of sharing and listening to one another's stories, I invited student leaders into introspection and meaning-making ("my story"). Through their sharing and active listening, the goal was for the student leader group to develop into a bonded community, realizing their collective mission in their work at Hollins ("our story"). As the student faith leaders on our campus, participants were guided to reflect theologically on their experiences so that they would be equipped to guide other students through a similar process of finding meaning and purpose as part of a larger story ("God's story").

This chapter will show the research that supports my thesis from two perspectives: behavioral science and theology. By exploring the process of identity and faith formation in adolescence and the shifts in higher education that have stymied these critical developmental tasks, I will demonstrate ways in which storytelling as a spiritual practice can meet these adaptive challenges. Using narrative theology to examine how Jesus used storytelling in his teaching and discipleship, God's story and our place within it will become more evident.

Behavioral Science Framework

Adolescent Development and Identity Formation

As the seeds of my calling as a university chaplain were planted during my own transformational college ministry experience, I value the identity formation and faith growth that can happen during the college years, especially when this development is supported by the mission and initiatives of higher education institutions. Sharon Daloz Parks describes it in this way, “No longer adolescents, young, emerging adults have achieved critical strengths, yet in a complex and demanding culture, they remain appropriately dependent in distinctive ways on recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration as they make their way into full adulthood. Not only the quality of their individual lives but also our future as a culture depends in no small measure on our capacity to recognize emerging adults, to initiate them into the big questions of their lives and our times, and to give them access to worthy dreams.”⁸¹ College students rely on higher education professionals (especially chaplains) to shepherd them through this important transition, prompting them to reflect upon questions of meaning and purpose necessary for their adult development. From my personal experience over the past seven years, the dependency of college students on student affairs staff is only increasing as students arrive on campus with fewer coping skills and greater needs and demands for support.

What, then, are the tasks and goals that young adults encounter through this transition of identity and faith formation? Erik Erikson described the processes that must take place across the lifespan and the challenges of each developmental stage: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority,

⁸¹ Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2011, ix.

identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair.⁸² In adolescence, the primary task is *identity formation* as the individual interacts with his or her environment and peers to find a place socially and occupationally. In coming to terms with their maturing bodies and changing expectations as they look towards the future, emerging adults face transitions in separating from parents and preparing to make their own independent journey from home. This ushers in a moratorium, a period between childhood and adulthood of determining personal values and worldview before making a commitment.⁸³ Whether adolescents plan to enter the workforce or college, they will need to know and follow their values and trust themselves to be the authority in decision-making. The emergent virtue of this stage is fidelity,⁸⁴ as they learn to accept self and others. The crisis that must be overcome is *role confusion* as the young person can “temporarily overidentify, to the apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds.”⁸⁵ An authentic and grounded sense of self is the necessary prerequisite for making decisions with confidence and integrity.⁸⁶

Arthur Chickering built on Erikson’s work and contributed his model of seven developmental vectors that promote identity formation during the college years.⁸⁷ As

⁸² Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1963, 247-268.

⁸³ Fowler, James. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2000, 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

⁸⁵ Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1963, 262.

⁸⁶ According to Fowler, Erikson considered a crisis to be a “turning point”, a developmental task that challenges an individual’s personhood. Consequently, an individual in crisis can either grow in strength (develop an emergent virtue appropriate to each stage) or be diminished by their weakness (Fowler, 15).

⁸⁷ Evans, Nancy J.; Deanna S Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998, 10.

vectors can have varied direction and magnitude, Chickering's model is not one of linear progression, but movement may be cyclical as students return to previous vectors in changing circumstances. The vectors grow in complexity and build on one another as they guide young adults to build new skills. The vectors are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity.⁸⁸

With these vectors, students gain confidence and competence as they learn to manage their intellectual, physical, and social responsibilities, gain responsibility and independence, and develop friendships and intimate relationships. As students attain these skills, the skills culminate so that one gains an understanding and acceptance of his, her, or their personal identity (including gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, culture, role, and social class) and can choose to reject or redeem any labels that were given to them by others in preference for what is meaningful to them personally.⁸⁹

The work I do with student leaders utilizes these vectors in our training together. While my goal is to develop them to be strong leaders in order to serve our campus, I realize that the first step is to help them in their individual growth. Our one-on-one supervisory meetings provide the space for them to reflect on their frustrations and successes and their reactions to them. Through making meaning of their experiences, they are developing competence and learning more about their identity. Group meetings

⁸⁸ Evans, Nancy J.; Deanna S Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998, 38-40.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

allow us to practice interpersonal relationships and managing emotions as we work through conflicts using our different styles. Through our individual and collective work, we strive to develop purpose and integrity as we serve the campus using the skills we have learned.

Parks, Erikson, and Chickering describe the crucial work of identity formation in adolescence and how each stage builds on the previous ones in order to develop an individual's competency and autonomy. In this phase that brings challenges (or "crises"), emerging adults require the support of mature adult mentors who can guide them through the process and inspire reflection and growth through posing questions of meaning and purpose. Faith formation requires the same support and guided reflection, and proceeds in a similar manner of progressive stages.

Faith Formation

Faith formation is integral to identity formation during adolescence and young adulthood. According to Parks, faith is "an activity that all human beings share. Whether expressed in religious or secular terms, *faith is the activity of meaning-making in the most comprehensive dimensions of our awareness.*"⁹⁰ This work of meaning-making drives more than just a set of beliefs, but a way of understanding that guides our lives and actions. This understanding does not remain static, but must continually adapt to the circumstances of our lives, seeking truth among the many different myths presented.

James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* has provided a foundational understanding of faith formation since its publication in 1981. Building on Erikson's psychosocial

⁹⁰ Parks, x.

development stages, Piaget's cognitive developmental theories, and Kohlberg's work on moral development, Fowler sought to explain how we encounter and grow in faith across our lifespan.⁹¹ According to Fowler, faith is present from birth, but deepens depending on the environments and ways in which we are nurtured. It is shaped by our encounters with others, our own seeking, and in "initiatives of spirit or grace" outside of ourselves.⁹² In adolescence, youth typically enter stage 3 (synthetic-conventional) as they grow more comfortable with abstract concepts and interact with the diversity of life, particularly as experienced in school and their local community. As Chickering explains Fowler's stage 3, "The individual begins to define self-identity, to establish the meaning of various narratives for self and others, and to synthesize an individual's life story, particularly in relation to others."⁹³ Through a process of self-authorization and differentiation, the young adult transitioning to stage 4 (individuative-reflective) begins to develop an understanding of themselves as a "self" beyond the roles and masks they bear, and they engage in an intentional process of committing to their now examined beliefs and values.⁹⁴ They will firm up their commitments made in stage 3, becoming more integrated in their identity and less dependent on the voices of others. This integration

⁹¹ Chickering, Arthur, John Dalton, and Liesa Stamm. *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass, 2006, 53.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁴ Fowler, James. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2000, 49.

necessitates a period of self-reflection and critical thinking about themselves and their world.⁹⁵

Sharon Daloz Parks enriched Fowler's work by focusing on the specific faith development of college-age young adults as they begin to locate authority within themselves. Stage 1 adolescent or conventional faith is characterized by "*authority-bound, dualistic (tacit) forms of knowing, dependent/counterdependent forms of dependence; and conventional forms of community.*"⁹⁶ Adolescent faith starts with a reliance on outside authorities such as the family, church, or holy texts as sources of knowledge. As they move towards independence, they may wrestle with and resist authority, a movement known as counterdependence. Although community initially is equated with conformity, a shift takes place as they notice and become open to the perspective of others, and attachment to a particular community weakens.⁹⁷

In stage 2, young adult faith is in transition, emphasizing "*probing commitment (ideological) forms of knowing; fragile inner-dependent forms of dependence; and mentoring forms of community.*"⁹⁸ Young adults work to construct meaning and faith as they realize the pressures of determining their life's path. Their dependence shifts, and they waver between dependence on family and outside authorities as their own identity is shaky. Their inner-dependence begins to develop as they discover the support and

⁹⁵ Fowler, James. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2000, 56.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁷ Chickering et al., 59.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

challenge of new authorities and commitments through finding their place in a mentoring community and network of belonging.⁹⁹

I utilized Westerhoff's Styles of Faith model in teaching my student leaders about faith formation and how their faith could be shifting and developing as they began to identify what they wanted to hold onto, discard, and/or change from the faith traditions in which they had been nurtured. Through my story circle process, I provided the model and the means for students to reflect on and question their faith experiences, seeing questioning as a facet of growing faith that would encourage them to progress towards an owned faith. The results of students' engagement with Westerhoff's Styles of Faith is found in chapter 3.

Westerhoff's focus was on religious education and how faith is transmitted to children. Distinguishing between religion (the means of teaching) and faith (the end, which is inspired, lived out, and not taught), he focused on the role of the community of faith which "has a common story and life is shaped by that story. Stories form the community, and it is the biblical story that must shape the church's life by becoming its story."¹⁰⁰ Faith, then, is an active verb, and one that is cultivated in community through shared stories and experiences.

Erikson, Chickering, Fowler, Parks, and Westerhoff all note that the process of identity and faith formation does not take place independently, but within the network of interactions and relationships that surround us. We learn who we are and what we

⁹⁹ Chickering et al., 60.

¹⁰⁰ Westerhoff, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Morehouse Pub, 2012, 51.

believe in conjunction with others who are learning the same, and with those who mentor us. This points to the necessity of having faithful companions on the journey, mature and faithful adults who can offer appropriate support and challenge, initiating them into the “big questions and worthy dreams” of meaning and purpose that Parks describes.

Mentors are also helpful in teaching coping skills to guide young adults in building resilience so that they can weather the stresses of life on their own strength, while also being aware of the supports around them. In this transitional period, young adults also need quiet spaces for personal reflection and trusted authorities that can be a sounding board as they begin to make important life decisions for themselves.

Shifts and Adaptive Challenges in Higher Education

The inner formation of a young adult in terms of their identity and faith is as vital as enriching their minds academically. My reading and research, however, have shown that the type of self-reflection needed for this sort of growth and development is not always a priority in today’s high pressure academic environment. Astin says, “While...the core of liberal arts education is grounded in the maxim ‘know thyself’, the development of self-awareness receives very little attention in colleges and universities these days.”¹⁰¹ Though higher education began as a religious endeavor to develop the whole self, through the secularization of education, we have moved away from inner development and the life of the spirit.

¹⁰¹ Astin, Alexander, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, 2.

As the spiritual element becomes more neglected in higher education (or relegated entirely to the chaplain's office), we must deal with the increasing anxiety in the system from students who are not resilient in facing the challenges of academic and social life, from faculty that must increasingly reach beyond their disciplines to deal with perceived nonacademic issues in the classroom (e.g. students with developmental and mental health struggles, the demand for trigger warnings for course material, and the understanding and prevention of microaggressions), and from staff who complain about the disconnections between different aspects of campus life and the disintegrating sense of community as students compete to meet their individual needs without thoughtful concern and empathy for one another.

Some educators would label the above-mentioned challenges as spiritual problems, if not crises. Parker Palmer, a Quaker, and Arthur Zajonc, an academic, write about the "soullessness of the university" that prepares students for a vocation without meaning.¹⁰² Palmer further elaborates, "the pain that permeates education is the pain of disconnection."¹⁰³ This pain is realized in pedagogies that do not address the whole person, but focus solely on the mind. While higher education can prepare students to find their place within and become engaged citizens of their community and world, its aims can be reduced to competitive job preparation that further separate students instead of building community.

¹⁰² Palmer, Parker and Arthur Zajonc. *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, 54.

¹⁰³ Palmer, Parker. *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. Harper, 1993, x.

Arthur Chickering points out that in the secularization of education, much of the focus on moral and character development has been lost, and with it, the connective force of spirituality. As institutions have grown more specialized, the educational system has changed its focus from understanding connections between things to dissecting things into smaller pieces.¹⁰⁴ The practice of religion has been separated from the academic study of religion, with the former being devalued. At Hollins, the separation of religious practice from the study of religion is exemplified in the removal of teaching responsibilities from the chaplain's job description and from faculty who disparage students who bring up their religious beliefs in class discussions.

This separation between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit results in religious tension on college campuses. Secular institutions attempt to avoid any hint of religious indoctrination and view religious and spiritual practice as a personal and private matter. Private and religious colleges must be mindful of the diversity of beliefs and practices represented even as they may officially endorse a particular faith. It becomes more difficult as affiliation shifts and the majority religion (Christianity) is declining, while the number of minority religions represented increases. On many campuses, the non-believers and the "spiritual but not religious"¹⁰⁵ are the largest growing populations. Yet while religious engagement may be decreasing in some segments of the population,

¹⁰⁴ Chickering et al., 77-81.

¹⁰⁵ "Spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) is typically defined as individuals who are not connected to an organized religion (or have moved away from a particular tradition) in order to seek their own path to meaning and truth. At Hollins, many of these students see no need in attending church, but prefer to find God in nature or in their own solitary spiritual quest. Some SBNR students express their distaste for religion due to a hurtful religious experience, and others are just open to exploring the best qualities of different faiths without restrictions.

spiritual interest and need is growing and is often not adequately addressed in the curriculum or in extra-curricular initiatives.¹⁰⁶ Campuses are increasingly sensitive to diversity needs but often neglect religious diversity concerns, which is reflected in Nash and Murray's understanding that "*Multiculturalism, diversity, and pluralism* are empty catchwords unless they include religious and spiritual diversity and nonbelief diversity as well."¹⁰⁷

Author, professor, and social activist bell hooks quotes from Steven Glazer's *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, "Many people fear religion or spirituality in education because they are afraid of the 'imposition of identity' and the 'indoctrination of particular beliefs.' Glazer explains, 'Out of this fear of imposition a great tragedy has taken place...the wholesale abandonment of the inner world. This fear has allowed us to ignore in our classroom (and lives) the existence of the inner realm, the realm of spiritual formation, of spiritual identity.'" ¹⁰⁸ hooks continues, "Schooling that does not honor the needs of the spirit simply intensifies that sense of being lost, of being unable to connect."¹⁰⁹

As a result, students at Hollins are feeling the spiritual disconnection both from the realm of religious faith (What/Where is the Holy Other that created us with a purpose

¹⁰⁶ Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), UCLA, "College Students Report High Levels of Spirituality and Religiousness," news release, April 13, 2005, http://spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/news/release_study3.pdf, accessed 13 December, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Nash, Robert and Michele C. Murray. *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, 60.

¹⁰⁸ hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge, 2003, 179.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

and who orders our world?) and from our community (Who is our neighbor and how are we to live in relation to one another?). When we ignore these spiritual questions, our questions of meaning and purpose are reduced to mere material concerns about what we can produce (work) and what this will provide for us (a job).¹¹⁰ Frequently in my role as chaplain, I have had panicked seniors lining up outside my office door in the spring to talk about what they should do with their lives. Many of them haven't previously considered this question beyond what classes they needed to take to get a degree that was supposedly going to provide a successful end goal. More and more often, though, students are recognizing even earlier in their college careers that something is missing from their formation as they seek to understand why they are so busy fulfilling the required tasks and yet feel so empty, incomplete, and uncertain. In seeking out the chaplain, they are recognizing the spiritual nature of their crisis.

