Encountering Questions of Religion in Psychotherapy: A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Study of Religious Patients' Experiences

Jonathan Ahern

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ENCOUNTERING QUESTIONS OF RELIGION IN PSYCHOTHERAPY:
A HERMENEUTICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
PATIENTS’ EXPERIENCES

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Duquesne University

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Jonathan Ahern

December 2011
ENCOUNTERING QUESTIONS OF RELIGION IN PSYCHOTHERAPY:
A HERMENEUTICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
PATIENTS’ EXPERIENCES

By
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ABSTRACT

ENCOUNTERING QUESTIONS OF RELIGION IN PSYCHOTHERAPY:
A HERMENEUTICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
PATIENTS’ EXPERIENCES

By
Jonathan Ahern
December 2011

Dissertation supervised by Will Adams, Ph.D.

This dissertation presents a hermeneutical-phenomenological investigation of having one’s religious or spiritual views called into question in psychotherapy. A review of the literature revealed very few studies exploring the experiences of religious or spiritually devoted psychotherapy patients and a complete lack of studies describing the lived phenomenon of having one’s religious or spiritual views called into question in psychotherapy. Three self-described “religious” or “spiritually devoted” former psychotherapy patients provided in-depth descriptions of having their religious views or practices called into question in psychotherapy. Participants’ descriptions—gathered first in writing and then by way of a hermeneutic interview—comprised the empirical
qualitative data for this study. The data were interpreted using an adaptation of Giorgi’s Descriptive-Phenomenological method. The interpretive analyses of these texts suggest that for the participants in this study, religious questioning in psychotherapy began as a conflict between seemingly opposing views which corresponded to and held in place, key relational affiliations and ways of being-in-the-world. Acting as cultural agents and personally meaningful individuals, psychotherapists came to shape the participants’ conflicts as they, together with the participants, meaningfully engaged their patients’ experiences with varying degrees of mutuality. As the participants changed the way they took up their religious conflicts, they experienced profound changes in their identities and in the nature of their relationships with individuals, communities and broader cultural narratives. The implications of these findings for competent clinical practice are discussed with an emphasis on the importance of mutuality in the therapeutic relationship.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Liz, Max and Luke, who could not have known what they were getting themselves into, but sacrificed all the same.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my dissertation chair, Will Adams, Ph.D., and the members of my dissertation committee, Eva Simms, Ph.D. and Marco Gemignani Ph.D., who added vital feedback and faith when required. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my parents and siblings who offered a listening ear during this lengthy process. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the research participants whose courage and generosity made this project possible and fascinating.
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Religion and spirituality have played a foundational role in the lives of countless people over the course of millennia and the majority of patients who enter psychotherapy in the United States describe themselves as religious (Richards & Bergin, 2000). This means that a significant number of psychotherapy patients look to religion—to some extent—to structure their worlds and give answers to questions of “ultimate meaning” (Fowler, 1995). Given the prominent role of religious beliefs, experiences, customs and practices in the psychical lives of so many, it is essential that psychologists and psychotherapists think carefully about their role and the role of psychology in relation to religion.

Along those lines, it is significant that psychology’s approach to religion has been ambivalent, at best, and frequently dismissive and pathologizing. Although there have been key exceptions, it seems that up until the last 15 years many psychological theories have approached religiosity as a regressive state or a type of pathology if they addressed these phenomena at all (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Others, including William James (1902/1958), Carl Jung (1936/1966), Ken Wilber (1983) and James Fowler (1995), have approached religion with some degree of sympathy, insisting on its potential utility and attempting to highlight the possibility of a religious stance that is neither regressed nor pathological. Along those lines, there has also been recent spate of didactic literature advocating a more thoughtful and sensitive approach to psychotherapy with religious patients (e.g., Richards & Bergin, 2000 & Pargament, 2007). Nonetheless, psychologists have only begun to understand and explicate the ways psychotherapy is experienced by religious patients.
This study is an attempt to represent and learn from the experiences of religiously and spiritually devoted people who encounter psychotherapy, as it is offered in secular settings, as an encounter with narratives that are novel, foreign or even threatening.

Before continuing, it might be helpful to define a few key terms, namely: religious, spiritual and secular. A full discussion of the various meanings of these terms is impractical for this study. Generally the word “religion” connotes an approach to deity, deities and/or questions of ultimate meaning that is shared by a large community of people. Common among these communities are defining beliefs, claims and practices that characterize the particular kind of religion. Spirituality frequently connotes one’s personal approach to deity, deities or questions of ultimate meaning. Many people use this term to describe a concern with questions of meaning and purpose and/or the divine that is not tied to dogma or other authority structures prominent in many religions. Those who affiliate themselves with an organized religion often use the term spirituality to refer to their personal relationship to deity that is supposed to be distinct from, albeit related to, their group membership (i.e. their personal encounters with the divine, their prayer life, or their views regarding deity that are not given in canonical sources).

For the purposes of this study, I was not as concerned with arriving at precise definitions as I was with studying the experiences of people who self-identified as “spiritually devoted” or “religious” and experienced their spiritual or religious approaches as an integral part of their existence. In this study, the word “secular” is used to describe treatment settings where a religious or spiritual narrative does not explicitly guide or shape the type of psychotherapy that is offered. As will be apparent later in this study, in the case of one participant, a religious narrative did come to guide the therapy.
However, in each case, the participant entered therapy under the impression that he or she was to receive secular treatment, or in other words, a treatment guided by something other than religious beliefs and assumptions. Within these settings, it seems likely that they encountered something like the secularity described by Charles Taylor (2007), who saw secularity as a state in which one’s religious views cannot be taken for granted as the only self-evident view. These settings seem to be the fertile ground from which questioning may arise.

As part of this study, I have interpreted the experiences of religious psychotherapy patients who, as recipients of psychotherapy in a secular setting, experienced a questioning of their religious lives, including their religious views, beliefs, experiences or practices. My interpretations were guided by a Descriptive-Phenomenological framework (Giorgi, 2003). The question guiding my interpretation was as follows: How do religious and spiritually devoted psychotherapy patients respond to and experience the questioning of their religious stances in psychotherapy?

I posit that psychologists and psychotherapists cannot adequately understand their role in relation to religion and religious patients if they do not contemplate and understand the effect of their psychotherapeutic values, truth claims and interventions on those patients. For that reason, I anticipate that my research will benefit both psychotherapy practitioners and psychotherapy patients; as it provides a fuller and more experience-near account of what it means to be a religious psychotherapy patient and encounter questioning of one’s most fundamental existential stances.
Literature Review

Key Contributions

A number of key figures in the history of psychology have addressed the topic of religion with different areas of emphasis and varying degrees of sympathy. In the literature review that follows I will outline some of the most important and emblematic contributions to that body of literature. I will start with important historical theorists who commented on religion and move into the contributions of contemporary commentators and researchers. Finally, I will identify gaps in the literature which I hope to address with my research.

As Sigmund Freud -- who is widely thought to be the father of modern psychology -- was an outspoken critic of religion, it seems appropriate to start with his thoughts on religion and psychology. Freud's critique of religion, as contained in his books The Future of an Illusion (1989/1927) and Civilization and Its Discontents (1989/1930), is worth further discussion as it has been repeated many times and was itself a recapitulation of already existing arguments (i.e. those presented by Marx, Nietzsche and others) against the validity and usefulness of religion. In effect, Freud's argument was that all religion is based on illusion, defined as a belief that is founded on a wish. Accordingly, his stated aim was not to dispute the truth value of various religious claims (although he did parenthetically on several occasions). Rather, Freud aimed to explicate the wishes that are operative in religious faith, to outline the social benefits and disadvantages of religion as a provider of societal stability and to suggest that it was founded upon a society-wide regressive state that might soon, thanks to the objective knowledge afforded by science, be overcome. He further suggested that religion
disempowered people, occupying them with concerns of gaining rewards and avoiding punishments and, in so doing, prevented them from developing more mature psychological resources that would facilitate a more satisfying life.

The wish Freud identified in *The Future of an Illusion* (1989/1927) as the root of the religious illusion is the infantile wish for paternal protection from the detrimental forces of the world. For Freud in 1927, the appeal in religious affiliation lay in the fantasy of union, with the father who provides protection. For Freud, this wish was the product and reflection of a regressive state akin to an obsessional neurosis. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1989/1930), Freud engaged the idea that religion arises from the “oceanic feeling (p. 11)” or a sense of unity with the universe. He equated this subjective experience of oneness with a primary narcissistic state of womb-like unity with the mother. Overall, Freud suggested that religion, like other neurotic and regressed conditions, had not been particularly effective in terms of its ability to maintain societal order. Accordingly, he proposed that a worldview, based on the truth claims produced by science and rationality might prove to be a more effective tool in maintaining a content and orderly society. Freud took pains to point out that the tenets of psychoanalysis did not necessarily lead to the conclusions about religion that he had drawn, but it is clear that many in psychology have taken up his approach to understanding religion.

Carl Gustav Jung’s approach to religion was complex, subtle and even inconsistent and, as such, is difficult to summarize. Suffice it to say that Jung saw the tendency toward religious experience as an archetypal potentiality. That is to say that he understood religion broadly as the experience of being deeply affected by the numinous (Storr, 1983) and suggested that to experience the numinous was one way of experiencing
the unconscious. He saw this capacity to be deeply moved by the numinous as a result and indication of the archetypal God-image present in the self. It is because the self, with its broad heritage in the collective unconscious, contains something of the divine that it can apprehend, bear witness to and even devote itself to God. While Jung was critical of the tendency within institutional religion to develop creeds and dismiss truths not their own, he cannot be accurately described as having been adversarial either. Jung frequently recounted the stories of patients who through analysis reclaimed their old religious faiths. However, he was quick to point out that the practice of psychology must not be partisan in its preference for any one metaphysical claim. The task of psychotherapy for Jung was to establish a dialogue between conscious and unconscious, which may happen to awake the ability and desire to cultivate the divine within oneself.

The American psychologist William James offered religion what was perhaps its most sympathetic reading among early psychologists. In his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1958), James attempted to understand the common roots that form the diverse experiences we call religious. In essence, James concluded that the religious impulse is the human impulse to find “union” with “the more” and that this impulse is expressed in a variety of ways according to the constitutional make-up of the person experiencing it. James argued that this union was, at least, a connection with a phenomenologically real, wider sub-conscious self and may even be a connection with a supernatural realm of existence that is commonly known as God.