Glazer says we can resolve this disconnection by “establishing sacredness as the ground of learning” not from a religious framework, but growing out of our awareness and wholeness.¹¹¹ As I see it, this move to incorporate the sacred into academia reveals the adaptive challenges for the chaplaincy: first, creating the space for the sacred through exploring spiritual practices and the integration of spirituality into holistic wellbeing in higher education. Secondly, providing opportunities for intentional and guided reflection on faith formation as a means of supporting this critical aspect of identity development. While spirituality has been neglected in many areas of campus life, my students are seeking a more integrated and holistic education. They want and need a space to ask the

¹¹⁰ Chickering et al., 10.

¹¹¹ Chickering et al., 180.

big questions and consider how their studies are forming them and how they might discern a sense of their vocation from their passions and the world's needs that weigh heaviest on their hearts. As tensions mount in our diverse and polarized world, students are left trying to find their place and identity amidst the brokenness. College students need spiritual guides along the way that can help them recognize the greater truths (and Truth) in their experiences and apply them. They need guided reflection to prompt their process of meaning-making and improve their well-being. This in turn helps them to interact with the world in generative ways.

In summary, shifts in higher education that have deemphasized the spiritual lives of students have also resulted in an increased sense of disconnection for many individuals on college campuses who are looking to integrate learning and faith. This disconnection creates an adaptive challenge for university faculty, staff, and administrators to consider how we are engaging students in the process of meaning-making. The recognition of spirituality as a significant factor in campus life and the support of spiritual programming can contribute positive gains toward student development and campus community-building.

The Importance of Spirituality

In my chaplaincy work, I have defined spirituality as that which connects us to our deepest truest self, to those around us, and to the Divine. Our spiritual well-being is nurtured by devoting time to the passions that enliven our energy, and by engaging in activities that foster connection to the world and beings outside of ourselves (whether that be God, another deity, nature, or a value or ideal that drives us). Spirituality, then, both moves us inward to care for ourselves, and also outward to love and serve others. I

resonate with Parker Palmer, who considers spirituality to be the integration of our inner and outer lives, involving personal reflection that also calls us into community with others to share our thoughts and join our actions.¹¹²

Through her sociological research on vulnerability, Brené Brown has acknowledged the importance of spirituality as she defines it, “Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to one another by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and belonging. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.”¹¹³ From my vantage point in ministering to young women who struggle to find their worth and value, this notion of our inherent love and need for belonging is both powerful and challenging. Growing up in a culture that places value in production and consumption, women learn from an early age that their worth can be found in what they possess, buy, and achieve. It is no wonder we have a highly stressed and anxious generation of students who struggle to take on heavier course loads and more commitments that they can reasonably handle due to internal and external expectations. This pressure pushes them to compete with their peers instead of finding connection, and is detrimental to their well-being.

However, this definition shows the healing potential of spirituality. Brown’s research identified spirituality as a critical component of resilience and overcoming struggle, and other studies have shown the same. According to author Lisa Miller,

¹¹² Palmer, Parker. *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. Harper, 1993, 17.

¹¹³ Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. Random House, 2015, 10.

spirituality can be a resource for helping young adults through the inner work required of identity development, and can help promote emotional resilience, character-building, meaningful work, and healthy relationships.¹¹⁴ As measures of active spirituality are associated with decreased rates of depression, substance abuse, and risk-taking behaviors, it can be a protective force during the turbulent years of adolescent transition.¹¹⁵

Particularly relevant for college students, spiritual practices develop connections within the brain that stimulate the continuing development of the prefrontal cortex, which aids in decision-making, and connects the head and heart in moral reasoning.¹¹⁶ In particular, prayer, mindfulness practices, meditation, and a daily examen or gratitude reflection exercise are spiritual practices that have been useful to the students with whom I have worked by slowing them down to think, seek guidance, and reflect on the present moment.

Spirituality, as has been discussed, is a means of connecting to our inner selves, to one another in community, and to the Divine. It has been shown through research to be a tool for building resilience and in finding perspective and meaning in life. Spiritual practices are easily taught to and utilized by young adults as coping skills to support them through the challenges they face. As such, spirituality can play an important and therapeutic role in an adolescent's development.

The Importance of Storytelling

¹¹⁴ Miller, Lisa. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. St. Martin's Press, 2015, 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2015, 218.

Storytelling, particularly sharing stories of faith, can be used as a means of connection, reflection, and spiritual growth. Therefore, storytelling is a spiritual practice because it “cultivates awareness” and can help develop resilience through “wrestling with perspective, meaning, and purpose.”¹¹⁷ This is a practice that can be easily taught and utilized with young adults that are hungering for spiritual connection as they seek to understand who they are and to develop relationships with others who are on the same journey.

Many authors and researchers¹¹⁸ have explored how the act of telling our story is also an act of meaning-making and healing. Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own faith narratives (facilitated by nurturing mentors) will help them to find their place in the larger story of Hollins. For those who are religious, students can find their place in God’s Story by stopping to be still and know God, seeking the answers to spiritual questions such as “Who am I? Where and to whom do I belong? What is my purpose? What is the meaning of my life? Where is God in my story?” This is a crucial developmental process that has been lacking for many of our students.

Storytelling is also a powerful tool for connection as community is forged as people find themselves in a shared story. In a time of increasing diversity and polarity, sharing our stories and learning to respectfully listen to one another is a key to interfaith leadership, breaking down barriers and stereotypes and instead building bridges of connection across differences in faith and belief.¹¹⁹ While our “diversity is a fact;

¹¹⁷ Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. Random House, 2015, 11.

¹¹⁸ Parks, Baxter Magolda, Seligman, and Jones, for example.

¹¹⁹ Patel, 29.

pluralism is an achievement, one that must be worked at.”¹²⁰ Gordon Allport has demonstrated the bonding effects of “contact theory”¹²¹, and research has shown that developing friendships with even one member of a marginalized religious group can improve someone’s attitude toward the whole group...and other minority religious groups as well.¹²² It is important for us to hear one another’s stories so that we can understand our fundamental connections and learn from our differences. Sharing our stories helps us to be inwardly *bonded* as a group, while making us *bridged* so that we can outwardly work together across lines of difference.¹²³ As Hans Küng said, “No peace between the nations without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions.”¹²⁴

Throughout this section, I have explored the tasks of identity and faith formation in adolescence and how they have been impacted by shifts in the focus of higher education. By neglecting spiritual development, educators have fostered disconnection within students’ personal lives (evidenced in students’ struggle to find meaning and their increasing struggles with mental health) and within campus communities (resulting in tension and division). Spirituality, as a practice and a force that connects inner and outer aspects of people’s lives, can improve students’ well-being by offering them coping skills that will develop resilience and fostering a sense of meaning and purpose. Spirituality

¹²⁰Patel, 54 (citing Diana Eck).

¹²¹ Ibid., 54.

¹²² Ibid., 55 (citing Putnam and Campbell’s *American Grace*).

¹²³ Ibid., 60 (citing Putnam’s *Better Together*).

¹²⁴ Ibid., 77.

can also strengthen students' relationships with their peers by helping them to recognize their innate connection as human beings, uniting them across their diversity. Storytelling can be utilized as a spiritual practice as it guides students to make meaning of their experiences, builds community as they share our stories with one another, and guides students to recognize commonalities and learn from one another in their differences.

Theological Framework

Storytelling as Social Justice

As Hollins students develop their theology through storytelling, they are also engaging in social justice through speaking up. Students can be empowered by claiming their stories and their authentic voice, refusing to be victimized by circumstances, be silenced or pushed aside, or to have others speak on their behalf. They are invited to share their lives and understand that the worth of their stories in connecting them to something greater. Brené Brown says, "We own our stories so we don't spend our lives being defined by them or denying them."¹²⁵ There is power in understanding our stories and in realizing that how we interpret the truth of them is up to us. "Our histories are never all good or all bad, and running from the past is the surest way to be defined by it. That's when it owns us. The key is bringing light to the darkness—developing awareness and understanding."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. Random House, 2015, 40.

¹²⁶ Brown, 249.

In hearing the stories of others and understanding our connectedness to one another, we are called as activists. Educators and mentors guiding the story sharing process can, as Paulo Freire said, empower students to “become agents in the process of social change”¹²⁷ and give voice to those who have been marginalized. This is especially pertinent for young women, whose voices are often silenced and whose experiences do not comprise the dominant narrative of history or research. Dori Baker addresses this gap in her work, coining the term “girlfriend theology” to describe her method of inviting young women to share their stories with one another, discovering connections with the stories of other women, and providing theological context for their experiences as they look for God’s presence in their unfolding narratives. She infuses her discussions with the work of womanist, feminist, and liberation theologians.

This work, which greatly influenced my project, meets youth “at the crossroads between adolescence and adulthood” and is a “relational model of producing meaning,” moving young women from reflection to action.¹²⁸ I appreciate how this method encourages the participants to construct their theology, becoming “authors of their own meaning” through relationships with their peers and the guidance of a faithful adult mentor.¹²⁹ It can be empowering for young women in particular to be part of a space that encourages their voices through a group of active listeners that hears them to speech.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005, 146.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁰ This is like a comment from one of Dori’s subjects (*Ibid.*, 30) as well as Parker Palmer’s rationale behind his Circles of Trust, to “hear each other into deeper speech” (Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. Jossey-Bass, 2004).

A women's institution such as Hollins is a prime place for exploring this method, working to give voice to those who may not all identify as women, but have all experienced marginalization and silencing through their minority identities.

For our students who have been hurt by religion (in particular our LGBTQ students who have been devalued or excluded from churches or women who haven't been allowed in church leadership roles), critical reflection on faith and discovering new images of God can be a means of healing from trauma and reclaiming a personal faith and theology that is not dictated by the former religious authorities. We need these stories and voices of the marginalized to inspire us to "participate in 'saving work'...to join the communal process of continually reshaping the Christian tradition"¹³¹ both for the marginalized and for the Church.

Rebecca Chopp, who studies women in religion and higher education, encourages women to find "a new *ecclesia* that allows women to name the holy in ways that fit their expectations."¹³² Those who have been alienated by theology or patriarchal symbols and power are then empowered to deconstruct these theologies and symbols in their limiting, restrictive functions and reconstruct them in ways that bring new life, shared power, and blessing for all people.¹³³ This effort will write new liberation theologies that tell of

¹³¹ Rebecca Chopp quoted in Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005, 32.

¹³² Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005, 51.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

resistance to those who would hold us back and silence us through the act of sharing our voice and finding our God-ordained place in the story of faith.

I am encouraged by the number of students who have left the church in anger and hurt, only to come to me seeking reconciliation with a faith that seems to deny their very identity. And yet God continues to draw them, whispering a story of belonging and hope. These God stories become saving work for individuals who can find their place within faith again just as they are, and for those of us called to share the story of God's all-encompassing love and grace, which continues to unfold in new revelations of inclusion. Through our shared lives and stories, we create "fifth gospels. Our life stories are sacred texts where God continues to reveal God's self" in new ways.¹³⁴

Narrative Identity

Paul Ricoeur developed the narrative identity theory to explain how we "understand who we are by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves."¹³⁵ We narrate the events of our days to ourselves or to friends, making connections that explain why we like what we do and how we came to our beliefs. I have always thought of myself as having a richly creative inner life, and trace my development as an introvert back to my preschool years when I made up stories about my imaginary friends, Tootie and Suzie, as I rode the high school bus that my mom drove. The high schoolers loved talking to me,

¹³⁴ Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005, 40.

¹³⁵ Patel, Eboo. *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*. Beacon Press, 2016, 28.

but being little and shy, I preferred my own quiet headspace and deferred their requests to sit beside me by telling them that Tootie and Suzie were already sitting there.

While personal introspection is crucial, we also need community. Our identity is not formed in isolation, but rather it comes through our intersection with others' narratives. Hearing others' stories helps to expand our own understandings, and can either solidify or shatter our own closely held truths as we take in new information and experiences, critically questioning and reframing our own search for and context of meaning. I have found in my chaplaincy work, particularly through our weekly interfaith *Sanctuary* gatherings, that hearing another's faith story often makes a student stronger in her own faith as she reflects on what she believes in comparison with others and why. When I went away to college, my church family feared that going to a secular school would destroy my faith, but instead my faith was strengthened as I was confronted with differing beliefs and had to choose my own path, internalizing my own values through the process of questioning, learning, and engaging with others of similar and differing beliefs.

Our stories provide the means to understand ourselves and our world since the human brain processes events in narrative form. We both perceive and create reality.¹³⁶ Our identity and personal theology begins to form as we write and tell our stories, and as we find the meaning in our own narrative arc. According to Baker, "The writing of autobiography constitutes a literary construction of self. For women, the act of writing

¹³⁶ Taylor, Daniel. *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories*. Bog Walk Press, 2001, 20.

and the creation of self are often simultaneous.”¹³⁷ Often, we don’t know what we believe until we speak it, as the very act of talking can help us to frame our thoughts. Joyce Mercer calls this, “Finding out by telling”,¹³⁸ and Thomas Long describes this self-revelatory nature of testimony in this way: “We don’t just say things we already believe. To the contrary, saying things out loud is part of how we come to believe. We talk our way toward belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply.”¹³⁹ Part of my inspiration for this project was the joy of witnessing this process of “talking our way toward belief” take place time and time again in my work with students. Students often come to me to talk through their struggles. In the beginning of the conversation, they are usually confused, not knowing what to think or believe. As they talk it through with me listening, there is usually an epiphany in which their eyes light up. They pause in shock and say, “I never realized that I thought that!”

While I grew up in the Southern Baptist tradition which was rich with personal stories of faith, mainline Christianity today, as I have experienced it, lacks the spaces for this sort of testimony. This lack, however, does not diminish the hunger and need for people to recount their personal experiences of wrestling with the Divine and finding redemption. Thomas Long says, “The fact that honest God talk is taboo in some social settings is not a sign that it is irrelevant but, to the contrary, an indication of how

¹³⁷ Baker, Dori Grinenko. *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. Pilgrim Press, 2005, 88.

¹³⁸ Mercer, Joyce. *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls and Their Parents*. Jossey-Bass, 2008, 2.

¹³⁹ Long, Thomas. *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*. Jossey-Bass, 2004, 6.

powerfully important it is”¹⁴⁰ and “The world is full of stories, but all of these billions of stories are searching for the one true story, the story of a God who knows and loves us, the story of a God who brings justice to a broken world. We are on the witness stand to tell our own encounters with this true story.”¹⁴¹

We are in dire need of honest and authentic sharing of stories of truth, grace, hope, faith, and redemption. Our world is desperate for talk that matters, stories of healing and hope among all the noise and arguing. We are the bearers of stories that can be a transformative force, and our stories tie us together as a community as they are heard and affirmed by those who will listen.¹⁴² In my vision of an ideal Hollins community, students will find liberation as all personal stories are welcomed and valued, and everyone gets a chance to share. The ordinary stories will be heard and celebrated, marking us all as worthy of belonging with a story that matters. Through our sharing, we can find our place in the framework of other stories, whether they be within affinity groups, across lines of difference, as part of cultures, geographic locations, religions, institutions, spiritual traditions, or just in what unites us as human beings.

In sharing testimonies, my students explore and formulate their personal theology and continue to grow into a mature faith, one that situates their stories within God’s greater story, and sees God’s presence and revelation through their lived experiences. Our testimony, then, becomes a framework for orienting our life and the faith that guides

¹⁴⁰ Long, 90.

¹⁴¹ Long, 29.

¹⁴² Thomas Hoyt Jr. “Testimony” from Bass, Dorothy. *Practicing our Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2010, 94.

it. As Neil Postman says, “Each of us uses the word *story* as a synonym for *god*, with a small g...god is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to organize our lives around it.”¹⁴³ Narratives build faith by deciphering the meaning of our lives and helping us to recognize where our story fits in to the greater narrative of life and the world around us.