James’s analysis had the benefit of entering into the world of religious experience, while avoiding the pitfalls of naiveté on the one hand and of cynical reductionism on the
other. He was able to portray religion as a fully human endeavor, limited and idiosyncratic, but by no means superfluous or easily dismissed.

Ken Wilber is a contemporary social scientist who has approached religion in a nuanced and generally sympathetic way. In his 1983 book, *A Sociable God*, Wilber argued for, among other things, the existence of a developmental continuum of which religion is a part. Wilber stated that while certain forms of religious expression (i.e. magic, mythicism, and fundamentalism) represent a regressed or immature state similar to lower Piagetian stages, there are also religious forms (characterized by particular kinds of “experience”) that represent a higher order than the rational thought of the formal operational stage (i.e. transrational, transpersonal, transegoic). Furthermore, Wilber argued that although higher orders of religious development are built upon lower orders, they could not be reduced to them.

One implication of Wilber’s line of reasoning is that not all religious forms can be rightfully described as the mere product of regression and other defense mechanisms. However, Wilber still seems to suggest that the majority of religious experiences and frameworks can be explained quite well as regressive or at least immature psychological states. While he argues that these allow individuals to circumvent the realization of ultimate mortality and may serve the valuable purpose of providing a sense of meaning, they are ultimately “lower” than higher orders such as the rational order.

Wilber’s willingness to state the terms by which we can judge certain religious systems “higher” or “lower,” seems to lie at the heart of his argument. In the introductory chapter to his book, Wilber introduces phenomenological methods that attempt to understand religious experience on its own terms, but quickly points out that
such methods are not sufficient, as they are incapable to evaluating the truth claims of their subject matter. He suggests instead that what is needed is a combination of phenomenological methods and the frameworks of structural thinkers like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, who posit a developmental hierarchy of cognitive ability and moral reasoning respectively.

James Fowler (1995) is a social scientist who attempts to understand faith (religious or otherwise) as a person’s setting his or her heart on what really matters, on “centers of ultimate value.” Like Kohlberg and Wilber, Fowler attempts to describe faith as a phenomenon that can grow in maturity throughout the lifespan and bases his stages of faith on the work of Piaget and Kohlberg. Mature faith, for Fowler, might be summarized as radically placing one’s heart upon God or Being, transcending self-preserving biases and group memberships that might stand in the way of such devotion. This is a stance he labels “Radical Monotheism.” Fowler’s work has the virtue of painting faith in its common human terms. Fowler’s “Universalizing Faith” provides a description of the religious world that is, at once, fully human and therefore psychological and at the same time transcendent. Fowler also seems to be less willing to label whole religious traditions as regressed. However, it is clear that although highly developed faith and institutional affiliation often coexist, for Fowler, maturity implies the realization that any group’s claim to Truth is relative to the ground of all Being and only describes one part of the transcendent reality.

**Recent Dialogue**

In more recent times, there has been an influx of research and literature devoted to understanding religion as a fully human, and therefore biological and sociological
phenomenon (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). In dialogue with this thread of literature, there have also been calls for research that recognizes religious experience as a potentially unique experience, characterized the actual intersection between the natural and supernatural realms (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). At the same time, there has been a rise in educative literature devoted to the idea of working within the patient’s religious framework and attempting to understand that framework. Certainly this movement seems to suggest an increased openness to the variety of ways in which individuals ground their lives. However, despite what seems to be a growing interest and even a conciliatory turn on the part of many psychologists toward religion and spirituality, some key questions remain unanswered.

Among these is the question of how psychologists and psychotherapists situate themselves in relation to religion when it becomes a central organizing narrative in a person’s life, particularly when that narrative is provided by an institutional religion. Despite the reputation of psychotherapists as a largely irreligious group, recent studies have found that the majority of therapists hold some form of spiritual or religious beliefs (Bergin & Jensen, 1990; Smith & Orlinsky, 2004). It would seem that psychologists might possess a greater degree of affinity with their religious patients than some might have assumed. But do the largely non-institutional religious inclinations of therapists (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004) described in these studies translate into practice with religiously identified patients? Historically, it seems that even among those who have defended the value and validity of certain types of religious experience many have been dismissive and critical of religion in its more “rigid,” “dogmatic,” and “fundamentalist” forms (Simmonds, 2006). Furthermore, there may be, as Bergin & Jensen (1990)
suggest, an institutional norm within the therapeutic profession that would discourage therapists from addressing spiritual and religious concerns more openly.

Even in the current literature devoted to encouraging therapists to work with and within their patients’ religious frameworks, many suggest that there are certain religious frameworks that are antithetical to psychological well-being (Brooke, 2000; Morely, 2007). It would be hard to argue with that assertion, especially if we think of individual spiritual orientations as religious frameworks in their own right. Few would disagree that a person can take up a relationship to “God,” higher powers or questions of ultimate meaning in a damaging way. But the line between pathological and healthy devotion can be hard to draw.

Clearly there is a question of what to do when a religious framework gets in the way of therapeutic goals. Brooke (2000) advocates a position in which psychologists and practitioners of psychotherapy acknowledge their responsibility to challenge fundamentalist worldviews that he deems “violent.” He asserts that the work of psychotherapy as an emancipatory institution is left undone if Fundamentalist Christian notions of transcendence are not challenged in favor of a model that focuses on confronting and learning to live with the unwanted aspects of our personalities. According to Brooke, real transcendence does not occur by virtue of denial of carnal desires and other aspects of our “shadow” but rather through the integration of these human qualities.

Contrasting Brooke’s recommendation that psychotherapists challenge their patients' fundamentalist worldviews and work toward one that is more in keeping with certain psychological worldviews, is the approach of Heilman & Witztum (1997), who
stress the need to “learn from” even “Ultra-Orthodox” patients. In their series of case vignettes, they demonstrate what might be considered an unusual willingness to work within what many would consider the rigid frameworks of their patients, often sacrificing preferred therapeutic outcomes in order to help their patients maintain the religious structures that order their worlds. The following quotation provides a succinct rationale for their approach:

“…People tend to seek healing when the ‘assumptive systems’ as to the nature of their world begin to be threatened [and] they should be prepared for some attack on their values and culture. Yet, it is also true that, although they should do so, many patients may not think through the consequences of their therapy because they are simply overwhelmed by pain or so disturbed that they cannot get beyond their immediate problems. Thus it becomes the therapist’s responsibility to look out for the wider value interests of the patients even when these may clash with certain commonly accepted therapeutic approaches and when the patient may, because of his or her problem, be temporarily oblivious of the threat to them that psychotherapy engenders. We call this therapeutic approach being ‘value-sensitive’ (p. 524).”

The authors in this instance clearly have an understanding of the psychotherapy session as a meeting of sometimes incompatible “assumptive systems,” and assume that all psychotherapy involves the questioning of such systems. However, it seems that they also keep in mind the considerable influence therapists hold over their patients who often approach them in considerable distress. “Value sensitive psychotherapy” seems to be an
approach that avoids forcing patients into a decision between their organizing worldviews and the alleviation of their suffering. Of course there is no clear answer to questions of when it is appropriate to question the belief structures of patients. It is reasonable to assume that responses to the dilemma of religiosity that interferes with psychotherapeutic goals will be as diverse as the professionals that practice psychotherapy.

Recently, Slife and Reber (2009) attempted to address the philosophical conflicts that may underlie the dilemma therapists face as they encounter religious or spiritually devoted patients. They argue that mainstream psychology has come to operate on the philosophical framework of scientific naturalism and that this framework, rather than being merely neutral toward theistic worldviews, is actually prejudiced against them. According to Slife and Reber (2009), the naturalistic worldview assumes that the natural world (which includes the psychological world) can be fully understood without accounting for the role of the presently active and personal God of the theist. This belief, they argue, is fundamentally incompatible with theism and relegates theistic explanations to the realm of irrelevance, while exalting naturalistic explanations of the world to the realm of the objective. Slife and Reber go on to suggest and demonstrate how this bias affects psychological research and theory. In the end, they call on naturalistic psychologists to acknowledge the biases that underlie their worldview and engage in a more equitable dialogue with theistic explanations of the world.

Although Slife and Reber did not address the implications of an anti-theistic bias in the realm of psychotherapy, their insights appear to be clearly applicable. If, as they point out, the exclusion of “God” (by any name) from our psychological theories cannot be seen as a neutral exclusion, then it follows that the therapist cannot assume a neutral or
objective position by merely avoiding the subject of religion, spirituality or “God” in psychotherapy. Rather, in doing so, the therapists would be communicating to their patients that “God” (by any name) is not a necessary part of understanding themselves, their suffering and their well-being. This stance is likely to stand in sharp contrast to the foundational assumptions and beliefs of the theistic or otherwise spiritual patients and will likely require those patients to grapple with ideas that are alien and threatening to their worldview.

If we continue to apply Slife and Reber’s argument to the practice of psychotherapy, it would seem that their ideas would call for a turn away from the myth of the objective therapist, who merely avoids the subject of religion, and toward the therapist who acknowledges his or her subjectivity (at least to him or herself) and attempts to engage the patient in a more equitable conversation.

Surveying the literature on psychotherapy and religion, it becomes clear that, as Crossley and Salter (2005) found, disagreement and confusion are commonplace. While it appears that more clinicians may be integrating spirituality into their work with spiritually devoted and religious clients (Morrison et. al, 2009), one may ask what guides therapist actions in those moments. Are the values embraced within the extant literature on psychotherapy with religious patients embraced and lived out in the session? Are there other values that guide their interactions? Is there any connection between the body of educational literature devoted to work with religious patients and the interactions of actual therapists with actual patients? Does the therapeutic research literature even address what is actually done in sessions with devoutly religious patients?
To the last question it appears the answer is largely, “No.” There is a growing body of educative literature (e.g., Dowd & Nelson, 2006; Richards & Bergin 2005) regarding patients from a variety of spiritual and religious backgrounds. This literature is largely comprised of books devoted to the “culturally sensitive” treatment of individuals from a number of different religious backgrounds. Such books usually devote the largest amount of space to describing the main guiding beliefs of a certain group and the rest of the space to making suggestions about how to best work with a patient of a certain religion. Often these suggestions come in the form of cautions against certain interventions that could potentially be alienating (e.g., encouraging patients to violate their beliefs either in or outside psychotherapy).