Narrative identity theory teaches us that we understand who we are by the stories we tell about ourselves. In fact, our identity is created as the perceptions we gain about ourselves through our stories become our truth. Verbalizing our stories, then, becomes both a means of realizing our truth and the empowerment to live it out. The act of sharing our stories out loud makes the work of testimony important as we find meaning and beauty in our stories and share them to enrich our world with the deeper truth for which it longs.

Narrative Theology

The work of narrative theology involves evaluating religious claims through and in story. It was initiated by H. Richard Niebhuur and further developed by others such as Paul Ricoeur, Hans Frei, David Tracy, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas.¹⁴⁴ Opposing the use of abstract reason employed by systematic theology, narrative theologians believe that narrative provides the ideal way to understand Christianity by grasping its language, grammar, texts, and practices.¹⁴⁵ Christians learn about their faith

¹⁴³ Postman 1966, p. 5 as quoted in Nash and Murray, 55.

¹⁴⁴ Comstock, Gary L. “Two Types of Narrative Theology.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1987, p. 687.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 688.

through the biblical stories and the stories shared and lived out by their communities of faith. We find truth at the intersection of the biblical story and our contemporary experience. How does our current story interact with the biblical narrative?

Frei's work with narrative theology moves toward ethnography and "thick description" of the narratives, exploring deeply the texts, language, and practice of Christianity. Instead of seeking the historical meaning of the text, narrative theologians find the meaning within the text itself. The meaning of Christianity is found in the details of the lifestory of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁶

Hauerwas identifies narrative as the "context of corporate and individual formation." He places a high value on the importance of the community in faith formation and believes that Christians must, above all, "conform the stories of their lives to the narrative of the Christian tradition."¹⁴⁷ James Gustafson also speaks to the importance of narrative within a community: "Narratives function to sustain the particular moral identity of a religious (or secular) community by rehearsing its history and traditional meanings, as these are portrayed in scripture and other sources. Narratives shape and sustain the ethos of community. Through our participation in such a community, the narratives also function to give shape to our moral characters, which in turn deeply affect the way we interpret or construe the world and events and thus affect

¹⁴⁶ Comstock, Gary L. "Two Types of Narrative Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1987, p 696.

¹⁴⁷ Senior, John E. "Stories Revisited: Revelation, Narrative Ethnography, and the Story of our Lives." *Practical Matters Journal*, 2010. Web. <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2010/03/01/stories-revisited/>. Accessed 11 July 2016.

what we determine to be appropriate action as members of the community.”¹⁴⁸ Our shared narratives as a community remind us of what binds us and call us to act in accordance with our shared values.

According to C.S. Song, “Theology and story are inseparable. Where there is story, there is theology.”¹⁴⁹ The Bible begins not with history, laws, or explanation, but with story. “In the beginning were stories. Life begins with story.”¹⁵⁰ Likewise, our faith is comprised of the stories of our interactions with the divine, both personally and communally, both in our current age and throughout the history of the tradition to which our story binds us. In addition to discovering our identity through story, we also find our own place in the story of faith, crafting our personal theologies based on what our experiences and tradition have revealed to us about the presence and nature of God.

We gain access to God through story¹⁵¹ as attributes of God are revealed through the changing understandings of our ancestors of faith. The biblical stories present facets of God as people could capture them, from a voice speaking the world into being, to the cloud and the pillar of fire, to God embodied in human form. And we find our own metaphors and images of God as we experience God’s comfort in suffering, peace in grief, and presence in community. These understandings of God form the foundation of our theology as we learn how to relate to the Divine. But our theology is continually

¹⁴⁸ Hauerwas, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones (eds). *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*. W.B. Eerdmans, 1989, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Song, C.S. *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology*. Cascade Books, 2011, 18.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

being reworked as we have fresh encounters with God and our stories change to make sense of them.

Stories are used throughout the Bible to teach, challenge, explain, or comfort. Jesus was a storyteller who used parables to instruct his gathered community and disciples. As the Gospel of Mark attests, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples” (Mark 4:33-34, NRSV). Many of these stories sound strange to our ears, and would have been perplexing in their context as well. When they were not explained, they were intended to challenge “those who have ears to hear” to engage in the process of meaning-making,¹⁵² remaining open to new meanings and differing understandings, and wrestling with the mystery. Offering more than a surface level interpretation, parables were meant to speak to the heart as well as the mind.

What does it mean that the disciples didn’t often understand? What does it mean for us when we don’t either? I believe it speaks to the power of story to keep us digging, to intrigue us to think more deeply about ourselves and our world. The element of surprise in parables causes us to reflect on our own stories and to challenge our accepted understandings, in order to shift our thinking, find deeper meaning, and be inspired to new action. A.J. Levine says, “What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. HarperOne, 2014, 276.

¹⁵³ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. HarperOne, 2014, 3.

Parables can “unlock the mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions: how to live in community; how to determine what ultimately matters; how to live the life that God wants us to live...[these] narratives remind us of what we already know, but are resistant to recall.”¹⁵⁴ The key, then, is to immerse ourselves in the story, to understand its context as well as our own, as we question all that rises up within us.

Levine points out that the intention of Jewish parables was often to challenge stereotypes¹⁵⁵ and make people see and think in new ways. She warns that if a parable makes us feel good we may be reading it wrong, as they usually promote challenge over comfort and also “remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb...”¹⁵⁶ While theologies can co-opt stories to legitimize religious power and defend unjust practices, Jesus used stories to upend the status quo and point to God’s transforming and redemptive work.¹⁵⁷ In the same way, the feminist voices of our Hollins students have much to contribute as our national news is filled with stories of sexual harassment being revealed. How will our students’ stories contribute to society’s ability to hear and value women’s voices and how can our students and their mentors and teachers advocate for their full dignity, worth, and equality?

Parables, along with stories in general, stress the importance of truly, deeply listening. To understand the parables and other biblical truths, we must listen deeply and let them resonate within our minds and hearts, seeking God’s revelation to us through

¹⁵⁴ Levine, 275.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 276.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁷ Song, C.S. *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology*. Cascade Books, 2011.

them and through our experiences and contexts. Secondly, we must listen to those who entrust us with their sacred stories, holding a welcoming space that invites vulnerability. We can be spiritual guides, helping others to discover the meaning of their stories through thoughtful questions or contemplative silence on our part. By being a listening ear, we can support the process of those who are working out their theologies and we can be a caring presence for those who seek healing through the telling of their stories. Finally, we must also listen to ourselves as we share our stories. What insights can we gather from speaking our truth aloud? What can we learn about ourselves, one another, and God through the storytelling? As Frederick Buechner said, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”¹⁵⁸

Narrative therapy

Listening is also a key component in finding healing through our stories. The field of narrative therapy has emerged as the healing and resilience properties of telling our stories has been documented. Listening, too is the work of Christian pastoral care, which serves as “a narrative, ecclesial, theological practice (NET)” as it demonstrates the “inseparable interconnection between our own lifestories, others’ stories, the larger cultural stories, and God’s story,...bears witness to and embod[ies] God’s mission of love,...and is grounded in God’s love story.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Buechner, Frederick. *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*. HarperOne, 1991.

¹⁵⁹ Scheib, Karen D. *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives*. Abingdon Press, 2016, xi.

We all have the need to be heard, and caring, active listeners can help us delve into our experiences in a way that gives new meaning to our stories and helps us work through our pain. Dori Baker writes, “Something beautiful happens when a skilled listener creates a safe space for stories to be told in an unhurried, unworried fashion. Ethnographers find themselves entering into a holy space, a space in which the speaker may be saying something brand new, even to themselves.”¹⁶⁰ Listening, then, is as an act of love¹⁶¹ and is an act of contemplative spirituality¹⁶² that invites both the speaker and the listener to slow down and be present to the story and to recognize it as holy ground.

Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves can bring more harm than healing due to a loud inner critic or the judgment of others. We believe in false narratives that hold us back from embracing our value and fully living our lives. According to Gottschall, depression stems from “an incoherent story, an inadequate narrative account of oneself.”¹⁶³ Brené Brown writes, “The most dangerous stories we make up are the narratives that diminish our inherent worthiness. We must reclaim the truth about our lovability, divinity, and creativity.”¹⁶⁴ “Our faith narratives must be protected, and we must remember that no person is ordained to judge our divinity or to write the story of

¹⁶⁰ Baker, Dori G. *Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations Growing Young Leaders Who Will Change the World*. Alban Institute, 2010, 25.

¹⁶¹ StoryCorps: <https://storycorps.org/animation/listening-is-an-act-of-love/> (accessed 31 May 2017)

¹⁶² Mercer, Joyce. *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls and Their Parents*. Jossey-Bass, 2008, 9.

¹⁶³ Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 175.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. Random House, 2015, 82.

our spiritual worthiness.”¹⁶⁵ This is especially true for women who tend to struggle with comparison and who still fight for full equality in the workforce and in leadership in many communities of faith. As a Baptist minister, this is an ongoing battle as I am still occasionally told that “God doesn’t call women to be pastors”. I am grateful for my calling to work with women, providing a role model of a woman faithfully living out her God-given vocation, while my students inspire and teach me what it means to be a feminist and use my voice for activism and social change.

Although there is much injustice in our world and brokenness within our lives, we can find personal transformation in therapy, creating a healing narrative¹⁶⁶ through reframing our experiences. This is part of Erik Erikson’s model of identity formation. He notes, that by selectively reconstructing our past, we become creators, making a complete self through the compiling of our coherent and meaningful story.¹⁶⁷

Out of his own traumatic experience as a concentration camp prisoner, Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl developed a therapy to help people find meaning as a way of dealing with trauma and depression. Realizing that prisoners who surrendered their inner spiritual selves fell quickly to the degrading influence of the camp and were more prone to die from sickness or early death, Frankl understood the importance of retaining a sense of spiritual freedom during their physical incarceration, torture, and abuse. He observes, “It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶⁶ McAdams, Dan. *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. William Morrow and Co, 1997, 33.

¹⁶⁷ McAdams, Dan. *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. William Morrow and Co, 1997, 91-92.

and purposeful.”¹⁶⁸ Through his experience Frankl realized as Nietzsche said, “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.”¹⁶⁹ Quoting Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Frankl wrote, “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and concise picture of it.”¹⁷⁰

Frankl, therefore, developed logotherapy, “a meaning-centered psychotherapy [in which]...the patient is actually confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life.”¹⁷¹ It presupposes that people need a worthwhile goal along with responsibility and agency, but instead of asking what *we want from life*, it asks *what life expects from us*. In Frankl’s own words,

“We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”¹⁷² Realizing that we have a role and a responsibility imbues us with a sense of purpose that overcomes the meaningless with which we struggle. Suddenly, our story has an orientation and a goal as we put our calling into action.

¹⁶⁸ Frankl, Victor E. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press, 2006 edition, 67.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷⁰ Frankl, 74.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 77.

In our story journeys, we ultimately must remember that we are the co-creators of our experiences with the ultimate Creator God. While we cannot always control our circumstances, we have the power and the agency to seek transformation in ourselves by editing our perspective or writing a new chapter. We gain new clarity as we learn from the stories of others and find our place in God's greater story that is unfolding across time. As Brené Brown writes, "We are the authors of our lives. We write our own daring endings."¹⁷³

So let this chapter end with a blessing as we seek the meaning in our stories:

BLESSING

That you may know your life
as a sacred text.
That God will lead you
to read your story anew.
That you may see how the holy
inhabits every line
and breathes across every page.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. Random House, 2015, 253.

¹⁷⁴ Richardson, Jan L. *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection and Prayer*. Upper Room Books, 2010, 128.

Chapter 5: To Be Continued...

(Conclusion and Application)

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

The Story Continues (Insights and Learnings from the Project)

My project research demonstrated growth in connection and community within the student leader group over the duration of the study as most of the leaders attested. Through our weekly story circle meetings, they began to articulate their emerging theology and improved in their ability to listen and ask good questions. I realized the method was effective when they would ask probing questions of one another outside of our meetings as a way of helping one another to process and reflect more deeply on their personal struggles. The theme of story popped up everywhere as students realized the impact of sharing stories and became even more eager for the annual Story Week event that the chapel student leaders and I host for campus as a means of inviting students to share their stories through various means: social media and writing prompts, open mics, a faith fair, and a “s’mores and secrets” event.

While not directly tied to the work of the student leaders, but I suspect is correlated with their intentionality in talking about faith and spirituality at Hollins, there has been an increase in attention to religious matters on campus. I have noticed an increase in Facebook posts concerning faith from students I didn’t even realize were

religious, in more frequent visits from students to discuss their spiritual journeys, in questions about what Student Chaplains do (which led to adding three new Student Chaplains in spring 2017), and in students willing to share their frustrations with religious microaggressions on our campus as part of a Housing and Residence Life survey. There has been growth in the number and diversity of students coming to *Sanctuary* as the Student Chaplains have led the discussions this semester, and a student-led Bible study has been started by some of the new students attending *Sanctuary*.

There has also been an openness from faculty, particularly with our new curriculum's focus on well-being. I was invited to join faculty for a grant-funded workshop on integrating contemplative practices (such as silence, meditation, reflection, and yoga) into the classroom and co-curricular campus life, and I was pleased to learn that several faculty and staff are regularly incorporating mindfulness practices into their teaching and work. Through this, opportunities developed for collaborative programs. The counseling center staff and I began a Walk-N-Talk program to encourage outdoor exercise and talking with others as a coping strategy. Interest increased in a weekly faculty and staff meditation group that I support as students were invited to participate.

My work with the student leaders highlighted the importance of spiritual well-being and the need for practices that nurture spiritual health. The timeliness of this project seems to be opening doors and allowing the Spirit to move in new ways on our campus and I look forward to its continued transformation.

However, a challenge in this study was that the student leaders initially lacked the closeness I had hoped for in terms of friendship, trust, and bonds outside of the group. Moving into the spring semester after the project, the group struggled to find a common

goal and the drive to share what they had experienced with others on campus. The break between semesters (late November to early February) caused a juncture that was hard to bridge, particularly as three new members were added to the group during this period. Although the original members had previously expressed enthusiasm about adding new student leaders to the mix, it was difficult to catch the newly inducted up on our work and get to know them while also respecting the tenuous connections that had been built between the original members.

During our spring semester meetings, several leaders expressed frustration about our lack of a unifying group goal and about the group members who were not regularly attending our meetings. Once again, there was resentment from leaders who felt they were giving more of their time and commitment than other group members. There was a lag in energy and only the new student leaders seemed to have interest in contributing ideas for the semester. While we left feeling hopelessly stuck, after reflecting upon it, I came to understand that while we had shared our individual stories, we were lacking a cohesive group narrative.

Without a unifying purpose, we were struggling to see how our individual stories fit into a greater communal narrative of transforming the spiritual atmosphere of our campus. I had assumed that by sharing our personal stories, we would naturally find the intersections between them and a group narrative would be written in the connections. However, our initial definitions of community hindered us from forming a unified mission in our ministry to Hollins. The students' definitions focused on how community happens naturally with people who share commonalities, and their examples were of their friend groups. However, outside of group members' common interest of serving the

spiritual needs of our campus and in being people of faith, the student leaders didn't have that much in common. While this was the model I was trying to institute, creating community across our diversity of beliefs and experiences, it took time for students to value their connections as a student leader community.