Certainly this body of research serves a useful purpose as a reference for those who would like to gain some awareness of their patients’ guiding beliefs. The fact that such books are published suggests a growing sense among many that working within religious frameworks is an important consideration. In short, it seems possible that the current educative literature may lead to more “culturally sensitive” psychotherapy. However, this literature is not designed to describe what is actually done in session and how this is experienced by religious psychotherapy patients.

Other major currents within the psychology of religion include attempts to identify healthy and unhealthy effects of religion (e.g. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Oman & Thoresen, 2005), exploration of religion’s biological and psychological bases (e.g. Newberg & Newberg, 2005; Donahue & Nielsen, 2005) and literature designed to advocate a certain way of conceptualizing or intervening in relation to religious patients generally (e.g. Yang et al., 2006; Wendel, 2003; Heilman & Witztum, 1997). An
emerging and popular trend is literature that calls for greater levels of integration of spiritual and religious concerns into therapy with religious and spiritual patients (see Pargament, 2007). Again, this literature comprises a worthwhile and healthy conversation on how to best understand religious experience and to intervene in the life of a religious or spiritually devoted patient. However, it does little to illuminate how psychotherapy with religious patients is actually practiced, and more importantly for this study, how it is received by the patient.

This is not a failing of the literature just mentioned; rather, it points to a gap in the psychological literature on religion. We are left to question how the various subtleties and incompatibilities between religious and psychological worldviews are negotiated and managed in vivo. More importantly, we are left to wonder how different therapeutic approaches are experienced by religious patients. It seems that there is a need for research on psychotherapy with religiously devoted patients that explores the way interactions between therapist and patient are experienced and integrated by the patient.

To date, I have been able to find very few articles describing the experience of religious patients in psychotherapy. One article that approaches this description is a “qualitative study” performed by Knox et al (2005). The authors of this article focused mainly on assessing the degree to which “religious” patients found psychotherapy beneficial and what interventions were experienced as helpful or harmful. The general findings of this project were that the patient participants largely felt comfortable bringing up issues of religion and spirituality and found psychotherapy with their secular therapists beneficial. With the exception of a few grossly invasive or insulting interventions (e.g.,
telling a patient she was “too Catholic” or laying a patient down on the floor and telling her that her “aura has holes in it”), the patients reported generally positive experiences.

The Knox et al. (2005) study points to a number of opportunities for future research. The authors of this article were only able to find one other study looking at religious patients’ experience of psychotherapy. That study yielded similar results to the one I’ve just summarized and appeared to share some of its limitations. Of the twelve participants described as religious, only two identified with an organized religion (Catholic). I was therefore, led to wonder how experiences of patients strongly identified with organized religion might differ from those of the participants in the study. Furthermore, the published data appeared to be largely categorical rather than richly descriptive, despite the authors’ characterization of their study as “qualitative.” This had the unfortunate consequence of obscuring any picture one could gather about any one patient’s experience and the efforts he or she might make to grapple with the discourse offered in therapy.

Adler and McAdams (2007) collected the narratives of psychotherapy patients in general (as opposed to religious patients in particular) and subjected them to a Grounded Theory analysis in order to see what narratives of therapy were associated with “Ego Development” and “Well Being”. Among other things, they found that those patients who experienced both increased Ego Development and Well Being were more likely to minimize the role of the therapeutic relationship in their improved state, whereas those who experienced increased Ego Development and low Well Being were more likely to see the therapeutic relationship as having played an important role in their lives. Certainly these findings touch on the way patients grapple with the presence and the
contributions of the therapist as an agent of change in their lives. However, I think it still leaves room for a study that provides a rich, depthful analysis of the details of the patient’s struggle to integrate psychotherapeutic discourse, rather than presenting a few common themes. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how patients experience the presence of another, such as their therapist, whose presence has the potential of being so influential in their lives.

A 2005 study by Crossley & Salter took a qualitative look at the therapist side of the therapeutic relationship, exploring the attitudes of clinical psychologists relative to “spirituality.” The authors of this study chose a grounded theory approach and reported two main themes emerging from their analysis. The first was that the psychologists they interviewed felt unsure about how to address spirituality in psychotherapy owing to the “nebulous” nature of the phenomenon, a lack of training in addressing spiritual matters, and varying levels of personal comfort with spirituality. The second theme was that the psychologists felt they should attempt to understand their patients’ spiritual beliefs without judging them. They hoped in sessions to help find an approach that would work “in harmony” with their patients’ religious beliefs. However, some felt very unsure about how to approach spiritual beliefs when they seemed to stand in the way of therapeutic progress. In those instances many reported simply abstaining from any sort of intervention, others looked for ways of offering alternative approaches that were still in keeping with their patients’ religious frameworks; still others recommended that their patients seek some sort of help with clergy from their respective spiritual backgrounds. It seemed that those who felt least comfortable or familiar with spirituality were most likely to refrain from intervening or to refer their patients to a spiritual resource.
The Crossley & Salter (2005) study seems to confirm the claim of Richards & Bergin (2005) that there is a need for better training in dealing with spiritual concerns. It also begins to explore some of the ways therapists might deal with the spiritual disconnects between themselves and their patients. However, as with the rest of the existing literature it is limited in that it relies solely on psychologists’ accounts of particular moments. Such accounts may be given with a host of ulterior motives, such as to appear open-minded, fair, and competent-- motives that can affect the way therapeutic stories are told. But even assuming that the participants in this study entered with the sole motive of giving an honest account of what went on as they saw it, their accounts may still vary significantly from those of their patients. Furthermore, the therapist participants may not be attuned to the many changes, deliberations, and questions that arise for the patient outside of the therapist’s office.

Gockel (2011) performed a narrative study focused on the experiences of “spiritually devoted” clients in counseling. The results of this study suggest that these spiritually devoted clients tended to view the therapy as an inherently spiritual process and looked for greater spiritual integration in their relationships with their therapists. These clients sought out and appreciated what they saw as spiritual sensitivity and openness in their therapists and felt disengaged when their therapists did not address the spiritual nature of their concerns.

Gockel’s study provides a rich description of patient’s experiences and clearly suggests a possible preference among spiritually devoted patients for integrated therapy. However, because it focuses explicitly on those who describe themselves as “spiritually devoted” rather than religious, it was not designed to access the experiences of those
whose beliefs and foundational narratives differ most from those represented in the various fields of psychology. Indeed, it seems that there is a need for a study that portrays a vivid picture of psychotherapy as a meeting of potentially conflicting worldviews. In particular there is a need for research that describes that meeting as it is lived by religiously and spiritually devoted patients.

For this reason I have decided to study the experience of religiously or spiritually devoted psychotherapy patients who have had their religious or spiritual views or practices called into question in psychotherapy. The phenomenon of having one’s religious views or practices called into question is one that could benefit from clarification. Finding one’s grounding narratives are in question is an increasingly common experience in Western culture. Indeed, according to some (i.e. Gergen, 2000 & Taylor, 2007) it is one of the defining features of that culture. Both Gergen and Taylor make use of personal accounts of the lived experience of being in a secular, multicultural world. For Gergen, the effect seems to be one of being pulled and called in various directions and never quite living up to all that one should be. For Taylor, it is the experience of not being able to take for granted that one’s view is the View; it is knowing that one’s view is one of many possible views. These authors bring useful insight to their work, but I think it would be interesting to explicate the accounts of ordinary people to see what is essential in their experience.

In order to explain this project, I should first explain a few terms. The first is the term “religiously or spiritually devoted.” In using this term I hoped to describe a certain type of person, namely a person who embraces a religious or spiritual stance that is integral to their way of being and recognizes the crucial role her beliefs play in her life. I
anticipate that people who fit this description will be more likely to recognize an experience of being called into question as meaningful. Because they have an organizing narrative that can potentially clash with narratives provided in psychotherapy, their narratives are more likely to be affected by other changes in their lives and the experience of having this narrative questioned is more likely to have a memorable effect on them.

The second term that bears some explaining is, “had their religious or spiritual views or practices called into question.” This phrase is written in the passive voice, leaving the origin of the questioning unknown. This language was intended to convey the sense that the experience of being questioned and truly feeling questioned can emanate from a number of different situations. Of course there are instances when a psychotherapist might openly question a patient’s religious beliefs or practices. There are also instances in which the process of introspection and questioning that goes on in psychotherapy in general can have the effect of calling certain beliefs or practices into question. Feeling questioned might also have a lot to do with the questions one harbors personally. These, in turn, can be influenced by questions they’ve encountered within the broader cultural milieu. I have attempted to leave room for these considerations by leaving the source of the questioning ambiguous.

At the same time, the use of the word “call” suggests that there is a questioner that “calls”. I’ve chosen to phrase it in this way so as to honor the sense I’ve developed from those I have interviewed, that the questioning process occurs within a human relational context. Whatever the source(s), the questioning often seems to be experienced, at least partially, as emanating from someone; particularly someone out there. This was the
case, even when the participants also saw themselves as questioning their religious and spiritual beliefs.

I chose to focus on religiously and spiritually devoted individuals receiving psychotherapy in nonreligious settings for several reasons. First of all, the vast majority of psychotherapy is offered in nonreligious settings (Richards & Bergin, 2000) and religious patients are likely to seek out psychotherapy in these settings when their problems become unmanageable in pastoral settings (Thurston, 2000). Second, many religious patients do report trepidation about entering psychotherapy in secular settings (Richards & Bergin, 2000). This trepidation seems to be related, in part, to fears of being misunderstood or pathologized for one’s religion (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Certainly this trepidation suggests that there is at least a perceived incompatibility in worldviews on the part of the patients. Third, there is research that suggests that therapists often feel uncertain when addressing the religious concerns of patients (Crossley & Salter, 2005). Given the trepidation religious patients and secular therapists feel as they meet in psychotherapy room, it seems appropriate to explore how that relationship is managed. It also seems like a concrete, evocative portrayal of religious patients’ experiences might help to alleviate the uncertainty that can reign in such situations or at least transform that uncertainty into a fruitful dialogue.