As the student leaders' definitions of community slowly grew towards an understanding of the importance of intentionality, so my definitions of community were also being transformed. I realized that my initial goals of community were a little naïve. I was convinced that if the students could hear one another's stories, they would easily connect and form friendship bonds through their commonality and the vulnerability of sharing. I did not, however, stop to ask if the group truly *desired* to form community with one another or discuss what that would look like. Nor was I intentional in helping the group to shape a shared narrative. I realize now that the student leaders were looking to me to give them a unifying purpose, while I believed that the story circle process would direct them to their common mission. Because of our differing expectations, the group members and I experienced frustration and felt stuck without a story that connected us and motivated our work together.

The group's sense of disconnection mirrored the disconnection of our campus. Instead of being united as a *group* with a common mission, the student leaders saw themselves as *individuals* charged to engage the faith of campus in disparate ways. While they each could articulate the sense of calling that had led them to be part of the group, their stories did not get collated into a larger story of who they were as the student leader group, so they did not function together as a team. Their work began to feel overwhelming as they were attempting to address the spiritual disconnection of other

students on campus while experiencing it themselves within our group. They looked to me for direction instead of being self-directed as leaders, particularly as they were increasingly disengaged from each other.

As I was feeling somewhat defeated with results that were not what I expected and uncertain as to the direction in which to go at the end of a frustrating spring 2017 semester, Rei stopped by my office for a chat. We had not talked much over the semester other than me filling out reference forms for their seminary applications. Rei had been absent from the spring group meetings due to their all-consuming commitment to the theatre, which was doing a production of *Godspell*, for which Rei was serving as dramaturg. After the production finished, Rei visited my office to catch up and chat about how to reconnect with the student leader group as Rei understood the group was likely frustrated by their lack of involvement.

Our talk transitioned to a discussion on the nature of community. We talked about what theatre means to Rei, and the unbreakable family-like connections they had formed through the time and passion they had invested in the play. I expressed a wish that our student leader group could have had a similar bonding experience through a shared mission and work, and I was honest about my disappointment with the lagging commitments this semester. Rei pointed out that the student leader group was closer last semester when we were united in the common work of my thesis project. Even though the focus has shifted some with my research no longer being the primary priority for most members, Rei pointed out that the group is closer now than when Rei joined two years ago, and that the Student Chaplains have a sense of the group mission that can be

articulated to others, who now recognize who the chapel student leaders are campus and their roles.

As they were getting ready to leave, Rei shared a heartwarming story that gave me hope for the seeds of community that were starting to take root within the group. In talking about the often hidden nature of growth, Rei smiled while relating a story of seeing Shalan after one of the theatre shows. Shalan came up and gave Rei a big hug, and it was so meaningful for Rei, knowing what a big deal it was for Shalan, who had expressed difficulty in making friendship in general and specifically with Rei due to their differences in belief (particularly concerning Rei's sexual orientation). Rei said, "We've gotten to know each other and are friends. Shalan has the biggest heart of anyone, but she has some beliefs that I *fundamentally* don't agree with. But she is growing and wrestling, and so am I. I've gained a greater empathy and patience for those who don't believe as I do, particularly those on the more conservative side." Rei recognized that we are all in the gradual process of growing in understanding of one another, and this deepened Rei's empathy and sense of connection to others.

Ultimately, as the student leader group and I aimed to create an open space for sharing, I believe we laid a good foundation upon which we can continue to build, both within our group, and in providing a space and incentive for campus discussions of faith. While we are still writing our group narrative, there seems to be a compelling mission that draws students to the group. My first year at Hollins, I had four Student Chaplains. When I began this project, there were five Student Chaplains and two *Better Together* leaders. Now there are fifteen student leaders (eleven Student Chaplains and four *Better*

Together leaders) as part of the chapel student leaders group, and several other students are interested in applying as the community has become more recognized on campus.

We are building space for a community of faith on our campus, brick by brick, story by story. Sometimes our foundation seems a little shaky as our stories take us in uncertain directions, but the good news is that we are still sharing our stories together, and the mess is part of the process. As we do the work over time, we are writing our group story through each lesson we learn, and reframing our stories as we find meaning in our communal discussion. The process and results may not be as predictable and linear as I would like, but our group stories are providing the context for the new shared goals we are creating as we work to build awareness, dialogue, and community across our religious and spiritual diversity on campus.

Reframing the Story

As I explained to students the benefits of editing our stories, being able to reframe and alter our perspective in order to better deal with the unexpected plot twists, our group has had the opportunity to practice this technique. While *Better Together* leaders were initially disappointed in the turnout to their weekly meetings, they learned at the end of the year that their initiatives in rebranding the club to be more inclusive in its dialogue and hospitable in its social events had a positive impact on the campus. Their Fun Friday Carnival to welcome new and returning students in the fall had record attendance, with over 80 participants, but was surpassed by the over 100 attendees at their spring Faith Fair. A survey on the spiritual climate of Hollins conducted during the faith fair revealed issues we had predicted with some students expressing that our campus is not open to talking about issues of faith, particularly pertaining to Christianity, and numerous

students saying that while there are sufficient opportunities to engage in faith activities on campus, there doesn't seem to be a large interest. But 80% of respondents expressed an interest in learning about faiths outside of their own, and several commented that attending *Better Together* meetings had been helpful to them in this regard. It was interesting to have students outside the group share with me how successful they thought *Better Together* had been in changing the perception of the club and in facilitating spaces for religious dialogue and interfaith education on campus. Non-group leaders who attended the meetings were impressed by the number of students who participated, which was in contrast to the leaders, who were initially disappointed due to their higher expectations.

These unexpected findings support my advice to the group on being realistic with expectations and reframing what success means by not basing evaluation of that solely on meeting attendance. In fact, reframing is an element of storytelling that has been important in my own understanding of my research results and how the results have altered my expectations. I have shifted from the perspective of what my students have learned to what I have learned. Additionally, I have come to realize that the study has been beneficial and has supported individual and group development even though it looks different and is happening more slowly than I had imagined.

How I Would Change the Story

There are things I would do differently if I were to conduct this study again. First, it would have been helpful to have a longer period of team building before sharing our stories in order to build trust. Ideally, a weekend retreat with a service project would provide an opportunity for getting to know one another, providing training, and finding a

common mission through serving together. The brief retreats at the beginning and end of the semester were positively received by the students and provided a comfortable setting for sharing with one another, and we all wished for more of this type of gatherings outside of the stress of weekly meetings and full calendars.

Students suggested that the physical environment of the retreats (off campus at *Sweet Donkey Coffee* in the beginning, and in the Gordh Room lounge of the chapel at the end) were more intimate and relaxing spaces as opposed to the private dining room for our weekly meetings that made things feel more like a rushed business meeting instead of a leisurely story sharing gathering. As we discussed how to create spaces that invite vulnerability, it is important to consider how the rooms themselves either support or inhibit emotional and physical comfort. It is worthy of consideration that some students have expressed discomfort with how many of the spiritual life events (including *Better Together* meetings) take place in the chapel, which may feel exclusionary for non-Christian or non-religious students. We need to be more intentional in finding new third spaces that provide inclusive hospitality and invite brave sharing.

Additionally, I would consider how to better engage and connect participants over the winter and J-term break. Could we have created ways to share our stories with one another in the time we were apart? As I prepare for a new academic year, I'm brainstorming how to begin to connect our next group of student leaders over the summer. I have considered a joint summer reading book that would be light enough to engage them, yet would have a theme that would serve as our focus for the year and provide some preparation for our discussions. I would also like to send a traveling journal that would be mailed to a different leader in turn, allowing them to add stories

from their summer experiences, and letting them add notes for one another. These strategies could also be utilized over winter breaks, as well as using Instagram Stories, Facebook Live and Messenger, Snapchat, or YouTube as other storytelling media.

Since I determined that the lack of a cohesive group narrative hindered the group from fully growing into the community I had hoped for, I would be more proactive in working together to create a story of our community, starting with a covenant of shared expectations (which we did implement in the spring semester). Weekly reflection questions would focus on our evolving definition of community such as: How have you experienced connection within our group? How can we continue to grow as a community? Leaders would also be encouraged to check in with one another outside of meetings, possibly in having prayer partners as prayer requests via Facebook Messenger were a means of bonding that the group members successfully initiated in the fall.

Soliciting the group's input in planning how they would use the story circle process to facilitate discussions on our campus would be ideal, and this should be initiated from the beginning of the study so that they would have a group goal to work towards and have investment in the development of the process. This would hopefully help the student leaders to be motivated with a shared goal that would extend beyond their own development to serving the campus. They would then be able to consider how the challenges they personally faced throughout their training (such as dealing with group conflict) could be applied in other settings and they could contemplate new challenges that might arise in implement discussions on campus. This model of individual and group experience, observation and reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation mirrors Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, giving students hands-on experience in

processing as they learn the method and plan how to engage others in a similar process of reflection and active engagement.¹⁷⁵

About the Author (My Learning and Growth as a Leader)

As a writer and an introvert, I like to keep myself in the background and instead feature other characters in the story. I realize, though, that my story is what drives my work and this research. While I may have set out with the goal of sharing my students' narratives, my work with students continues to edit and refine my own story. As I guide my students towards growth and development as emerging adults and leaders, there is more to understand about my own leadership and how I continue learning through what is being written.

As an introvert who was raised in a charismatic evangelical church, I once viewed my reserved and reflective nature as a liability. In my ministry context, though, I've come to accept it as a strength. I am known on campus for my skill in building relationships with students, and my quiet nature allows me to be a good listener. I am able to be a support and advocate for students because I bear witness to their needs and struggles as an ally.

The shadow side of being a support for students is that I have a difficult time holding people accountable. I want to be an encourager (which sometimes exhibits itself in people-pleasing), and when things aren't completed in the way I had hoped, I keep my frustration to myself instead of using it as a teachable moment. Our student affairs team

¹⁷⁵ Evans, Nancy J.; Deanna S Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998, 210.

laments how we are responsible for creating a culture in which students do not learn from their mistakes because of our tendency to “rescue” students from their failures.

Sometimes in order to reach our own individual and team goals (since they are evaluated as part of our accreditation reviews), we will step in and take care of overlooked details in a student club’s event planning process instead of letting them be responsible when things fall apart. My Student Chaplains sign a covenant detailing their commitment to their spiritual growth and the time investment and responsibilities they commit to in order to provide support for our community. Yet, more often than not, these expectations and promises fall through the cracks of their busy schedules, and I have a difficult time confronting them about it.

Through this project, I pushed myself to have more difficult conversations, offering feedback as part of mentoring, and holding students accountable (i.e. letting them suffer the natural consequences when they fail). When *Better Together* leaders were disappointed with declining meeting attendance, I allowed them to vent their feelings, but then we also discussed the practical steps they could have taken (a more consistent meeting time, better communication about meetings instead of last minute notifications, and being clear about their goals and how to evaluate success). While I had talked to them at the beginning of the semester about consistency, communication, and goal-setting, they learned the lesson through the experience of failure and being accountable for their actions.

These conversation helped me to face my own frustrations at unmet expectations and consider how to reframe, learn, and grow from these situations. My goal for myself and for teaching my student leaders is to find balance in managing the situations we can

control, surrendering the things that are out of our power, and utilizing the teachable moments that arise.¹⁷⁶

My personable teachable moment through this project came in the realization that I need to differentiate between my gifts and proclivities and those of my students, understanding our differing abilities and expectations. I expected much of the group goal-setting to take place naturally and to be initiated by the students, but they wanted me to have these goals and a plan in place for them to follow. My process is evolving from being a work in progress that flows from our learning to one of initially sharing my goals with a group and guiding us in a collaborative process of refining them to meet our needs and suit our purposes. Being a self-motivated person, I often expect my students to be similarly driven. I must understand, though, that they may not be inclined (personality-wise or developmentally) to function in this way. I value collaborative work and expect others to jump in and work together with me. Instead, I'm learning that I must create a nurturing environment incorporating both affirmation and challenging feedback in order for a group to feel comfortable and engaged to work together. Like community, a collaborative group process doesn't happen naturally, but must be built through trust and shared expectations. This groundwork is essential for creating a shared group narrative, which will be a priority in the future.

Another area of personal growth has been amplifying my voice on campus. As I have modeled the importance of talking about religion and spirituality to my students as

¹⁷⁶ I hear in this echoes of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer in this: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

we aim to normalize faith discussions on campus, I have been more intentional about advocating campus-wide for the inclusion of religious plurality into conversations of diversity. I was an early proponent of our well-being curriculum, pushing for the inclusion of contemplative practices as a resource to aid spiritual well-being, and I am now lobbying to make student well-being a part of our upcoming strategic plan.

Fortunately, through my work with student leaders, I no longer feel that I am alone on my soapbox, and I have been encouraged to find new allies from students to faculty, staff, administration, and members of the larger surrounding Roanoke Valley community.

These experiences are changing my story as I learn how to be a more intentional leader, starting from where students are instead of where I want them to be, and being a vocal advocate for their well-being on our campus. My students have taught me much about myself and how to grow as a leader through their stories and our shared journey together. I am grateful for the ways that these student leaders have been chapters in my life story and I have been in theirs, and I look forward to how the story continues to unfold.

The Moral of the Story (Continuing Goals and Opportunities for Future Ministry)

As the student leaders continue to facilitate the story circle process to invite others to share their stories, this will begin the process of normalizing faith dialogue on our campus. As previously mentioned, this seems to be taking place as students are finding new ways to engage in their faith and speak up about the challenges and joys of religion, particularly on our campus. I have been working with our new special advisor for inclusivity and diversity to ensure that religious and secular identities are part of our

campus conversations about diversity, and together we have co-sponsored programs on the intersectionality of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

As Hollins continues our work of inclusivity, I am aware of the productive power of discourse¹⁷⁷ and how the act of telling our stories is an act of social justice, as it allows us to claim who we are instead of letting others decide for us.¹⁷⁸ I wonder how this might begin to change our story of community at Hollins and the understanding of our agency in how we create it. What will our institutional story become as we continue to wrestle with the important and uncomfortable narratives of from whence we have come¹⁷⁹ to the transformations we are only beginning to envision?

As Hollins continues to strengthen our focus on career preparation and building mentoring relationships with alumnae and staff, I can see how the story circle model might be utilized in one-on-one mentoring sessions or in vocational discernment groups with students as they reflect through their stories to understand where their unique gifts, experiences, and passions may be leading them. Panicked seniors who come to me not knowing what career path to choose are often comforted by my story of my roundabout vocational journey. As I listen to their stories of what brings them joy and where they

¹⁷⁷ Michel Foucault as quoted in Mercer, Joyce. *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls and Their Parents*. Jossey-Bass, 2008, 2.

¹⁷⁸ I learned this concept from Helms Jarrell, who uses art as a means of inviting people to share their stories as part of QC Family Tree, an intentional community of “kinfolk rooted in discipleship in West Charlotte [NC]. www.qcfamilytree.org (accessed 4 May 2017).

¹⁷⁹ Including our slave-holding history, the subject of Ethel Smith’s *From Whence Cometh My Help: The African American Community at Hollins College*, and our unofficial Christian tradition that forced the non-religious and non-Christians into mandatory weekly Christian worship services.

long to make a difference, I can help them to listen for and identify the still small voice of God that is speaking through their interests, gifts, and experiences.

Hollins hosts a Career Connection Conference (C3) each year that brings back alumnae to share their experiences and tips with our current students, and it is successful event for networking and connecting through stories. This year, I will help to moderate a session, and I look forward to getting more involved in highlighting the faith component of vocational discernment as we consider how our passions and gifts guide us to discover how we might be useful in the world. Hollins recently hired a new executive director of career development, and we are in conversation about how we can bring a new vision of career preparation that emphasizes the spirituality of vocation (much like Parker Palmer writes about in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*).

In my ministry here, I am reflecting more on the benefits of mentoring relationships. Through my research, the importance of young adults having mentors to guide them through the process of identity and faith formation was reiterated time and time again, and I know from my own story how crucial it was to me in my process of becoming an adult. Of all of my job responsibilities and tasks, I am most passionate about the one-on-one relationship building that takes place with students. There is nothing holier than the sacred space that is created as they share their stories and I am able to help them find meaning in them. Mentees can be empowered to find and use their voice through sharing their story with a trusted mentor, and as a mentor I can help them to discover their individual gifts, develop their leadership skills, and find ways to use them in our setting. I treasure the mentoring relationships I have with each student on an individual basis. Through our relationship, my students know that they have a trusted

adult guide that they can turn to for a listening ear, support and spiritual direction.

Through our connection and the stories they share with me from the holy armchair about the hopes, fears, and dreams they carry along their journeys of faith, they are learning coping skills and gaining resilience. As I sit in that holy space with them, I find my own meaning and purpose, and my spirit and sense of calling are renewed.

Applying the Story in New Settings

The story circle method used in this project could be helpful in a variety of different settings. We are living in a time of transition, as evidenced in political upheaval, declining church affiliation, and the shifts in higher education priorities as previously mentioned. Consequently, the old stories are shifting across communities, cultures, religions, and nations. Some have said that we have lost a unifying narrative for the dominant culture¹⁸⁰ and in this, we have also lost our means of connecting with one another. In this time of polarization that establishes divisive stereotypes and separation, we are losing the sense of our inextricable connection as human beings and it becomes easier to communicate solely with those who believe as we do, isolating us from people whose differences make them “other” in our eyes.¹⁸¹

As our world grows larger in terms of population and diversity, it also seems smaller, in a sense, through our technology, that makes it so easy to be connected to one

¹⁸⁰ Addressed in Rob Bell’s *Robcast* podcast #121 “Wisdom Part 6: Talking About Talking” on the unifying narrative and animating myth; *Popping Collars* podcast #52 “We Who Live” spoke of the appeal of fantasy stories like Harry Potter in this “post-secular cultural moment” in which “We have lost our grand narrative. We have lost trust in institutional narratives. We are hungry for narrative.”

¹⁸¹ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. Random House, 2017, chapter 4.

another. Yet technology, created as a tool for connection, has often created larger divides and detachment from more authentic and engaged personal interactions. Sherry Turkle has studied the impact of our digital culture which includes a 40% decline in measures of empathy in college students over the past 10 years.¹⁸² In moving away from face-to-face conversation, we have lost our ability to connect through conversation and story. But these skills need not be lost forever. We have the opportunity for reconnection, teaching how to dialogue through conversation itself.¹⁸³ The story circle method teaches and models active listening, empathy, reflection through story sharing, and participants grow in self-reflection and in understanding and connection with others through the process.

Digital tools have many positive applications that can counteract the downsides if we can learn to use them well. They can be used in the service of transformative learning and constructive relationship building, particularly as they are another means of sharing our stories and allowing students to learn from others who may be very different or geographically separated from them. Social media is how many of my students define their community, and they are teaching me new ways of connecting through more interactive visual story media formats such as Instagram and Snapchat. Podcasts (particularly popular story sharing ones such as *The Moth*, *Harry Potter as a Sacred Text*, and *On Being*) allow us to learn from the stories of others while also developing our capacity to slow down and listen.

¹⁸² Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin Press, 2015, 21.

¹⁸³ Turkle, 242.

While story circles are ideal for youth and young adults who are in the crucial stages of identity development and faith formation, they could also be helpful for any group wanting to be intentional about constructive and respectful dialogue across difference. The story circle method would be beneficial in church settings as we reconsider our methods of catechesis, helping to transmit the story of faith in a way that people can make it their own. In other words, how do we teach theology and make space for congregants to develop their own narrative theology? I envision an intergenerational approach with everyone from children to senior citizens sharing their stories of faith across the lifespan and learning from one another.

Story circles can also provide a means of healing from trauma and grief. Much counseling is based in narrative therapy, understanding that telling our story helps us to find meaning in it and helps us to establish our own agency and power.¹⁸⁴ It aids us in recognizing what we do have control over and altering our perspective so that we are not defeated by the things we cannot control. Being able to shift perspective is especially empowering as young adults differentiate, establishing their separate identity while maintaining healthy connections and boundaries with their families. They can learn to “*re-member*”, “putting back together the parts of past experience in a way that has meaning for the present”.¹⁸⁵ This act of reframing allows us to relate to the past in healthier ways.¹⁸⁶ “We can modify our stories while we are living them because we are both characters and co-creators. There is an ongoing tension between living as our

¹⁸⁴ Nash and Murray, 132-3.

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, 38.

¹⁸⁶ Nash and Murray, 135.

stories dictate and dictating the stories we live. We both shape and are shaped by stories.”¹⁸⁷ When we feel powerless in situations, narrating our stories helps us to find our voice and create our own endings. Or, as author Mo Willems says in his children’s book *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs*, “If you ever find yourself in the wrong story, leave.”

Our stories are constructed by us as we make meaning, and yet it is our stories that make us who we are by placing us in the context of our faith. As we search for meaning, we are looking for that great Other outside ourselves. As a Christian, I find my identity in the God who created me in love and in the image of the Divine (*imago dei*). When I question my identity and purpose, I am reminded by Psalm 139:14 that I am “fearfully and wonderfully made”, and was intentionally knitted together in my mother’s womb for a purpose. I find strength in realizing that I am not alone, but was created to be in community, to be part of the body of Christ carrying out Christ’s continued redemptive work in the world. As a minister and chaplain, my work is to guide students to find their own place in the story of faith, to discover their purpose and connection to something greater than themselves that will empower them to make a difference in others’ lives and to continue the work of creation and repairing the brokenness in our world.

This story circle process has revealed how our stories form our identity and our faith as we begin to reflect upon our lives and recognize the presence of the Divine in our experiences. Through sharing our stories, we find our commonalities and break down the barriers of difference, connecting us in community with one another. It’s only natural that in our fragmented and polarized world, story would become so important. We need

¹⁸⁷ Taylor, 76.

to know we are not alone, and our stories help us to find our place in the world and our relationship to the people around us. The good news is that we are never short on stories, and they are the source of our hope in uncertain times as they orient us in the present instead of being stuck in the past or longing for the future. They give us agency to be the author and editors of our own stories, making meaning of the chaos. As the great storyteller Walt Disney said, “That’s what storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again. Let me prove it to you.”¹⁸⁸ May it be so.

¹⁸⁸ From the movie “Saving Mr. Banks” (*Saving Mr. Banks*. Dir. John Lee Hancock. Walt Disney Pictures, 2013. Film.)

Appendix

Creating *Sanctuary* ground rules:

- Tell your own story
- Listen to the stories of others
- Look for points of connection
- Be curious and open; ask questions
- Be kind
- Assume positive intentions
- Choose reflecting over reacting
- Respect confidentiality
- Be prepared to be challenged in a positive way



"The particular faith that motivates us can promote a greater good for all of us." (Eboo Patel)

How do you find sanctuary?

Sanctuary: noun \ˈsɑŋ(k)-chə-,ˌwer-ē

1. a consecrated or holy space; a place for worship that connects you to the divine and to others
2. a place of refuge, safety, and protection
3. a time of rest for your soul and renewal for your spirit
4. **Our weekly interfaith gathering, open to all...Tuesdays at 4:30pm in the Meditation Chapel**

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 1

HUMAN RESEARCH AT HOLLINS UNIVERSITY

Hollins University affirms that, in the pursuit of knowledge, individual rights of participants must be protected. The following policies and procedures are designed to comply with the state law protections for human participants involved in research. All systematic biomedical, behavioral, or social research directly involving human participants which is associated with this university must comply with the policies and procedures set forth below and must be properly reviewed and approved by the Human Research Review Committee (HRRC) before the research begins. (This policy applies not only to research done in academic departments, but to all systematic biomedical, behavioral or social research executed by any office or department of Hollins University)

Protection against harm

Researchers are responsible for identifying, justifying, and minimizing the risks of real or potential harm accruing to human participants involved in their proposed research; such risks include physical, psychological, and social harm. Physical harm may range from unnecessary discomfort or inconvenience to physical pain or disfigurement. Psychological harm includes emotional distress, loss of self-esteem, and impairment of the participant's ability to judge behaviors or make decisions. Social harm includes damage to participants' reputations and social or legal standings.

Protection against coercion and deceit

Researchers must respect a participant's right to autonomy and guard against unnecessary deception. Therefore, researchers are required to obtain in writing the informed consent of their participants, except as otherwise approved in advance by the HRRC. In obtaining "informed consent," researchers must meet the following conditions: (1) before agreeing to participate in the study, prospective participants must be given the most detailed and accurate description of the study as the research design will allow; (2) consent and subsequent participation cannot be coerced and prospective participants must be provided with written and oral reassurance that they are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty; (3) if parties other than the researchers identified with the study are to have access to the individual contributions of the participants, prospective participants must be provided with a written statement identifying these parties; (4) under no circumstances may prospective participants be misled or uninformed as to any risks associated with the study; (5) when the design of the study necessitates concealment or deception on other matters, researchers are ultimately required to reveal to participants the reasons for the action; and (6) any other items required by law. The HRRC is legally required to determine whether the proposed "informed consent" contains the necessary types of information. Ideally, prospective participants should understand all features of the research that reasonably might be expected to influence willingness to participate. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the study researchers should freely provide to participants, upon request, information explaining the purposes of the study, the genuine nature of the design, and the results. This access to information should be clearly stated in writing on the consent form which participants sign. If a prospective participant is less than eighteen years of age, then the prior informed consent of a parent or legal guardian is required and the conditions prescribed herein pertain also to the parent or guardian.

Protection against violations of privacy and personal integrity

Researchers must respect the privacy and human dignity of participants. Research participants possess the right to decide how much of themselves to share with others. When possible, participants should participate anonymously. If the research design precludes the anonymity of research participants, then information that is traceable to the individual participant or to their contributions to the study must be treated with strict confidentiality. Once obtained, personal data about participants may not be revealed to any third parties or the public in such a way as to make possible the identification of individual participants unless required by law. A statement explaining the anonymity or confidentiality of information associated with the individual participants and their contributions to the research must be presented in writing to prospective participants prior to their participation. Researchers should make every effort to preserve the personal integrity and

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dignity of human participants, including refraining from research which could conceivably humiliate or belittle participants. The repeated use of particular groups as participants (e.g., members of certain academic courses) merely for convenience is also discouraged.

Student research

Student research projects involving human participants must comply with the policies and procedures prescribed in this document and must be properly reviewed. Faculty members guiding such research share with their students the responsibility of compliance. Students are not permitted to be the principal investigators of projects.

Students as participants in joint projects with other colleges

Studies originating from other schools must first receive approval from their own review board before seeking permission to use Hollins University students as research participants. Please see the Hollins University statement on Procedures for Review of Research.

Procedures for review

All research done by those affiliated with Hollins University falls into one of three categories. The research is either exempt from review, qualifies for expedited review, or requires full board review. These three classes of research are clearly defined in the Hollins University statement on Procedures for Review of Research. The Procedures statement and all necessary forms are available from the office of the Provost.

HOLLINS UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE PROCEDURES FOR REVIEW OF HUMAN RESEARCH

Any research involving human participants and conducted, in whole or in part, by members of the Hollins community should be considered as a possible object of review under this policy. Faculty sponsors advising student research share in the responsibility for making certain that student research complies with Hollins University formal policy. The HRRC application form is available online or from the HRRC Chair. If the research is not exempt from review, submit a copy of the application and attachments in triplicate, or an electronic copy with attachments sent via email, to the chair of the HRRC. If the proposed research qualifies for expedited review, a qualified member of the HRRC will review the application. If the proposed research requires full board review, the entire committee will review the application. The HRRC will meet once a month during the academic year and will review only those applications submitted by the deadline two weeks prior to the meeting. Applications submitted for expedited review will be reviewed by one member of the HRRC. If that member has questions or concerns about the research, he or she will either contact the principal investigator or reclassify the application for full board review. For applications considered for full board review, every member of the HRRC will review the application. If any member of the committee has questions or concerns, a convened meeting of the committee will take place at which the principal investigator will have the opportunity to answer any questions. After the review is complete, a decision will be returned as soon as possible to the principal investigator. Submissions requiring full board review will be distributed to all members and the committee will then meet to discuss the protocol with the investigators submitting the research. In the case of co-authored projects, the reviewed submission will be returned to the principal investigator.

If the committee does not approve a project it will provide justification and suggest ways in which the project might be revised to meet approval. In this case, the response must be received within 30 days. If a project is approved conditionally, those responsible for the project must provide the HRRC with a letter which states specifically how the conditions have been (or will be) met **before the project begins**. The HRRC will respond as to whether the conditions have been satisfied. Normally, in this case, a re-submission of the original proposal will not be required. The committee will not "follow up" on any suggestions for projects that are approved. In this case, the comments or suggestions are meant to draw attention exclusively to the ethical impact of the proposed project on human participants not on the merit of the proposed project.

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The HRRC is required to conduct continuing review of the research it approves at intervals appropriate to the risk involved in the research, but not less than once per year. Therefore, any project which will have a duration exceeding one year must submit a letter to the chair of the HRRC one year after the approval date stating the status of the project and any changes planned by the investigator. The HRRC will either extend the approval date or request a full re-application. If the HRRC decides that a shorter interval between re-application is necessary, this will be noted in the initial response to a request for review.

When it is desirable or necessary to include students from other colleges as participants, Hollins University students should obtain written permission through the institutional review boards of the respective schools (or, in the absence of such a board, the appropriate authority at the university). Hollins University students may be approached as participants for research originating from other schools only after a project has received approval from the institutional review board of the sponsoring institution; the project will then receive an expedited review at Hollins University. Student projects must secure, from a corresponding department at Hollins University, a full-time faculty member to serve as a liaison for the study. The role of the faculty liaison is to provide guidance with any logistics or details for using Hollins University students as participants. This should be done on a case-by-case basis, depending on the nature of the project. For the protection of all parties, the expedited review will ensure that projects involving Hollins University students are in compliance with our own human research policies or procedures.

If the nature of a study or standard methodology (such as an ethnography involving a personal interview with a single respondent) makes obtaining the written consent of participants inappropriate or potentially compromising (such as a study involving political refugees, women who have left or are currently leaving their abusive partners, or a study in which deceptions involved and informed consent could potentially compromise the results), the HRRC will consider other methods for obtaining consent, on a case-by-case basis. If you request a waiver of written informed consent, you must specifically address this in the HRRC application. Rather than requesting a standard, written consent from an informant, the ethnographer may wish to provide each informant with a written statement explaining consent and confidentiality safeguards; the informants would keep these to file as they wish before the interviewing begins. Submitted Consent Forms for projects will be stamped by the Chair of the HRRC clearly indicating that the proposed project has been approved by the HRRC. This stamped copy of the Consent Form must be copied for participants. If the research involves posting of Consent Form online, HRRC approval must be stated in the Risks section of the Consent Form (See example Consent Form attached).