Another interesting question is how religiously devoted patients integrate their experiences of psychotherapy with religiously affiliated therapists. I have chosen not to pursue this question. Aside from my general intuitive sense that the greater disparity between secular therapists and religious patients would make for a more interesting study, I am also interested in studying a phenomenon that will resonate with a greater
number of people. I imagine that a study of the stories of religious patients with secular therapists will do just that.

**Method**

**A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Method**

I have decided to study the experience of having one’s religious views or practices called into question in psychotherapy in order to explore how religious and spiritually devoted patients experience and manage the clash of narratives that occurs in psychotherapy. Using Giorgi’s Descriptive-Phenomenological method as the basis for my interpretations, I attempted to access and re-present these experiences, highlighting the constituent themes inherent in each description.

According to Giorgi (2003) a Descriptive-Phenomenological method is designed to access the experiences of others and identify what is essential to those experiences. Among the benefits of this kind of analysis is the fact that it affords the researcher and others with a clarified account of the phenomenon in question, allowing them to think about and discuss the phenomenon with greater precision. The Descriptive-Phenomenological method entails gathering written descriptions of participants’ experiences of a given phenomenon, interviewing the participants to fill in the gaps in the written descriptions, reading the resultant protocols several times to gain a sense of the whole, breaking the protocols into meaning units (i.e., units of text that convey a distinctive psychological meaning), translating these units into psychologically sensitive language, creating situated themes and finally deriving general themes from the collected situated themes. The situated themes are an explication of the constituent themes of an individual participant’s experience, translated into psychologically sensitive language.
Situated themes from each participant are compared and contrasted to arrive at constituent themes common to every protocol. These common elements are used to create the general themes. Participants in this kind of study generally commit to providing a rich description of a given experience and a series of face-to-face interviews. A more full description of this method will be provided in the “Data Interpretation” section below.

Before continuing, it may be useful to clarify a few points regarding the method of interpretation I have used for this project and the modifications I have made for the purposes of my study. The Descriptive-Phenomenological method borrows heavily from the phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl (Wertz, 2005), incorporating a number of essential aspects of philosophical phenomenology. Within Husserl’s method, the researcher is expected to bracket natural scientific and other theoretical knowledge arriving at what is called the “natural attitude.” Following this abstention, the researcher brackets the natural attitude itself, going beyond what is presented in experience to the aspects of presentation itself. The Descriptive-Phenomenological method also incorporates a Husserlian technique known as imaginative variation in which the researcher imagines the various conceivable ways a unit of experience can be varied in order to see what aspects of that experience are essential.

I decided to reframe a few of these concepts for the purposes of my study, which is meant to be a reflexive and interpretive endeavor. I found it useful to think of bracketing in positive terms, as a reflective acknowledgement of my taking up a certain kind of interpretive relationship to the experiences with which I was working. That is to say that I acknowledged that I was attempting to explicate how each experience was
given to me pre-reflectively and that I was attempting to see what was essential about those experiences. I also attempted to “bracket” by way of reflexive disclosure of my own preconceptions, biases and interpretive horizons. I attempted to describe my interpretive process as an interaction between my world and the world of the text. Consequently, it is fitting to call my method a Hermeneutic-phenomenological method based on the methodological structure provided by Descriptive-Phenomenology.

An analysis of this kind has the advantage of being based in the accounts of various individuals whose experiences will vary and sometimes coincide. The Descriptive-Phenomenological method uses these differences and similarities in order to approximate what is essential to that experience. Once the constituent themes of an experience have been grasped, it becomes easier to grasp what is variable and idiosyncratic. Furthermore, an analysis that must reckon with the experiences of several people rather than just one, introduces a fruitful tension between the world of the researcher, the world of theory and the world of the texts describing the experiences of individuals.

Some have criticized Descriptive-Phenomenological and other phenomenological research methods, asserting that they are built on a naïve assumption that experiences can be accessed by analyzing a text, and advocating that a text would be better understood as a performance that can be interpreted. I take these critiques seriously and have attempted to approach the Descriptive-Phenomenological method reflexively, with an eye to limitations of what can be accessed by interpreting a person’s description of an experience.
I have used the basic methodological structure of Giorgi’s Descriptive-Phenomenological method while customizing it to my purposes for this study. I incorporated a more reflexive, hermeneutic approach to the data. As I interpreted the participants’ protocols, I reflected upon the way the texts reached me as a limited, culturally and historically situated human being and used this reflexive process as a meaningful vehicle of interpretation. I kept a journal of my responses to the participants, their stories and to the interview. This journal became useful as it allowed me to reflect on the interpersonal dynamics between myself and my participants. This information allowed me to imagine the interpersonal dynamics that might have shaped my participants’ experiences of questioning in the context of the psychotherapeutic relationship. A more detailed description of that process will be presented in the Results section.

After interpreting and re-presenting the experiences of my participants as individual events, I also looked closely at the way the utterances, experiences and texts produced by my participants were themselves artifacts of the cultural milieu from which they arise. In other words, I paid attention to the ways in which my participants’ experiences reflected and were produced by broader forces including competing and historically situated discourses or ways of determining and describing what is real, right or pleasing. This involved revisiting the descriptions my participants provided and contemplating the ways the therapists’ and participants’ utterances and comportment reflected broader cultural narratives common in religion and psychology. It also involved contemplating the way the therapists’ and participants’ interpretations of the participants’ experiences differed in accordance with their respective grounding worldviews. In
particular, I was interested in the conflicts between religious and psychological worldviews and in the conflicting approaches to religion within the field of psychology. With each participant, I attempted to determine what arguments for the nature of truth and the good life affected their religious conflict.

**Data Collection**

Three former psychotherapy patients who self-identified as being or having been “religious or spiritually devoted” were recruited and asked to provide written descriptions of their experiences of having their religious view or practices called into question. Each participant was asked to respond, in writing, to the following access question:

“I would like you to help me understand a particular aspect of your participation in psychotherapy. Specifically, you agreed to work with me because something in the course of your therapy brought your religious views, practices, or identity into question. Please describe – in as much depth and detail as you can – how your religious views, practices or identity were brought into question and how this was experienced. Be sure to include specific examples of particular things that happened in therapy that gave rise to the questioning, and your response to these things, so I can get a clearer sense of what this process actually was for you. Please share everything that seems important, even if it doesn’t quite make sense to you right now or you wonder if anyone else could understand.”

After receiving the participants’ completed written responses to the preceding question, interviews were scheduled with each participant. Interviews, ranging from 90
to 120 minutes in length were conducted with each participant. After the situated structures were derived, a second brief interview was performed to allow each of the participants an opportunity to give feedback about the degree to which the situated themes fit their experience.

**Participant Selection**

Participants were required to:

- Be at least 21 years of age or older
- Identify themselves as having been meaningfully religious or spiritually devoted at the outset of therapy
- Identify themselves as having had their religious views or practices called into question in psychotherapy
- Agree to provide detailed written descriptions of their experiences.
- Consent to audio recorded interviews and to having recorded interviews transcribed and analyzed.
- Be willing to meet with me for a series of face-to-face interviews.

Participants were recruited by way of flyers distributed to various houses of worship, public areas and psychotherapy clinic bulletin boards and by inquiring with psychologists in the area to request they pass along a flyer to any party they thought may have interest. Interested individuals then contacted me and, if they met the established criteria, arrangements were made for them to sign the consent form and begin the study.

Three participants, one male and two females, completed the requirements for the study. After recruiting two participants, a decision was made to offer a financial incentive in the form of $50 for completing all study requirements. The third and final
participant was recruited on those terms. A fuller description of the participants and the context of their experiences will be provided in the Results section.

Flyers involved a statement of the purpose of the study—to take a closer look at the experience of having one’s religious views or practices called into question in psychotherapy. They also provided a brief description of the requirements for participation listed above. Finally, the flyers included my contact information.

Of the individuals that contacted me, I selected those that met the stated criteria for the study. In the initial phone conversation I provided a description of the study, its requirements and its purpose and attempted to gauge the goodness of fit between the respondent’s interests and the aims of the project and recorded contact information. I then sent the informed consent contract and the access question via email. After receiving the completed written descriptions and signed consent forms, I called each participant to work out the details of the time and place for the interview.

The first three participants were able to provide rich and abundant data regarding the phenomenon in question and constituent themes and findings appeared to be shared consistently across all three protocols. For this reason, a decision was made to end data collection at three participants.

**Interview Procedure**

Each of the written protocols was reviewed several times prior to the interview and questions were developed for each of the gaps in the description I was able to identify. Each participant was asked to read his or her protocol aloud and I interjected with questions and follow up questions to encourage the participants to provide more information. Interviews were digitally audio recorded and subsequently transcribed
verbatim, including the recited protocol, my questions and the participants’ responses. Second interviews were scheduled after I completed the situated themes for a participant’s protocol. During this interview I presented the situated themes to the participant and asked if it accurately described their experience having their religious views or practices called into question and if they would add or alter any part of the situated themes. Participant responses were digitally recorded.

**Edited Syntheses**

Each of the recorded interviews was transcribed and edited to create an edited synthesis. This process entailed rearranging participant utterances into a coherent temporal sequence, eliminating utterances unrelated to the research topic, changing or deleting identifying information and deleting interviewer speech that did not need to be preserved with the text in order to apprehend the meaning of a given utterance. Full texts were preserved in the transcribed interview and these texts were referred to when there was a question regarding the context of a given utterance. However, tangential statements that were clearly unrelated to the phenomenon being studied were deleted. Examples of such content includes parenthetical statements with no relation to the subject matter (e.g., requests to take a smoke break or questions about what part of the protocol to read) or statements by the interviewer that were not necessary to understand the participant’s response. This process produced a coherent text, primarily made up of the participant’s speech and focused on the research topic, facilitating the process of interpretation used in descriptive phenomenological methods.
Data Interpretation

As has been mentioned, participant protocols were interpreted within the framework of a Descriptive-Phenomenological method. According to Giorgi (2003), interpretation within this method is comprised of four major steps. The first is to read the transcript several times to gain a sense of the whole. The second is to break the transcript down into “meaning units”. The third is to interpretively transform the meaning units into “psychologically sensitive” language, that is, language that conveys as fully as possible the psychological significance of the meaning unit. The fourth is to determine the structure of the experience.