Failure to adhere to the procedures detailed in the HRRC application without amendment to the original HRRC application will seriously compromise the ethics of the project and legal implications for Hollins University. In the event of a compromise or change to the methodology that is not forwarded to the HRRC, the principal investigator will then assume sole responsibility for the legal and ethical consideration of the project. Affiliation of that research with Hollins University will not be permitted.

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 4**HOLLINS UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE
COMMITTEE SELECTION PROCEDURES**

Service to Hollins University's Human Research Review Committee will be determined by the Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA) in consultation with the Academic Affairs Council (AAC). The VPAA is charged with the obligation to nominate full time teaching faculty best qualified to evaluate the ethical considerations of various research activities on participants. The VPAA must nominate a diverse HRRC including at least one member whose primary concerns are in scientific areas and one member whose primary concerns are in nonscientific areas to ensure the complete and competent review of human research activities. HRRC members are obligated to critically review the ethical considerations of submitted projects.

The VPAA will appoint members for a three-year period. The VPAA will appoint three (3) faculty members to the HRRC. Human Research Review Committee members can be re-nominated for consecutive terms of service. Faculty can nominate themselves for HRRC service provided that nomination is processed through the VPAA. The Chair of the HRRC will be determined by the members of the HRRC.



HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE (HRRC)

APPLICATION FOR THE REVIEW OF HUMAN RESEARCH

Directions: Please complete Sections I-IV. If you have any questions, contact the HRRC Chair. Return **3 hard copies (including the original) or one electronic copy for review** of the completed application and attachments to the HRRC Chair **at least 14 working days** before the next meeting date. If any question below is irrelevant to the research proposal, note this by entering "Not Applicable." This application and its attachments (Protocol) will be returned without review if this form is not **COMPLETE AND TYPED**.

SECTION I: TYPE OF REVIEW—PLEASE CHECK ONE (Refer to Attached Appendix I for definitions of these categories)

Expedited Review (Common examples include: research that involves some deception or experimental manipulation; research that includes collecting voice, video, digital, or image recordings; survey or other research that seeks personally sensitive information; non-invasive clinical, medical, or sports-training research. In all cases, Expedited Review is possible only when there is **no more than minimal risk** to the participants.)

Full Board Review (Common examples include: experimental manipulation that involves more than minimal risk to participants; research involving assessment of sensitive aspects of participants' behavior, which may include sexual behavior, drug use or illegal conduct. In all cases, Full Board Review is required when **there is more than minimal risk** to participants.)

SECTION II:

	Name	Phone Extension
E-mail Address		
Principal Investigator	____ Jenny Call _____	____ 6665 _____
	____ calljf@hollins.edu _____	
Investigator #2	_____	_____

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Investigator #3 _____

Investigator #4 _____

Principal Investigator's *Division*: Student Affairs

Principal Investigator's *Department*: Chapel

Sponsor (if funded) _____

Site of Work Hollins
University

Title of Project: My Story, Our Story, God's Story: Storytelling for Faith Formation and Community Building with Young Adults

6. Proposed dates for data collection. Begin date: Aug 18, 2016 End date: January 30, 2017

7. Principal Investigator is: Faculty Staff

Investigator #2 is: Faculty Staff Graduate Student Undergraduate Student

Investigator #3 is: Faculty Staff Graduate Student Undergraduate Student

Investigator #4 is: Faculty Staff Graduate Student Undergraduate Student

8. This application is for a(n): New Project Extension of previously approved project
 Amendment to previously approved project

If this application is for an *extension of a previously approved project* or an *amendment to a previously approved project* please indicate the research number assigned to that project on the line provided.

9. Age Range of Participants: 18-25

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10. Type of Participant: Hollins University Student Adult non-student Minor
 Other
 (describe)_____

11. Participants: Volunteer Other (describe)

_____ Individuals with special needs (e.g., mentally disabled, individuals with limited civil freedom)

12. Estimated total # of participants: 6
 Estimated # of Treatment participants (If Applicable): _____
 Estimated # of control participants (If Applicable): _____

13. What is the expected duration of research participation for the participants? (e.g., if participation lasts only 30 minutes, please write '30 minutes' below)

Initial interview (1 hour), training (3 hours), story circle sharing and listening sessions (6 hours), final interview (1 hour), evaluation session (2 hours); total of 13 hours over a 6 month period

SECTION III: Directions: Please check the appropriate response for questions 14-17 and, in a *total of no more than four pages*, please answer the questions 18-23. Please be brief and concise in your responses to each of these questions. Failure to respond to any questions will cause significant delays in the processing of this application.

Yes No 14. Will participants receive payment or extra credit point compensation for participation? If yes, detail amount, form, and conditions of award.

Yes No 15. Was this proposed project initiated by a researcher at another institution? If yes, indicate cooperating institution and attach copy of approval letter from that institution. (e.g. Copy of institution's HRRC approval, copy of approval letter from school board, etc.)

Submitted to Virginia Theological Seminary as a proposal for my project thesis in fulfillment of my D.Min. in Educational

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Leadership degree (approval letter attached)

Yes **No** **16.** Does this project involve investigator(s) at another institution? If yes, identify investigator(s) and institution and attach copy of agreement to cooperate.

Yes **No** **17.** Will the participants be deceived, misled, or have information about the project withheld? If so, identify the information involved, justify the deception, and describe the debriefing plan if there is one.

18. Describe the objectives and significance of the proposed research.

I will address the personal and communal disconnection around faith issues as expressed by Hollins students in previous interviews by engaging my student leaders in story circle dialogues about their religious and spiritual experiences. By creating a model for study circles and training my student leaders, first as participants and then as facilitators of the method, I believe that students can become connected through a much neglected discussion of our religious and spiritual diversity on campus. Students will be presented with the opportunity to reflect and make meaning of their experiences, and will also learn to respectfully listen and dialogue with others who share their stories. As they make meaning through their stories, they will progress in identity and faith formation. They will also have the opportunity to learn from one another and build appreciative knowledge of different faith and spiritual expressions. Hearing another's story is a way of breaking down barriers and stereotypes and helping to build community on our small but increasingly diverse campus.

19. Describe methods for selecting participants and assuring that their participation is voluntary. Indicate whether participants will be selected for participation on the basis of specific characteristics (e.g., sex, age, ethnic origin, religion, social and economic characteristics, or disabilities) and provide a rationale and justification for the selection process. Attach a copy of the consent form that will be used. If no consent form will be used, explain the procedures used to ensure that participation is voluntary. (proposed Consent Form is attached)

Participants will be recruited through personal invitations to the chapel's student leadership (Student Chaplains and SRLA leaders), and all must be age 18 or older. Participants will sign and date two Consent Forms noting their voluntary participation. Participants will keep one Consent Form for their personal records, and they will return one Consent Form to the Investigator. Student leaders are the target subjects as I plan to evaluate through their participation whether this is an effective method which they can learn to lead with other students to engage more of campus in interfaith dialogue.

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Students may choose not to participate without it affecting their status as student leaders. If at any time students become uncomfortable with the questions or sharing, they may opt out of answering or discontinue their participation.

20. Describe the details of the participation procedures that relate to the participant. Attach copies of all questionnaires or test instruments (include as Appendices to this application package).

Participants will be asked to submit to two interviews with the investigator, attend a training on narrative theology and active listening, write a personal faith narrative and share it with the other study participants in a “story circle” session, and participate in a final evaluation. Each interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete. The story circles will take 1 hour each, for a total of 6 hours. Training and evaluation will take 5 hours total. Participants may also name a faculty or staff member outside of the project that can provide the researcher with observational feedback of whether the student engages in this story sharing process outside of the story circle group (i.e. using it their other roles on campus such as RAs, etc). The interview includes personal questions about the subjects’ views on spirituality and faith and how they have engaged in spiritual practices while at Hollins (questions are attached in appendix). The training outline is attached in the appendix. The evaluation phase will allow students to share what they have experienced and learned through the process by answering the following questions:

- What do you hope to (what did you) gain from this process?
- What would be a good way of sharing what we have learned with the campus?

21. Describe the methods that will be used to ensure the confidentiality of all participants’ identities and the stored data. Confidentiality of data is required.

Completed Consent Forms and other data (such as transcribed interviews) will be kept in locked or password protected locations accessible only to the Principal Investigator. Participants may have access to their data at any time and may request a copy of the results once the study is completed. Participants will choose how they will be identified (by first name or a pseudonym) in the paper and will self-select what material to share and keep confidential in their narratives. Narratives and transcribed interview responses will be shared (with the participants’ consent) in a dissertation that will be published through Virginia Theological Seminary, but will not otherwise be shared outside of the group without the group’s expressed and informed consent.

22. Describe the risks to the participants and precautions that will be taken to minimize those risks. Risk goes beyond physical risk and includes risks to the participant's dignity and self-respect, as well as psychological, emotional, employment, legal, and/or behavioral risk. (Note: There is always minimal risk(s) associated with a project.) Include as an appendix to this application Human Participant Protection Education for Research Teams Training Module Completion Certificates for all investigators involved in the proposed project. (This training module can be found at <http://cme.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learning/humanparticipant-protections.asp>)

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Some of the questions have the potential to cause emotional upset as they address the very personal nature of faith (which may include trauma). Participants who experience emotional discomfort will be directed to contact the Hollins University Health and Counseling Center. Participants may elect not to answer any question in the survey for any reason and may self-select which information to share in the personal narrative and what should be kept confidential from any written reports.

23. Describe the benefits of the project to science and/or society. Also describe benefits to the participant, if any exist. The HRRC must have sufficient information to make a determination that the benefits outweigh the risks of the project.

Our campus is seeking strategies for institutional and individual (faculty, staff, student, administration) well-being as we conjunctively want to build connection as a community, appreciating our diversity and improving our inclusivity. We aspire to affect student well-being by empowering them with tools to help manage stress and integrate their development in all areas: mind, body, and spirit.

Storytelling can be used as a means of connection, reflection, and spiritual growth. Many authors and researchers have explored how the act of telling our story is also an act of meaning-making (Palmer, Parks, Magolda, Baker, Long, McAdams). Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own narratives could help them to find their place in the larger story of Hollins and of the world. This is a crucial developmental process that has been lacking for many of our students, particularly those majoring in classes outside of the humanities.

Dialogue about faith, religion, and spirituality can build interfaith connections on our campus and break down harmful stereotypes. Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) data shows that students who have knowledge of and relationships with students from different religious backgrounds than their own are more likely to have positive attitudes toward pluralism. This could be beneficial in building community on our campus in a way that embraces our diversity and helps us heal and learn from painful incidents of racism and religious discrimination.

Potential benefits that participants may attain from participation in this research study include: an opportunity to reflect on spirituality, to grow in faith identity and awareness, to build community with other student leaders, and to gain skills of active listening and being able to facilitate the story circle model with others.

SECTION IV – ASSURANCES

This protocol review form has been completed and typed. I am familiar with the ethical and legal guidelines and regulations (e.g., The Belmont Report, The Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46, and Hollins University Policy; copies of these documents

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 11

available from HRRC Chair) and will adhere to them. Should material changes in procedure involving human participants become advisable, I will submit them to the HRRC for review prior to initiating the change. Furthermore, if any problems involving human participants occur, I will immediately notify the HRRC. I understand that HRRC review must be conducted annually and that continuation of the project beyond one year requires resubmission and review.

Principal Investigator / Date
Date

Department Chair /

SUBMISSION CHECKLIST

- Application including written description of purpose and procedures
- Questionnaires or surveys, standardized tests or assessments, interview questions
- Informed consent forms
- NIH Training Certificate (<http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php>)
- Recruitment materials
- Application form and approval letter from cooperating institution or agency, if applicable

SECTION V – ASSURANCE OF SCIENTIFIC AND/OR INSTRUCTIONAL MERIT

This is to certify that I have reviewed this research protocol. I agree that this protocol meets university standards and attest that the investigator(s) is/are competent to conduct this research.

HRRC Chair

Date

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 12 CONSENT FORM

1) Title of Research Study:

My Story, Our Story, God's Story: Storytelling for Faith Formation and Community Building in Young Adults

2) Investigator(s): Jenny Call, university chaplain

3) Purpose: As a part of my project thesis for my D.Min. in Educational Leadership degree through Virginia Theological Seminary, I will address the personal and communal disconnection at Hollins by engaging chapel student leaders in story circle dialogues about their religious and spiritual experiences. By creating a model for study circles and training student leaders, first as participants and then as facilitators of the method, I believe that students can become connected through a much neglected discussion of our religious and spiritual diversity on campus. Students will be presented with the opportunity to reflect and make meaning of their experiences, and will also learn to respectfully listen and dialogue with others who share their stories. As they make meaning through their stories, they will progress in identity and faith formation. They will also have the opportunity to learn from one another and build appreciative knowledge of different faith and spiritual expressions. Hearing another's story is a way of breaking down barriers and stereotypes and helping to build community on our small but increasingly diverse campus.

4) Procedures: To participate in the current study you must be 18 years of age or older. Participants will be recruited through personal invitations to the chapel's student leadership (Student Chaplains and SRLA leaders). Students will not be forced to participate and may still serve as student leaders without participating in this research project. Students who participate are volunteers and will not be compensated for their time. Participants will be asked to submit to two interviews with the investigator, attend a one-day training on narrative theology and active listening, write a personal faith narrative and share it with the other study participants in a "story circle" session, and participate in a final evaluation. Each interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete. The story circles will take 1 hour each, for a total of 6 hours. Training and evaluation will take 5 hours total. The interview includes personal questions about the subjects' views on spirituality and faith and how they have engaged in spiritual practices while at Hollins. Participants may also name a faculty or staff member outside of the project that can provide the researcher with observational feedback of whether the student engages in this story sharing process outside of the story circle group (i.e. using it their other roles on campus such as RAs, etc). Information shared in the story circles will not be shared outside of the group without the explicit permission of the participants. Participants also will sign and date two Consent Forms. Participants will keep one Consent Form for their personal records, and they will return one Consent Form to the Investigator.

5) Risks: Some of the questions have the potential to cause emotional upset. If your participation causes you discomfort and you would like to talk with a professional about this, please contact the Hollins University Health and Counseling Center at (540) 362-6298. Services rendered at this Counseling Center are free for Hollins University students for up to six visits per semester. Participants may elect not to answer any question in the survey for any reason and may discontinue participation in the study at any time with no negative consequences.

6) Benefits: Potential benefits that participants may attain from participation in this research study include: an opportunity to reflect on spirituality, to grow in faith identity and awareness, to build community with other student leaders, and to gain skills of active listening and being able to facilitate the story circle model with others.

7) Data Collection & Storage: Completed Consent Forms and other data (such as transcribed interviews) will be kept in locked or password protected locations accessible only to the Principal Investigator. Participants may have access to their data at any time and may request a copy of the results once the study is completed. Narratives and transcribed interview responses will be shared (with the participants' consent) in a dissertation that will be published through Virginia Theological Seminary. Participants will choose how they will be

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 13

identified (by first name or a pseudonym) in the paper and will self-select what material to share and keep confidential in their narratives.

8) Contact Information: For related problems or questions regarding your rights as a participant, the Chair of the Human Research Review Committee at Hollins University, Dr. Bonnie Bowers, can be contacted at (540) 362-7491. For other questions about the study, you should call the principal investigator, Jenny Call at (540)362-6665.

9) Consent Statement: I have read or had read to me the preceding information describing this study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older and freely consent to participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant Name: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 14**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

*Note: some of the answers to these questions may require clarifying questions such as, “Can you tell me more about that?”

Openness to plurality:

- When was the last time you had a conversation with someone of another faith?
- What percentage of your friends come from a different faith tradition than you?
- Tell me about a time when you interacted with a person of a different faith.

Community:

- What helps you to feel connected to others?
- Describe what community looks like for you.
- How have you experienced community at Hollins?
- What is your experience of community within this group?

Faith, religion, and spirituality:

- Tell me about your religious background.
- How would you describe yourself now in terms of faith or religion?
- What does spirituality mean to you?
- Describe your spirituality.
- What is your experience of faith and spirituality at Hollins?
- What helps you to feel close to God?
- What would help you to grow in your spiritual life?

Narrative prompt:

- Write (and share) a story about a time of transformation in your life and what guided you through it.

Evaluating the process:

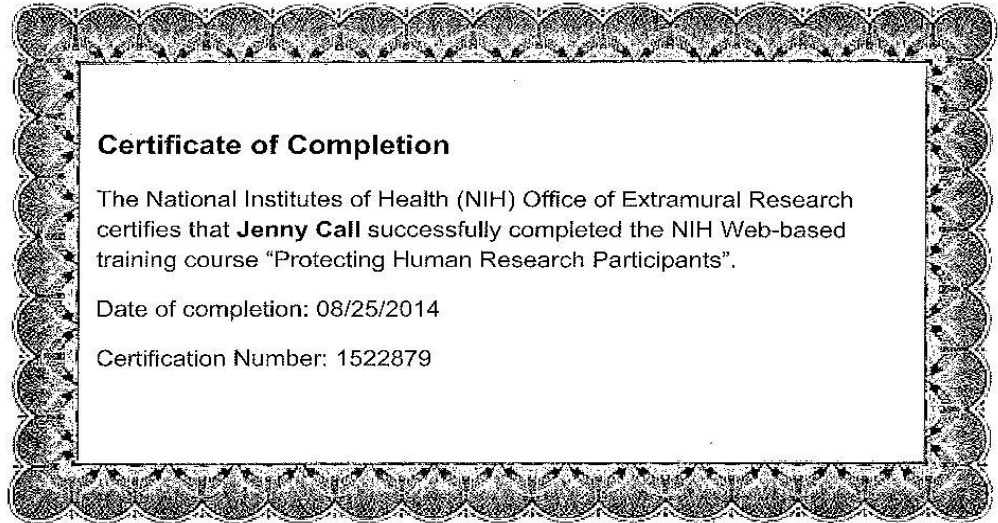
- What do you hope to (what did you) gain from this process?
- What would be a good way of sharing what we have learned with the campus?

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NIH TRAINING CERTIFICATE

10/2/2014

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants



HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 16

APPROVAL FROM GRADUATE PROGRAM

Virginia Theological Seminary Project Thesis Proposal Approval

Student: Jenny Call

6/24/2016

In General

Faculty members __Lisa Barrowclough__ & __Corbet Clark__ led the workshop in which __Jenny Call's__ Thesis Proposal was reviewed. We found the Proposal to have:

- no revisions needed
 minimal revisions needed
 moderate revisions needed
 significant revisions needed.

The revisions necessary, if any, are described below.

We **approve the Proposal without conditions**. Give the finished proposal (including corrections or revisions) to the Director by the end of the term. Consult with the Director about possible faculty members who might be your advisor, then proceed to make those contacts.

We **conditionally approve the Proposal**. There are sufficient revisions to warrant consultation with the Director before proceeding with recruiting a Faculty Advisor, but we are confident that these revisions can be completed before the summer term ends with minimal assistance or guidance from the Director and/or designated faculty. **Please speak with the Director about those revisions.**

We **refer the Proposal** to the Director for further guidance and coordination about the steps to take to complete an acceptable Proposal. **Please complete your proposal and get the Director's approval before the conclusion of the summer term.**

1. Is the description of the problem, opportunity or better way clear, focused and concise? YES

Notes:

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 17

2. **Is there a clear definition about why an intervention is needed and possible?**
YES
Notes:
3. **Are the bibliographic resources sufficient? Do they reflect current social sciences and religious scholarship? Are they clearly distinctive in terms of a theological list and a behavioral science list?** YES
Notes: We will both share some further resource suggestions with Jenny.
4. **Are the arguments for the intervention and its method well-grounded in the literature referred to in the bibliography?** YES
Notes:
5. **Is the thesis statement sufficient for the production of a high quality paper?**
YES
Notes:
6. **Is the plan for the act of ministry manageable, sufficient and measurable?** YES
Notes:
7. **Is the measurement plan for drawing data from the act of ministry and its influence sufficient? Will the project produce useable data to contribute to the paper?** YES – AS REVISED IN WORKSHOP
Notes: Jenny will revise the measurement plan to better reflect the storytelling and reflection methods of the project.
8. **Is there a plan for how to complete the work and produce a quality paper?**
Notes: YES
9. **Are there other matters for the author to pay attention to? Grammar, writing style, generalizations or too narrow application?** YES
Notes:

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 18**RECRUITMENT LETTER**

July 12, 2016

Dear Chapel Student Leader,

I hope you're having a wonderfully restorative summer. Campus is quiet and I'm looking forward to your return in August.

As you know, I've been working towards my D.Min. in Educational Leadership degree at Virginia Theological Seminary. I just finished my final residency and got approval to begin my thesis project. I will be researching the impact of storytelling on faith formation and community building. Through my work at Hollins I've seen evidence of how interfaith dialogue can break down the boundaries of difference between us and create positive connection. While Hollins is rich in spiritual diversity and interest, I have also heard that religious faith is one area that we as a community have not been as open in discussing. I believe that sharing our experiences of spirituality and faith can help Hollins students find connection with one another to span the tension and divisions we have experienced over the past couple of years.

This is where I would love your help. I am developing a "story circle" model as part of my thesis research that will engage students in sharing a written narrative about their faith with a small group who will discuss their reactions to it. I'm hoping that you as chapel student leaders will be my test group to determine if this is an effective process for engaging students in dialogue, making you aware of your faith and that of others, and building community as a group. If you find it beneficial, you would then be able to facilitate the process with others on campus.

Your participation would be completely voluntary and at your comfort level, as you will choose what you would like to share in writing and verbally. You may choose not to participate and still remain a student leader. You would be responsible for attending a training session and an evaluation session, undergoing two interviews with me, writing a short narrative and sharing it in a story circle, and attending all six story circles, for a total of 13 hours over the course of six months (August 2016 through January 2017). More information can be found on the attached consent form.

I believe that you will benefit from making meaning through sharing your story, gaining appreciative knowledge of others' faith experiences, and making deeper connections with our student leader team. I hope that this process can help engage our campus more fully in dialogue that will build bridges of connection instead of walls of division. I appreciate your consideration and the leadership you offer our campus. Please let me know if you have concerns or questions.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jenny Frazier Call
University Chaplain

duPont Chapel
Hollins University
P. O. Box 9682
Roanoke, VA 24020

Telephone: (540) 362-6665
calljf@hollins.edu

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TRAINING OUTLINE

As my project thesis will engage my student leaders in a newly created story circle process of sharing faith narratives as a means of faith formation and community building, I need to educate and prepare them through a full-day or weekend experiential training and planning retreat that will help us to create an appropriate environment for holistic learning as well as building community among the group. My goal is to model the story circle process as we create our ground rules for respectful listening and sharing, discuss how the environment provides informal learning (and how that conforms or diverts from our intentions), experience the sharing of and discussion of my story, explore models of faith formation, and plan for our next steps.

Outline of student leader training:

- Opening prayer (start with a minute of silence, I begin prayer and leave silence for their responses)
- Introductions/icebreaker: “I am” story pictures and words collage, inspired by:



(<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/377035800036871213/>)

- Setting goals (individual and group)
 - Understanding where they are coming from in experience and mindset
 - sharing my project goals and documenting theirs:
 - How do you hope to grow through being a student leader this year?
 - What do you need to learn to help you feel confident in this role?
 - How does your faith need to grow and develop?
- Creating space
 - Third places:
 - What makes you feel welcome and at home in a place?
 - What makes a place inviting and hospitable for all people?
 - How can we create a space of welcome to facilitate honest and vulnerable

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dialogue? What do we need to consider to make this accessible for people of all abilities, classes, races, genders, sexual orientations, and faiths?

-Creating sanctuary ground rules (brainstorm how to make a safe/brave space for sharing)

-“How to Be a Bad Listener” article (<http://www.quietrev.com/be-a-bad-listener/>) and discussion on active listening

-“How to listen when you disagree” article (<http://www.quietrev.com/be-a-bad-listener/>)

- Project thesis overview and guidelines for their participation
- Story circle model practice: My story and discussion (prompt: tell a story about a transformative moment in your life and how faith guided you through it)
- Lunch off-site (and ethnographic research):
What story is being told here?
How does the place accommodate (or not) guests of differing needs?
- Movement: Prayer walk or embodied prayer meditation
- The power of story exercises
 - video clips (TED talk on storytelling)
 - Share your favorite story with a partner
 - Narrative theology introduction and practice (putting yourself in a biblical narrative)
- Development and faith formation
 - David Kolb and experiential learning
(How does our story circle process fit into this model?)

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/david-kolb-learning-style-experiential-learning-theory-quiz.html>

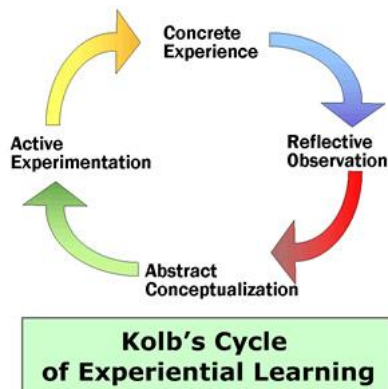
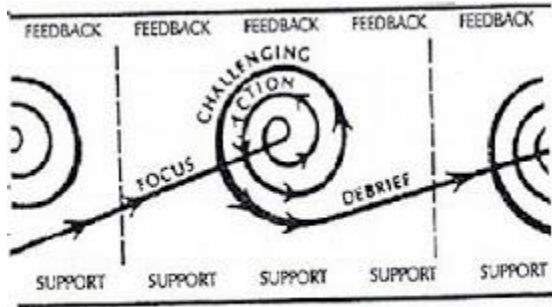


image by Karin Kirk

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 21

-Laura Joplin's Five Stages Model:



How can we offer support and feedback through the narrative process?
What is the challenging action within the story?

-Westerhoff Styles of Faith handout



Where are you on this model?
What elements in our stories point to our style of faith?
What helps us move toward owned faith?

<http://slideplayer.com/slide/9064208/>

- Group activity: definitions (spirituality, religion, faith, belief, practice, prayer, interfaith, dialogue, story)
- Evaluate:
 - Learning
 - Connection to community
 - Moving forward/next steps
- How can we continue to invite students to share their stories?
 - Introduction to curating resources and invitation to contribute and share:
 - Current resources:
 - Pinterest boards (<https://www.pinterest.com/huchapel/curate-creativity/>, <https://www.pinterest.com/huchapel/>)
 - Bulletin board
 - Weekly email newsletter
 - Instagram
 - Facebook pages (Chapel, Student Chaplains, SRLA)

HOLLINS HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE APPLICATION p. 22

New additions?: Tumblr, Twitter, Periscope, YouTube, podcast
monthly chaplain chat table at lunch
regular updates in senate
Monthly Fun Friday events
Other suggestions?

- Schedule next steps and meetings
- Closing blessing and commissioning as leaders (“For a Leader” from John O’Donahue’s To Bless the Space Between Us)

INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Note: some of the answers to these questions may require clarifying questions such as, “Can you tell me more about that?”

Demographics (how would you like to identify yourself in my thesis in terms of name, race, gender, etc)

Community:

1. What helps you to feel connected to others?
2. Describe what community looks like for you.
3. How have you experienced community at Hollins?
4. What is your experience of community within our student leader group?

Faith, religion, and spirituality:

5. Tell me about your religious background.
6. How would you describe yourself now in terms of faith or religion?
7. What does spirituality mean to you?
8. Describe your spirituality.
9. What is your experience of faith and spirituality at Hollins?
10. What helps you to feel close to God?
11. What would help you to grow in your spiritual life?

Openness to plurality:

12. When was the last time you had a conversation with someone of another faith?
13. What percentage of your friends come from a different faith tradition than you?
14. Tell me about a time when you interacted with a person of a different faith.

Narrative prompt for story circle sharing:

- Write a story about a time of transformation in your life and how faith guided you through it and prepare to share this story verbally at our next weekly meeting.

FINAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Note: some of the answers to these questions may require clarifying questions such as, “Can you tell me more about that?”

Name and Demographics (identify yourself in terms of name, race, gender, etc)

Community:

1. Describe what community means for you?
2. What is your experience of community within our student leader group?
3. How has our student leader community grown through this semester?
4. How would you like it to grow going forward?

Process:

5. How have you initiated conversations about faith outside of our group this semester?
6. What have you learned about yourself through this story sharing process?
7. What have you learned about others?
8. Has our process helped you be more open to conversations with people of different faith? If so, how?

Outcome:

9. What do you take from our journey together this semester?
10. What do you hope the group takes from the experience?
11. Moving forward, what do you think our group mission should be?
12. What does it mean for you to be a *Better Together* leader/Student Chaplain?

Permissions:

13. Who could I talk to that could serve as a reference for you in your connections outside of our group?
14. Do you give me permission to use this data in my thesis, in Hollins reports, in a Hollins process method, and in any future publications?

STUDENT LEADER TRAINING RETREAT

Saturday, September 3, 2016

- Lunch at City Market building
- Introductions and conversation
- Announcements/upcoming events
- Prayer (start with a minute of silence, I begin prayer and leave silence for their responses)
- Move to Sweet Donkey Coffee
- Introducing our stories icebreaker:



Decorate blank journal covers with pictures and words that complete the phrase “I am...” inspired by:

(<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/377035800036871213/>)

- Setting goals handout (individual and group)
 - Understanding where they are coming from in experience and mindset
 - sharing my project goals and documenting theirs:

How do you hope to personally grow through being a student leader this year?
 What do you need to learn to help you feel confident in this role?
 In what ways can we support you in this process?
 In what ways do you hope to grow and develop your faith and spirituality?
- Creating space
 - Third places:

What makes you feel welcome and at home in a place?
 What makes a place inviting and hospitable for all people?
 How can we create a space of welcome to facilitate honest and vulnerable dialogue?
 What do we need to consider to make this accessible for people of all abilities, classes, races, genders, sexual orientations, and faiths?

 - create a group covenant (brainstorm how to make a safe/brave space for sharing)
 - Share examples from *Sanctuary* weekly gathering ground rules
 - **active listening**: Share a story of a time when you felt heard or unheard.