Reading for a sense of the whole entailed reading and re-reading each complete interview protocol to gain a sense of it as a complete document. The process of establishing meaning units involved reading through the transcripts with an eye toward identifying the experience of the participant and shifts in the expressed meanings of the text. Shifts in meaning were demarcated, thus producing meaning units. The goal of this process was to break down the text into distinctive and manageable expressions of meaning that could then be more easily analyzed.

After these meaning units were created, each meaning unit was translated into “psychologically sensitive” language. The goal of this step was to take the individual descriptions of events and experiences in the text and interpret the psychological meanings being lived out in each instance. This involved creatively and imaginatively attempting to arrive at a statement that conveyed the psychological meaning of the individual’s experience without becoming laden in the specifics of the individual’s personal context. This process was, of course, an interpretive process in which the
researcher attempted to draw out, both what was explicitly written and that which the researcher saw as implicit in the protocol. Translation into psychologically sensitive language was also guided by the research question, as a means of attending to aspects of the protocol that were meaningful for this particular study and disregard other aspects that were not.

As an adaptation for this study, an effort was made to take the interview context into account by taking detailed notes about the interview situation, referring back to the interview transcript throughout the interpretive process and by keeping the interviewer questions as part of the meaning unit to be translated when it was determined that this would be necessary to understand the utterance of the participant. This step was important as the meaning of each utterance is given in the interpersonal context from which it came.

Following this step, translated meaning units were used to arrive at situated themes for each protocol. The goal of this procedure was to express what was truly essential about the experience as it was captured in the transformed meaning units. This was accomplished by way of imaginative variation, in which I attempted to arrive at which aspects of the experience described were essential to phenomenon in question and which were inessential. The results of this analysis were written in the form of a list of interrelated constituent themes or “situated themes” illuminating the essential aspects of each experience described in the transcripts, and showing how each of the distinct and psychologically meaningful themes or constituents interrelated with one another. Furthermore, each constituent theme was paired with an illustrative quote from the interview protocol, demonstrating how that played out in the life of the participant.
After the situated themes were completed, second interviews were scheduled with each participant wherein I presented the situated themes to them and asked them if I had accurately captured their experience. Participant suggestions were considered in light of the previous transcripts and the situated themes were changed when it appeared that doing so would better capture the experience described in the transcript.

General themes were derived as situated themes were considered together to arrive at a sense of what was essential and non-essential in each one. Aspects of the situated themes that did not appear essential to the others were discarded while essential elements that were shared among situated themes were retained as part of the general themes. Although, the general themes are intended to show what is common among all of the participants’ experiences, each collection of situated themes remains a meaningful source of information as each says something important about the experience of each individual.

**Reflections on Interpretive Horizons**

Before continuing to the results of this study, it is important for me to explore, as best as I can, the factors that may have shaped my interpretive horizons. As Gadamer (1989) suggests, interpretation always involves a tension between the world of the reader and the world of the text. Bearing this in mind, this interpretive project would be incomplete unless I shared those aspects of my world that shaped and delimited my access to the world of my participants.

Among the most important factors affecting my interpretive stance is my dual identity as a psychologist and a religious man. As the son of a psychologist, raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (aka, the LDS or Mormon faith), I have spent
my life spanning and attempting to negotiate the divide between the worlds of psychology and religion on an abstract and personal level. My graduate studies in psychology had the effect of amplifying my experience of conflict between these two worlds. Furthermore, the emphasis within my graduate program on various forms of post-modern thought, also gave me a lens in which to view this conflict as a conflict between cultural narratives. Suffice it to say that I entered this project with a deeply felt sense that the narratives of psychology and religion frequently clash and that these clashes can have profound effects on individuals. Throughout this project, I felt the tension between these worlds as I was frequently torn between my belief in the potential value of religion and spirituality on the one hand and the potential value of psychotherapeutic interventions on the other. I also frequently held a tension between my perception of therapy and religion as genuine sources of relief for many people and, at the same time, as institutions of power and possible oppression. In the midst of these tensions and past experiences, I attempted, to the best of my ability, to engage the experiences of my participants in good faith, attempting to represent their experiences as accurately as possible and leave myself open to experiences that stood outside of my preconceptions.

**Results**

**Presentation of the Data and Findings**

In this section, the data and the interpretive results from the study will be presented. A description of the participants and the context of their involvement in psychotherapy are presented first. Their written responses to the access question are presented second. The situated themes are presented third. The general themes are
presented fourth. By presenting this information, I hope to provide the reader with an understanding of the experiences of the participants and of the interpretive process used to yield the results and. The interview transcripts are located in Appendix A.

**Description of the Participants and the Context of Therapy**

The following descriptions of the participants are intended to give the reader a broad understanding of the pertinent background of each participant. Identifying information has been changed to ensure the confidentiality of all participants.

**Angela**

Angela is an African-American woman in her late twenties, who entered psychotherapy for the second time during graduate school. In therapy she addressed issues related to her relationship with her boyfriend and processed past emotional and physical abuse. She reported that her therapist was a middle-aged female Master’s-level clinician who approached therapy from a broadly psychodynamic perspective. At the outset of therapy, Angela identified herself with the Seventh Day Adventist faith.

**Bob**

Bob is a middle-aged White man who had been in psychotherapy several times throughout his life, prior to entering the therapy he described for this project. He entered this therapy after his previous therapist terminated their therapy, citing Bob’s refusal to end a relationship the therapist deemed life-threatening. Bob had been required to seek out therapy following a suicide attempt that resulted in actions taken on his professional license. After his previous therapist terminated the treatment, Bob entered therapy at a local counseling clinic with a Master’s-level clinician he called James. In this therapy he processed his relationship with his long-term girlfriend and soon to be wife, Carol. Later in the therapy, Bob learned that his therapist was a Greek Orthodox priest and the therapy
took on an explicitly religious character. Entering therapy, Bob was affiliated with a non-denominational Christian church and with a set of spiritual teachings known as “A Course in Miracles.” He had been raised in the Catholic Church and had affiliated himself with a variety of religious communities, including the Children of God and a Baptist congregation.

**Camie**

Camie is a White woman in her late twenties. She entered therapy seeking treatment for what she described as a “clinical depression” characterized by painful questioning about whether her life, or life in general, held any meaning. She described working with a male therapist, but did not specify his level or training or age. She entered therapy with a belief in a benevolent higher power with a purpose for individuals. She had been raised in Catholic and Baptist congregations.

**Written Protocols**

Below are the initial verbatim descriptions written by each participant in response to the access question included above in the Method section.

**Written Protocol--Angela**

During my fourth year of graduate work I entered individual psychodynamic focused psychotherapy with a master’s level therapist. Prior to this I had three years of therapy/counseling at my undergraduate university. I feel that my psychotherapy experience called into question several issues of related to religion/spirituality and my practice of faith. Two major issues I will take the leap of sharing. The first involves sexual purity as Biblically defined as abstaining from sex until marriage. At the time of this psychotherapy I was in a close to two year relationship with a young man of my own faith. We were having challenges because of our sustained long distance status. My
therapist inadvertently communicated to me that she thought our decision not to live
together prior to marriage and to work hard at abstaining from sex was rooted in some
psychopathology. More specifically, her line of questioning was directed at assumptions
related to my being ‘repressed’ and ‘over controlled’. Ultimately, this led to her not
expressing any concern at my distress in discovering my boyfriend’s frequent use of
internet porn. (His therapist actually told him that we should reconsider our decision not
to become sexually active until after marriage and normalized his use of porn) Although
this behavior was distressing to us individually and as a couple.

The second issue has been the most painful for me and is ongoing. During my
work I disclosed a substantial history of neglect and physical/verbal abuse that I and my
three siblings experienced growing up. My therapist pushed me to explore what anger I
might have toward God for allowing these things to happen. I really don’t know how to
articulate how this impacted me, my faith and my relationship with God. First, I don’t
blame my therapist. I was already angry at God and I knew it. But she called into
question the justice of God and compared his failure to protect me as a child to that of my
human parents. This experience in therapy was huge part of what I can only explain as an
existential crisis. I don’t have any proof to back up the justice of an all knowing all
powerful God who can’t even protect three and four year olds. I don’t ignore the
questions I have. I just live with them being unanswered. I believe at text in the Bible that
says something to the effect of each person is given a measure of faith’. I believe some
people decide to have invest/place their faith in Science and evolutionary theory,
Buddhism or the worship of ancient ancestors. I don’t think that placing my faith in a
man immaculately conceived two thousand years ago, crucified and now risen is any
more absurd than the belief systems I just referred to. My whole experience in psychotherapy and process of questioning my faith has left me with this question. What’s the better alternative? What other God/deity/power and system of symbols and rituals better answers the question of why? I have studied other religions and there are no better alternatives. Regardless of whom I pray to tonight, a child will starve to death tomorrow, an innocent man will go to prison, a woman will be raped. But I can sleep with the peace of mind that I believe in something that God’s word has promised to be eternal. If at the end of life, I find that I have believed a lie, then at least I would have lived believing in something. This is where I am, and I admit it is extremely over simplified, but I don’t know any other way to reconcile this or make sense of it. In an attempt I contacted an old religion professor from college. This experience caused serious doubt in the mind of my ex about my commitment to God/our faith and also led me to question my own loyalty to God and my faith. I have also experienced anger, sadness and confusion.

**Written Protocol--Bob**

My experience with spirituality and psychotherapy cannot be told without some background information. I was born to a mother who was an alcoholic. She was drunk almost all of my life—only sobering up after I threatened to keep her then four-year old granddaughter away from her—and then only seven years before her death—long after I had left the house and had started my own family. My father’s role in my childhood was that of someone very detached and self-absorbed in his job. He was also, I believe, very co-dependent on my mom for his (albeit sick) emotional needs. As a devout (well maybe loyal is a better word) Catholic, he stayed married to her through many years of alcoholism—and never allowed the subject of her alcoholism to be raised to the surface.
(This, I learned much later, was the role model I was to attempt to follow.) He coped by locking himself in his room and leaving me under the care of a drunk mom—whose alcohol abuse fanned the flames of insanity and fueled the rants and raves of a very angry and scared woman. It seems my dad had been involved with another woman years before I was born—but every time my mom got drunk--the resentment and anger of his affair boiled up as if the unfaithfulness was still going on--and while I was being raised I lived with the ghost of a woman I had never met haunting my existence.