STUDENT LEADER TRAINING RETREAT, p. 2

- “How to Be a Bad Listener” article (<http://www.quietrev.com/be-a-bad-listener/>) and discussion on active listening
 - “How to listen when you disagree” article (<http://urbanconfessional.org/blog/howtodisagree>)
 - **Empathy:** putting yourself in someone else’s shoes
 - Video: “Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care” by the Cleveland Clinic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8&index=21&list=PL9rElhgN9AL2y26odw-Va8jQrFYknivTd)
 - Discussion:
 - What people/groups/situations most naturally engender empathy within you?
 - When is it difficult for you to empathize?
 - How do you hope to grow?
 - In what ways are you afraid to change?
- Project thesis overview and guidelines for their participation
- Discussing our context
 - What has been your experience of faith and spirituality at Hollins?
 - What are the spiritual needs of Hollins?
 - How can we support one another and other students?
- Moving forward/next steps
 - How can we continue to invite students to share their stories?
 - Current resources:
 - Pinterest boards (<https://www.pinterest.com/huchapel/curate-creativity/>, <https://www.pinterest.com/huchapel/>)
 - Bulletin board
 - Weekly email newsletter
 - Instagram
 - Facebook pages (Chapel, Student Chaplains, SRLA)
 - New additions?: Tumblr, Twitter, Periscope, YouTube, podcast
 - monthly chaplain chat table at lunch
 - regular updates in senate
 - Monthly Fun Friday events
 - Other suggestions?
- Schedule next steps and meetings
- Closing blessing and commissioning as leaders (“For a Leader” from John O’Donahue’s To Bless the Space Between Us)

WEEKLY MEETING OUTLINE:

- Welcome
- Announcements
- Spiritual practice: centering prayer, silence, guided meditation or Poems as Prayer
- Community Check-in: How are you caring for your spirit?
- Learning together (introduce a topic for education/discussion such as narrative theology, faith formation, interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution)
- Sharing our stories: ground rules for listening/sharing:
 - respect
 - confidentiality
 - radical vulnerability
 - questions and curiosity are welcome
 - assume we are all seeking understanding and will not always get it right
 - knowing it's their story; not to take their attention or make it ours
 - empathy
 - active and engaged listening
 - “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight” (Parker Palmer)
- Story circle (ask for permission to record)
- Discussion and response
 - What did you not understand? (clarify)
 - What would you like to know more about? (deepen)
 - What connected with your story? (connection)
 - What does this make you think about in your own life? (reflect)
 - Where do you see God in this? (theology)
 - What will you take from this? (action)
- Prayer Requests and Closing prayer

STORY CIRCLE SAMPLE STORY by Jenny Call (Shared September 8, 2016)

If this story circle were a time of show and tell to help you to envision my faith journey, I would show you the dusty shadowbox full of awards from high school that hides at the bottom of my office bookshelf. It reminds me of how hard I have always worked for success. I was not one of the popular kids in high school, but excelled in academics, finding my place and earning approval through my grades and extracurriculars. Early on, I had internalized the message to work hard and be a “good girl” so that I could make my dreams (and my family’s dreams) come true. After my dad died when I was 5, my mom struggled under the weight of stress and grief, working multiple jobs to pay the bills, and worrying about me. I was dearly loved and cared for, but I developed responsibility quickly and realized that my grades could be my ticket out of my small town and into a better future.

Faith and the church were a big part of our life as Southern Baptists, and I often spent three days a week there in my second home with people that were as close as family. The message about working hard and following the rules was reinforced in my religious tradition, and I came to believe that if I did what God wanted me to do, I would be blessed. When it was time for me to leave for college, I felt like my world was finally beginning. I knew that I would miss my mom, but I was ready to create my own life and knew that with all the work I had put in, I would succeed.

But success at William and Mary didn’t come as easy, as I went from being a big fish in a small pond to a minnow in the ocean. Everyone there had been in the top of their class. I studied night and day to make Bs and my very first Cs. I doubted my ability

STORY CIRCLE SAMPLE STORY p. 2

and questioned my identity; if I couldn't measure my worth by good grades, how could I ever be enough?

The bright side of my experience was making deep friendships and growing my faith through my involvement in the Baptist Student Union. My home church had feared that going to a secular university would challenge my beliefs, and they were right, but for very different reasons. Being exposed to differing perspectives and diverse faith traditions and practices broadened my faith so that God became bigger and more compelling, and less able to fit in the small black and white box that I had created.

My growing faith and the friendships that nurtured it were a vital support system in the rocky times ahead. In my junior year, my research supervisor and academic advisor broke the news that "biology is not your thing" and that the medical research career I had plotted out since the third grade was not a feasible path due to the competitive nature of medical school. I was shocked, crushed, and experienced it as a crisis of faith. I had done all the right things! Why hadn't things worked out? Where was God's blessing?

Without a plan for the first time, I graduated and moved to Richmond with friends who were attending seminary. I worked two menial jobs to pay the bills, but discovered my joy was in commuting twice a week back to Williamsburg to volunteer with my church youth group. During a youth camp that I was helping to chaperone, I answered the call to ministry. It was unplanned, unexpected, but it felt just right. I experienced a

STORY CIRCLE SAMPLE STORY, p. 3

peace I hadn't felt in years. When I called to tell my family, they were excited and supportive, but not exactly surprised. I had always been a leader in my church.

Seminary only confirmed my calling and introduced me to another call, the man who would become my husband. John Call and I were married on the seminary lawn where we met, and then walked across the quad hand in hand to our first shared apartment. Exactly a year later, we had moved to Roanoke to begin our first ministry jobs. The following year, we were packing up our apartment to move to our first house and start our family. As we were packing, John teased me about the high school trophies I kept in our guest room closet. Although they were rarely seen, I still had an attachment to them as they signified so much hard work and what I thought of as my success. And yet as I thought back over my life, these accomplishments weren't what made me what I had become. Instead, they had sometimes held me back and blinded me to the more natural path God was showing me. High school memories bring a sense of loneliness, but my life now is filled with love from family, friends, students, and colleagues. Letting go of my plan and my attachments and stepping out in faith was the most uncomfortable and yet most rewarding thing I've ever done. It was true for ministry, marriage, and parenthood. None of these journeys have been predictable or easy, and yet they have built my faith and my identity. In surrendering my expectations, God has surprised me with grace time and time again.

Those trophies didn't survive our move; I decided it was time to let go of some of the baggage that weighed me down. But I did create a small reminder in the shadowbox, not as a testament to my achievements, but a reminder that God brought me through all

STORY CIRCLE SAMPLE STORY, p. 4

that and in to a life far greater. It is a journey where I don't have to work to earn my worth, but merely accept it as God's gift. It is a life that doesn't demand perfection, but only faithfulness. And this dusty shadowbox is a reminder that letting go can sometimes be the biggest act of faith and freedom.

STUDENT LEADER EVALULATION RETREAT

Thursday, November 11, 2016

- Opening candle-lighting and prayer
- Check-in: How are you caring for yourself right now?
- Affirmations: write your name on a piece of paper and pass around the circle. Everyone will add something positive they appreciate about you.
- Assessing our community growth
 - How have we come together?
 - What do we still need to work on?
 - How has our process this semester been helpful to you?
- Dinner
- Goals: How have we progressed in individual and group goals?
- Story circle model evaluation

What did you learn through the story circle process?

What have you discovered about yourself and others?

What surprised you?

How have you grown individually/communally?

How have your expectations changed?

What have you learned about the spiritual climate of Hollins?

How have you engaged in story-telling and listening outside of this group?

What have you been inspired to do through this?

- Faith formation



Complete and return a handout answering the following questions:

- Where are you on this model?
- How has your faith grown/changed since you came to Hollins?
- What will help you to continue growing in your faith development?

STUDENT LEADER EVALULATION RETREAT p. 2

- Moving forward/next steps
 - How do we support spirituality on our campus?
 - How can we continue to invite students to share their stories?
 - What does it mean to you to be a Student Chaplain/*Better Together* leader?
 - What should our mission be moving forward?

- Craft: collage tissue paper tea light holders

- Schedule next steps and meetings

- Closing blessing

COMPARISON DATA ON SPIRITUALITY (YFCY)

How to Read the Institutional Profile Report										
This Your First College Year (YFCY) Institutional Profile provides valuable information on your students' academic and campus life experiences during their first year in college for										
Sample University	Total			Men			Women			CIRP Construct
	Your Inst	Comp 1	Comp 2	Your Inst	Comp 1	Comp 2	Your Inst	Comp 1	Comp 2	
Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:										
Becoming a community leader										
Essential	11.1%	9.8%	9.2%	15.0%	10.7%	9.4%	8.9%	9.3%	9.1%	Social Agency
Very important	15.3%	13.8%	13.0%	18.3%	16.4%	13.6%	13.6%	12.6%	12.6%	
Somewhat important	31.3%	28.7%	28.7%	28.2%	26.3%	26.6%	33.1%	29.8%	30.0%	
Not important	42.2%	47.8%	49.1%	38.5%	46.6%	50.4%	44.4%	48.3%	48.3%	
Total (n)	1,395	5,458	16,100	514	1,761	6,067	881	3,697	10,033	
Mean	1.95	1.86	1.82	2.10	1.91	1.82	1.87	1.83	1.83	
Standard deviation	1.01	0.99	0.98	1.08	1.03	0.99	0.96	0.98	0.97	
Significance	-	**	***	-	***	***	-	-	-	
Effect size	-	0.09	0.13	-	0.18	0.28	-	0.04	0.04	

Comp 1 – The first comparison group is based on your institution's type and control.

Comp 2 – The second comparison group is based on a similar grouping of institution type and control.

CIRP construct – Items that are included in the measurement of a construct are indicated here.

Mean – The arithmetic mean is computed for each survey item based on the response options. Response options are given numeric values and are listed in descending order (i.e., 4=Essential, 3=Very Important, 2=Somewhat Important, 1=Not Important).

Statistical significance – Uses t-test to examine the difference between the mean

Effect size – Determines the practical significance of the mean difference

2013 CIRP Freshman Survey/2014 Your First College Year Survey									
Longitudinal Profile Report									
All Respondents									
Hollins University	Your Institution			Comp Group 1			Comp Group 2		
	TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change
All Respondents	58	58		1,979	1,979		3,655	3,655	
Spirituality									
Highest 10%	22.2%	18.5%	-3.7%	11.5%	11.8%	0.3%	14.0%	14.8%	0.8%
Above average	22.2%	18.5%	-3.7%	21.2%	27.8%	6.6%	24.4%	29.0%	4.6%
Average	18.5%	38.9%	20.4%	37.4%	38.3%	0.9%	37.1%	37.3%	0.2%
Below average	22.2%	11.1%	-11.1%	19.4%	14.2%	-5.2%	16.7%	12.5%	-4.2%
Lowest 10%	14.8%	13.0%	-1.8%	10.4%	8.0%	-2.4%	7.8%	6.3%	-1.5%
Total (n)	54	54	-	1,884	1,884	-	3,430	3,430	-
Mean	3.15	3.19	0.04	3.04	3.21	0.17	3.20	3.33	0.13
Standard deviation	1.39	1.24	-	1.13	1.08	-	1.11	1.07	-
Significance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Effect size	-	0.03	-	-	0.14	-	-	0.11	-

COMPARISON DATA ON SPIRITUALITY (YFCY) p. 2

		2014 CIRP Freshman Survey/2015 Your First College Year Survey								
		Longitudinal Profile Report								
		All Respondents								
Hollins University		Your Institution			Comp Group 1			Comp Group 2		
All Respondents		TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change
All Respondents		57	57		1,616	1,616		4,190	4,190	
Spirituality										
Highest 10%		7.4%	9.3%	1.9%	11.0%	12.9%	1.9%	12.7%	13.0%	0.3%
Above average		20.4%	18.5%	-1.9%	20.8%	24.8%	4.0%	24.1%	27.1%	3.0%
Average		40.7%	37.0%	-3.7%	36.3%	36.9%	0.6%	37.1%	39.8%	2.7%
Below average		20.4%	24.1%	3.7%	20.7%	15.4%	-5.3%	17.8%	13.2%	-4.6%
Lowest 10%		11.1%	11.1%	0.0%	11.1%	9.9%	-1.2%	8.4%	6.8%	-1.6%
Total (n)		54	54	-	1,439	1,439	-	3,856	3,856	-
Mean		2.93	2.91	-0.02	3.00	3.15	0.15	3.15	3.26	0.11
Standard deviation		1.08	1.12	-	1.14	1.14	-	1.11	1.06	-
Significance		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Effect size		-	-0.02	-	-	0.17	-	-	0.13	-

		2015 CIRP Freshman Survey/2016 Your First College Year Survey								
		Longitudinal Profile Report								
		All Respondents								
Hollins University		Your Institution			Comp Group 1			Comp Group 2		
All Respondents		TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change	TFS	YFCY	Change
All Respondents		81	81		3,122	3,122		5,586	5,586	
Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age.										
Spirituality										
Highest 10%		13.5%	12.2%	-1.3%	8.9%	9.5%	0.6%	10.8%	10.6%	-0.2%
Above average		14.9%	20.3%	5.4%	20.5%	21.7%	1.2%	22.9%	23.1%	0.2%
Average		36.5%	35.1%	-1.4%	38.0%	36.3%	-1.7%	37.0%	37.7%	0.7%
Below average		21.6%	16.2%	-5.4%	21.8%	18.8%	-3.0%	20.3%	17.4%	-2.9%
Lowest 10%		13.5%	16.2%	2.7%	10.8%	13.7%	2.9%	9.0%	11.2%	2.2%
Total (n)		74	74	-	2,932	2,932	-	5,257	5,257	-
Mean		2.93	2.96	0.03	2.95	2.95	0.00	3.06	3.04	-0.02
Standard deviation		1.21	1.23	-	1.10	1.15	-	1.10	1.13	-
Significance		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Effect size		-	0.03	-	-	0.00	-	-	-0.02	-

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE FORM AND DATA

Name_____

ID#_____

Email

Your Religious Preference_____

Your relation to this religion right now

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE SURVEY RESULTS FALL 2015

Class of 2019 (223 survey respondents)

Christian 52%

Other 11.7% (Pagan, Muslim, Quaker, Mormon, UU, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Taoist)

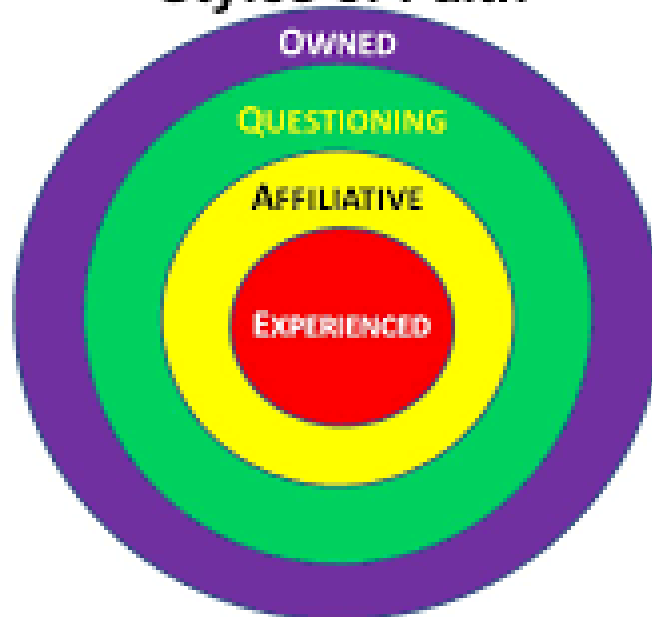
Spiritual 1.8%

none 34.5%

Those who marked a religious preference were also asked how involved they currently were in their faith (i.e. Do they attend religious services at least occasionally? Do they want to be involved in spiritual life on campus?). Of those with a stated religious preference other than “none”, 35.4% percent indicated that they were at least moderately involved in their faith and planned to continue practicing it or exploring another faith during their time in college (which is down from 64% in 2014).

WESTERHOFF STYLES OF FAITH STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Name _____

**John Westerhoff III
Styles of Faith**

Where are you on this model?

How has your faith grown/changed since you came to Hollins?

What will help you to continue growing in your faith development?

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