As soon I turned 18, I joined the Navy where I, too, learned to drink. My Navy career lasted just 4 years. I returned to my town, and to the mom and dad that I left…only 4 years sicker. I married within a few years and got busy with my own life. Alcohol was still a problem for me—and a little after 4 years of marriage, my then-wife—sick of the empty promises and stupid behavior—threatened to leave me if I did not get help.

Fortunately, I had been “12-stepped” by a man who had been in treatment at a local recovery center a few months earlier—and that night, afraid of the loss of my wife, I checked myself into treatment. 42 days later I emerged--and (knock on wood and Thank God) so far have never had another drink. Over the next 24 years, I enrolled in school, became a RN, and helped raise three beautiful children. I was going to a mainstream Baptist church at the time and was very active in the church band—playing drums. That involved Wednesday night practice and Sunday morning service. And then there was Sunday school and “home groups.” I had had a depressive episode sometime around the year 2001 and required a brief in-patient hospitalization but at this time (in 2005) I had seemed to stabilize. I had been sober for almost 20 years—and very active in AA—both as a member and as a sponsor for newly recovered alcoholics.
In 2005, I was working at a local hospital—and like my dad—had become somewhat self-absorbed in my work. Our oldest daughter had just moved off to college. My then-wife, suffering from the death of her father—began to become more and more detached. She would lose herself in romance novels—and any intimacy between us had dwindled to a trickle. I grew more depressed—but seemed to counter-balance this with work and AA. It was at this time that I hired Carol to work for me—and little did I know at the time—began the downward spiral into hell.

Carol was 16 years younger than I, and when I hired her, I thought she was a little “hyper”—but otherwise fairly normal. She was a fairly good worker—and for the next 6 months or so, I maintained a strict boss/worker relationship. That changed the day she came to work after she was beat up by her husband. She had bruises on her face and a black eye and, after closing the office door, proceeded to tell me horror stories of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her then husband—and of early childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father.

Looking back now, I think it was at that moment, that something switched “on” inside me. I began to pray in earnest for Carol—even suggested to my then-wife that she, too, pray for her. But prayer was not enough. Several weeks later she came back to work, again beat up. She was afraid for herself and her then 4-year old daughter—and expressed a desire for a “fresh start.” So, being the “altruistic” Christian (an in hindsight, extremely stupid and arrogant) man that I was, I offered to pay to move Carol from a neighboring town (where she was living with her husband) to my town. I even offered to pay the first month’s rent in an apartment. So one Saturday, while her husband was working, Carol and I packed up her and her child’s belongings and moved her to my
town. For the next month, the “attachment” between Carol and I grew—though I pretended not to notice it.

A little less than a month later, Carol asked to talk to me alone in my office. She confessed that she had a strong emotional attachment to me—and when I asked her to clarify—told me she was “in love” with me. She smothered me with compliments (I have never met such a kind and wonderful man as you, etc., etc.). I was taken-aback—but to be honest—somewhat excited by the fact that this woman (heck, any woman for that matter) actually had such deep feelings for me.

The first thing I did was to tell my boss what had happened and asked to have Carol moved out from under my supervision. I then went home and tried to explain to my then-wife what had happened--and explain my mixed emotions. I told her that I wanted our marriage to work—but that I was empty inside and would like to go to marriage counseling. My wife’s reaction was to tell me that if I had “mixed feelings” that I needed to move out. Having no place else to go (or at least I like to tell myself that) I moved in with Carol.

It should be noted that while I was working in a psych hospital, I really did not have a clear understanding of what Borderline Personality Disorder was—and certainly did not have the slightest inclination that Carol suffered from it—and an equally destructive affliction like substance abuse. Over the next 4 years, I would come to “earn my Ph.D.” in living with a Borderline--and suffer the countless torment that comes from trying to “love someone into being better.” (Sound familiar? It was my father all over again.)
To cut to the chase, over the next four years, Carol went through at least four separations and reunions. I learned that she had an addiction to Cocaine—and when I confronted her and told her I would not live that way—she began to cut. Understand, I had never experienced anything like this before—and that these were not superficial scratches—but deep incisions into her flesh. The implication was always that “I” had caused her to do this. The first time I moved out—only to have her show up at my door, clothes in the car—with her daughter in tow—telling me she loved me and that she and her daughter could not stay any longer with the ex-husband (whom she would return to when we separated.)

As far as my spiritual life, well, what can I say? The church that I was member in shunned me when I went to the assistant pastor asking for counsel. I was told to return home. So Carol and I began (I believe in my quest to “heal” her somehow) to attend Harmony Church. Harmony is a fairly liberal church—and one of its core beliefs is that people are not into sin—but that sin is a result of a poor choice. While I was never really clear on all their precepts—they accepted any and all into their membership. Sermons were a mixture on “new age,” a hint of Eastern philosophy, and positive thinking. Attending this church was the door that opened up a more bizarre belief system a few months later.

It is also important that you understand that I had always been a little attracted to Eastern religions. While maintaining my warped Christian beliefs, I read Taoism and Buddhism—and while I knew Jesus to be the Son of God; I was a little uncertain that He was the only son. (I had even joined a cult—an off-shoot of the Children of God for a
short while in the Navy—and while it does not really fit into this story—it was a weird
time.)

Carol’s and my relationship continues the Borderline cycle—her fear of
abandonment and its associated professions of never-ending love and passionate pleading
to never leave her—and then her as passionate attempts to destroy the relationship with
her fear of enmeshment. This phase was always accompanied by drug abuse and self-
degradation. I, meanwhile, was determined to love this woman into health. She became
addicted to prescription pain meds, Methadone, and anything that would numb herself.
Yet, as insane as it sounds now, I believed her statements that we were spiritually
connected--and came to belief that it was God’s will that I stay with this woman and to
love her until she changed—and saw herself as I saw her—a perfect creation of God.

It was during one our separations that I met John, a fellow member of Harmony.
John was a little older than I and had also been through many relationships in his life. He
began to “counsel” me—to “sit” with as he liked to call it—and through John that I was
introduced to the book that almost killed me: “A course in Miracles.” John was an avid
follower of “the Course” and soon I had a copy. To explain The Course, I have attached a
page off its website:

A Course in Miracles began with the sudden decision of two people to join in a
common goal. Their names were Helen Schuman and William Thetford, Professors of
Medical Psychology at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in
New York City. They were anything but spiritual. Their relationship with each other was
difficult and often strained, and they were concerned with personal and professional
acceptance and status. In general, they had considerable investment in the values of the
world. Their lives were hardly in accord with anything that the Course advocates. Helen, the one who received the material, describes herself:

"Psychologist, educator, conservative in theory and atheistic in belief, I was working in a prestigious and highly academic setting. And then something happened that triggered a chain of events I could never have predicted. The head of my department unexpectedly announced that he was tired of the angry and aggressive feelings our attitudes reflected, and concluded that, 'there must be another way.' As if on cue I agreed to help him find it. Apparently this Course is the other way."

Although their intention was serious, they had great difficulty in starting out on their joint venture. But they had given the Holy Spirit the "little willingness" that, as the Course itself was to emphasize again and again, is sufficient to enable Him to use any situation for His purposes and provide it with His power.

To continue Helen's first-person account:

"Three startling months preceded the actual writing, during which time Bill suggested that I write down the highly symbolic dreams and descriptions of the strange images that were coming to me. Although I had grown more accustomed to the unexpected by that time, I was still very surprised when I wrote, "This is a course in miracles." That was my introduction to the Voice. It made no sound, but seemed to be giving me a kind of rapid, inner dictation which I took down in a shorthand notebook. The writing was never automatic. It could be interrupted at any time and later picked up again. It made me very uncomfortable, but it never seriously occurred to me to stop. It seemed to be a special assignment I had somehow, somewhere agreed to complete. It represented a truly collaborative venture between Bill and myself, and much of its
significance, I am sure, lies in that. I would take down what the Voice "said" and read it to him the next day, and he typed it from my dictation. I expect he had his special assignment, too. Without his encouragement and support I would never have been able to fulfill mine. The whole process took about seven years. The Text came first, then the Workbook for Students, and finally the Manual for Teachers. Only a few minor changes have been made. Chapter titles and subheadings have been inserted in the Text, and some of the more personal references that occurred at the beginning have been omitted. Otherwise the material is substantially unchanged."

The names of the collaborators in the recording of the Course do not appear on the cover because the Course can and should stand on its own. It is not intended to become the basis for another cult. Its only purpose is to provide a way in which some people will be able to find their own Internal Teacher.

Essentially, one of the most basic precepts of the course in miracles is that there is no evil—only the belief in evil and, to become peaceful one needs only to “forgive.” Work in the course consisted on daily reading and work on the more complex text. John became my mentor. Carol my lesson. I was to forgive everything that she was doing—and to realize that she was confused—but not evil. I was told that my love would indeed heal her—and me.

This only made matters worse—obviously. I stuffed all my feelings and distaste at the horrific deeds Carol was involved in deep within myself. Then one day, after opening up an envelope that was mailed to me, only to discover nude pictures of Carol taken during a sexual threesome she had with a man and his girlfriend in exchange for drugs—I blew up. I confronted Carol, told her she had to leave, and that her love was just “shit.”
(A word she claimed she had been called by her parents all her life and that I knew would hurt.) She countered by swallowing 30 hydrocodone pills as I watched in horror. After calling EMS and watching her depart for the hospital—and convinced I had just killed the woman God has sent as a lesson, I called John. He scolded me for what I had done (“Just forgive, remember there is no evil”). I then called my AA sponsor who called me a “cunt” for ever becoming involved with Carol in the first place. Alone, feeling totally separated from God, I attempted to end my life. I did not die—though at the time it was all I wanted to do—and ended up spending 7 days in an in-patient psych hospital.

I was released and the first call I received was from Carol. She, too, had not died—thanks to what I now know was her exceptionally high tolerance to the drug. She expressed a deep sense of remorse—and expressed, once again, her undying love—and the nightmare became once again.

For the next 2 years, we played the off again and on again game. Carol had been seen by her community mental health organization, had been put on antipsychotic medication—and was taking massive doses (2400mg of Seroquel) ---along with any hydrocodone she could get.

After a brief separation and yet another reunion, Carol and I were able to hold it together with a semblance of peace. She had promised to take only the meds prescribed to her, even went to an AA meeting with me. It was then that she began her campaign to marry. I began to think that all the suffering I had endured was worth it: God had been right—thanks to my love, she was healing. (Delusional, huh?) So, on 4/19/2008, after several months of living together--and much pleading by Carol and the constant
encouragement of John—we married. (Ironically enough, the song played at our small wedding at Harmony church was one by Shawn Mullins: Love heals everything.)

But one thing had changed. As a result of an action on my license due to my suicide attempt, I had to attend counseling on my own. The first therapist fired me when I told him Carol and I were together again—so I was forced to find another therapist: the man, I believe, who restored me to sanity.)

Father James was an ordained Greek Orthodox minister from England. For awhile he saw Carol and I together. Later he told me that he had to restrain himself from slapping me upside my head and that he was there to support me—but thought I was totally insane.

The marriage of course was doomed from the start. It was but a month before Carol began her old antics: more hydrocodone and increasing her dosage of Seroquel. One night, only 4 months after being married, Carol was loaded. She had offered an excuse of being very sleepy and went to bed at 6:30pm. An hour later, when I went in to check her, I found her cold, barely breathing, and already blue around the lips and eyes. I attempted to rouse her to no avail. I then thought of using ice to wake her up. I began rubbing ice around her body, under her arms, everywhere. And then she awoke…in a full-blown Borderline rage. She became cussing me and packing her and her daughter’s clothes. When I asked where she was going, she stated she was leaving. When I pointed out that she was too loaded to drive—especially with her daughter—and that I would not let me drive—she asked me who was going to stop her. When I stood in front of the door, she proceeded to punch me as hard as she could (and she was not a small woman) in the face. It was then that I made the first smart decision I had made in 4 years: I called the
police. They arrived, “field” tested her and told her she could not drive. She called her friend and was gone. The next day, I filed for divorce. Apart from the signature I needed to keep from having her served, I have not seen or spoke with her since. The divorce was final in a record 61 days.

After the divorce, the real healing began--and this is probably the only part of this insane story you needed to hear—but I felt it was necessary to paint the picture of my “spiritual” condition at the time. I was, almost literally, hanging on a lover’s cross for Carol. Thanks to the sick teachings of the course in miracles, the belief that evil is only in your mind, the liberal allowances of Harmony church—and the mentoring of a man who taught peace and love—but really wanted me to sacrifice my life for an insane woman—I had become so brainwashed that I really thought it was God’s intention that I remain by this woman’s side. (And of course, you can not leave out the great role model my dad taught me!) By the way, John crashed and burned himself a few months later—lost in a sea of alcoholism.

The first thing Father James did when I told him that Carol was gone and that I was having second thoughts about the whole course thing and my belief that there was no evil (for I am experienced it fruits first hand) was to jump up and almost shout—alleluia! Then through weekly session, the “therapist” (while be maintained strict professional boundaries) led me through a lesson about David. My “homework” was to read Psalm 51—and pray for God’s mercy. He did not allow me to slither away with my tail between my legs and insisted I take responsibility for my actions—yet he also never shamed me. Though weeks and then months of psalm readings…and discussion about why I had allowed myself to become so enmeshed into Carol’s psychopathology…I began to feel
reconnected with God. The real God. One who loves us, yet allows us to suffer the consequences of our sin. (A bad word in the world of the course and Harmony).

Perhaps because Paul was a holy man—and not a run of the mill American minister who preached American religion (ask me about this)—something about him reached me. I began to understand what evil is and how it works in the hearts of people. I learned about the “devil in the details.” I also earned the mercy of God—who stilled called David—after his sordid affair—“a man after His own heart.” I learned how David, in spite of his mistakes, was reborn. He lived with the consequences of his mistakes—but because of them—was a better man…a better leader. Father James forced me into the forest of my self—to grief my loss—to find forgiveness. I quit Harmony—and while I am not ready for a mainstream church at this time—I have rediscovered the God that never left me…laughed maybe and cried for sure…but never, ever left me.

I am not sure if you can use any of this, but writing this down has been quite a freeing experience.

**Written Protocol--Camie**

In 2004, I struggled with severe clinical depression. Psychotherapy helped tremendously deal with life and move forward from a time of my life when I question life as it is. Questions like “What is my purpose?”, “Why am I here?” and “Is there a point to life?” For a while, I would question if there is a God, and if so what the heck is the point of my existence? Sometimes I felt that I was a joke and just a player in the scheme of things as if it was a game.

With psychotherapy, I was able to reach far into my past and take a look as to why I am the way I am and give more explanation for things around me. The therapy
dealt with my childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood and the dynamics of my family that in the end left me very confused, helpless, and hopeless.

I was baptized Catholic and went to Sunday mass until I was 9. At the age of 10, our family moved to Texas and began going to a Baptist church against my father’s wishes. The Baptist church is when I began to question God and the thought church was a whole marketing scheme to make people believe or reassure them that if you “believe” you will be taken care of financially, emotionally, physically, and be “blessed” with a good life. Although I questioned the church and their practices, I would continue to believe that there was a higher power until I was in therapy.

Psychotherapy analyzed my life experiences and I was able to cope with the past. As for the future, it lies in my own hands, my decisions, and choices. I cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are, but I chose my future, I control my destiny. I choose to categorize myself as an agnostic. I might find out there is a God (or Gods) after I die, or I might not.

**Situated Themes**

What follows are the situated themes derived from the interpretive analyses performed on each protocol. They are presented as an outline of interrelated constituent themes with verbatim quotes from the participant designed to provide empirical evidence for and illustrate each theme. In effect, these themes are designed to re-present the most essential elements of each participant’s experience of questioning in psychotherapy and to convey the relationship between themes.

**Situated Themes—Angela.**

- Angela valued and sought out religious truth and questioned it from an early age.
I just have always been very, very spiritual person. Even as a kid I think I was preoccupied with these existential issues. I think I accepted really early.”

In each case of questioning, Angela brought with her a preferred interpretation or perspective, while recognizing the existence of another possible conflicting interpretation of her experiences.

“I guess I worried if [my therapist] was going to think [I was controlling or pathological].”

“Like if what I believe isn’t true or there is some flaw with this, you know what do I believe or what’s going to happen?”

In both cases, Angela eventually experiences a tension, to one degree or another, between seemingly opposing views.

i.e. My response to my boyfriend’s sexual behavior is justified and understandable vs. My response to my boyfriend’s behavior is something other than justified and reasonable, even pathological.

i.e. God is perfectly just, merciful and all-powerful vs. God failed me and allowed me to suffer and is, therefore, unjust, limited in power or unmerciful.

Angela associates her therapist with a broader group and set of narratives.

“During my fourth year of graduate work I entered individual Psychodynamic focused psychotherapy with a masters-level therapist.”

In each case of questioning, Angela perceives that her therapist does not join with her in embracing the perspective she prefers and even seems to advocate an opposing or threatening perspective.

“My therapist inadvertently communicated to me that she thought our decision not to live together prior to marriage and to work hard at abstaining from sex was rooted in some psychopathology.”

“...The things that I remember most were just comments like, ‘Well, God failed you too, God didn’t protect you, just like your parents didn’t protect you’ that she would say.”

Angela feels misunderstood and negatively judged by her therapist.

“I just didn’t want to be judged by her or invalidated what I was thinking.”

Angela does not feel able or willing to completely reject, avoid or dismiss her therapist’s perception.

In part, because this perception coincides with a less preferred perspective which Angela sees as potentially valid.

“I guess I just felt like, ‘Well I’m being confronted with or I guess I’m running from and been ignoring, I can’t run from and ignore these questions anymore, like they’re in my face now...’”

In part, because Angela feels she is engaged in a healing process that can only be beneficial if she takes her therapist’s views into consideration.

“Because if I was being resistant then I’m not doing the work that I was supposed to be doing in the therapy... or at least being open to exploring that it’s a possibility... I mean to me, I just wanted to feel like I am doing a worthwhile therapy.”
• Angela believes it would be futile to openly resist her therapist’s interpretations because she believes her therapist will persist in advocating the less preferred perception regardless of Angela’s response.
• “...She probably would have just said it again or found a way to come back to it...”
• In response, Angela feels caught up, in a much more overt and unavoidable way, in a highly disruptive and frightening tension between two possible perspectives.
• These perspectives are seen as having meaningful and, in the case of the un-preferred perspectives, disruptive implications for Angela’s religious life and her life in general.
  o “Yeah, just wondering how it was going to resolve, how it was going to impact me being afraid of; “oh no, does this mean I’m becoming an atheist or something?” Which I’m not, but just like I said somewhere towards the end about feeling like a doubt of my own loyalty to what I believe in.”
• Because this is a tension between meaningful potential realities it is also a tension charged with painful and disturbing affect.
  o “I have also experienced anger, sadness and confusion.”
  o “…I think very scary in the sense that, well like desperate. Like if what I believe isn’t true or there is some flaw with this, you know what do I believe or what’s going to happen? Like falling out of a skyscraper, like there’s just nothing stable anymore...”
• Angela experiences this tension as a tension between cultural narratives.
  o “My whole experience in psychotherapy and process of questioning my faith has left me with this question, ‘What’s the better alternative?’ ‘What other God, deity or power or system of symbols or rituals better answers the question of why?’”
• Angela’s tension and fear is lived out in relationships.
  • Angela continues to attend but recedes from full engagement in therapy, purposefully choosing not to discuss certain topics and comporting herself in a way that feels superficially compliant and/or self-conscious.
    o “So I kind of stopped talking to her because she was almost kind of ‘Well maybe that’s his way of like dealing with the fact that you guys aren’t being intimate and maybe that’s, you know, functional- or not functional but an adaptive way for him to...’”
    o “I didn’t want to be resistant to them so I would just kind of either nod, kind of passively agree, but not really. I just tried to stay away from that.”
  • Angela feels angry and resistant to the ideas presented by individuals in her religious community but feels unable to share these sentiments.
    o “I would just find myself just sitting in church getting really angry because of things that I would hear and just feeling like want to shout that ‘This is a bunch of bullshit!’”
  • Angela maintains relationships with members of her religious community, but refrains from sharing her uncertainty and negative reactions to their shared religion, feeling that her dilemma cannot be understood or accepted.
    o “Well I mean that’s how it is in your heart and in your mind, you are still a part of this community of people and so you just kind of go through the motions.”
The only reason why I kept going is because of people, like my church family and I knew they really cared about me and they were a tremendous support. But you don’t talk to other people about it because they won’t either relate, and I just couldn’t go through having someone else give me some stupid, over simplified thing...”

- Angela attempts to resolve the tension in favor of her preferred (and more familiar) perception.
  - This involves taking up narratives from within her faith community and elsewhere that value living with conviction in the face of uncertainty and that allow her preferred perceptions equal status with those embraced by her therapist.
    - “I don’t have any proof to back up the justice of an all knowing, all powerful God who can’t protect three and four-year-olds. I don’t ignore the questions I have, I just live with them being unanswered. I believe a text in the Bible that says something to effect of: ‘each person is given a measure of faith.’”
    - “My whole experience in psychotherapy and process of questioning my faith has left me with this question, ‘What’s the better alternative?’ ‘What other God, deity or power or system of symbols or rituals better answers the question of why?’”

- Angela feels unable to resolve the tension completely as she continues to worry that the perceptions of her therapist are possibly true and may even be more real, rational or correct.
  - “It’s not resolved and it’s not like something that can be fixed, I just felt really in turmoil and just confused, I think.”
- Angela worries that her attempts to resolve the tension are motivated by her desire to remain with what is familiar rather than an honest attempt to arrive at what is true.
  - “My question and my loyalty about this...is, am I just here because I don’t know something else? Am I ascribing to this just because I don’t know something else or am I ascribing to this until I feel like a better option walks by?”
- Angela feels alone, unable to fully identify with and inhabit any community or set of narratives in an unproblematic and fully natural way.
  - “Just not heard, like just unheard and in this bubble where, just like the weight of what I was dealing with didn’t really click for her.”
  - “Because I just feel like alone...”

Situated Themes—Bob.

- At the time he entered therapy, Bob was deeply involved in a set of spiritual beliefs that supported his desire and decision to remain in a relationship that caused great suffering for him and for others.
  - Among these beliefs was the belief that nothing a person experiences is real and that the perception of evil is illusory
    - “But it starts with the core thing of everything you see is unreal... Forgiveness is the answer. There is no evil.”
Based on these beliefs Bob developed the belief that if he stayed in this relationship, forgiving his partner for the suffering her actions caused, he would be in-line with God’s will.

- “Yet as insane as it sounds now, I believed through statements that we were "spiritually connected," and came to believe that it was God's will that I stay with this woman and love her until she changed, and saw herself as I saw her, a perfect creation of God.”

Bob also developed the belief that if he continued in this relationship, he would be healed from wounds he carried from childhood.

- “…This was gonna be the healing. This was going to be the healing for her, the healing for me, the fulfillment of almost my life's purpose at that point.”

These beliefs were congruent with patterns of viewing and approaching the world and relationships he learned in his upbringing.

- “…And then my dad with what he did with my mom for all those years, you know -- here's this man who thinks that God wants you to give your life because this is what love is.”

These beliefs were held in place by significant relationships that promised to heal old wounds.

Bob was taught, and encouraged to live in accordance with, this set of beliefs by a man he admired and saw as a mentor.

- “Work in the course consisted of daily readings and work on the more complex text. John became my mentor. He would call me every day or come over. He would encourage me, especially during the off times with Carol.”

- “John was a little older than I and had also been through many relationships in his life. And I was attracted to John. I liked -- he was cool and he began to counsel me, to sit with me as he liked to call it.”

This relationship also seemed to meet desires that went unfulfilled in past relationships.

- “He said I'll be willing to sit with you. Which was exactly -- here's the paradox for you -- which was exactly what the church would not do. You know? Jim would sit with you, and I forgot the guy's name, but the music minister would send me away. They wanted me far away. And Jim would sit…”

Bob’s adherence to this to this set of beliefs was partially motivated by his desire to remain in relationship to his girlfriend in order to be healed from old wounds.

- “…This was gonna be the healing. This was going to be the healing for her, the healing for me, the fulfillment of almost my life's purpose at that point.”

Bob believed that if he failed to live according to this set of beliefs he would be failing God.
“After calling the MS and watching her depart for the hospital, and convinced I just killed a woman God had sent to me as a lesson... Alone, feeling totally separated from God, I attempted to end my life.” [Bob’s statement regarding his reaction after he had failed to forgive his girlfriend for a transgression and had angrily ended the relationship, leading her to attempt suicide in front of him.]

- Bob also experienced fear as he entertained the possibility that continuing and escalating his relationship, as his beliefs dictated, would not result in the outcomes he desired and would continue to cause suffering.
  - “Yeah, I was scared shitless.”
- Bob found ways of avoiding awareness of the tension he experienced between his spiritual beliefs and his perception that his beliefs caused harm.
  - “I stuffed all my feelings and distaste at the horrific deeds Carol was involved in, deep within myself.”
  - “...After several months of living together and much pleading by Carol and the constant encouragement of John.”
- Despite his fears, Bob had not been dissuaded by his first therapist, who vigorously challenged his commitment to that relationship.
  - “He wrote me, he said, I think this is very dangerous for you, all the wise things that a therapist has to say. But I was like, he doesn't understand.”
- Bob began to seriously doubt the validity of his spiritual beliefs after incidents that led him to become disillusioned with his mentor and his then wife.
  - “And so my mentor crashed. I mean he was like all this stuff that he told me I realized was just -- you know, I mean, if there's no evil, everything he was doing was just as evil as everything that Carol was doing.”
  - “And so when I stopped, when I went to stop her and she hit me. Was like, you know, this is done, this is the end.”
- During these incidents Bob developed perceptions of the world that he experienced as incompatible with the spiritual teachings he embraced.
  - Bob perceived that certain actions by these individuals caused suffering for the innocent.
    - “…she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave and I thought, you know, this is not, you know, what would the Course tell me? That, let her go, there's no fear. Let her go? There's no evil, let her go?”
    - “I mean he was like all this stuff that he told me I realized was just -- you know, I mean, if there's no evil, everything he was doing was just as evil as everything that Carol was doing.”
  - Bob arrived at the perception that allowing or causing the innocent to suffer was evil.
    - “Somebody will take the altruistic -- albeit this pretty screwed up love that you have for somebody, and twist it, and use it, and manipulate it. Even though she was sick, and I know she was sick, and I know she still is, that's got to be evil.”
So those are the things that are starting to pop up in my mind is: wait a minute, how can there not be evil? There's things happening on television every day. You can't tell me that those are not just confused people. Innocent people are suffering. Innocent people are being subjected.”

Bob perceived that the spiritual teachings he had embraced allowed a person to avoid awareness of and responsibility for the suffering that could be caused.

“I'm trying to mentor John into seeing that alcohol is destroying his relationship with Janet, which it was. I mean he was drunk and he was quoting the Course.”

Bob felt a tension between these new perceptions and his belief that evil did not exist and that God expected him to continue in his relationship to his partner, regardless of her behavior.

“And then I saw this woman that I was here to love, no matter what she did. ... and that she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave and I thought...What would the Course tell me? That, let her go, there's no fear. Let her go? There's no evil, let her go?”

Bob came to believe that his beliefs allowed him to tolerate and to deny the existence of the suffering his relationship caused.

“I realized that: number one, I had attempted to kill myself.... I had at that point at the suicide attempt I had stuffed my feelings so deeply that I had actually, you know, I wanted to die.”

Throughout the process in which Bob escalated his relationship to his girlfriend, (and eventual wife) and later experienced serious doubts, Bob’s therapist did not express any misgivings about his beliefs or relationship and even worked with Bob to help the relationship succeed.

“Later he told me he had to restrain himself from slapping me upside the head when I -- but he was there to support whatever if wanted. And if I wanted marriage therapy with this woman, he was gonna try and provide that, but that he thought that I was totally insane.”

When Bob expressed his doubts to his therapist he perceived that his therapist overtly and enthusiastically expressed his agreement with Bob’s new perception that evil existed and his disagreement and distaste for the spiritual beliefs Bob was beginning to discard.

“The first thing Father James told me when I told him that Carol was gone and I was having second thoughts about the whole course thing and my belief that there was no evil, for I had experienced it's fruits first hand, was to jump up and shout halleluiah.”

“My therapist disdains western religion, and he'll be the first one to tell you that.”

Bob’s therapist also revealed his status as a religious leader.

“And that's when he revealed he said, "Did you know I was a Greek Orthodox priest?"
Bob associates his therapist with a set of subcultural and religious narratives that are compelling to him.

- “He was an Englishman who was an unusual Greek Orthodox, he was a Greek Orthodox.”
- “Perhaps because James was a holy man and not a run-of-the-mill America minister, preaching American religion, and that’s what we talked about (indiscernible), something about him reached me.”

Bob’s therapist guided him through an overtly religious therapeutic process about acknowledging and seeking forgiveness for sin. This process included daily scriptural readings, religious teaching and suggestions about changes Bob might make in his spiritual life.

- “And so we did that for a while, for maybe a month, you know, every day, said I want you to read this every day... So I got out Psalm 51 and I read Psalm 51 every night, every morning...And then we did that for a while, and then he said, "Okay, now let's read more about David and what happened to David after that."
- Bob experienced his therapist’s response as overwhelmingly beneficial although the process of introspection was often painful and difficult.
  - “Instead of trying to make me feel better, he made me feel worse for a while. He made me go into what I liked to refer to the forest of my life. And a lot of therapists I think would probably keep you away from that, especially with my history of suicide attempts. But he forced me in there. He forced me in there, he forced me to get in there and to look at the stuff, and what you're hearing now is really joy, because he forced me into places where a lot of people never go.”

Bob greatly admired his therapist and looked to him as a father figure.

- “One thing I think that he represented to me was a father figure.”
- Bob felt that his therapist accepted him, while at the same time, insisting that Bob look plainly at aspects of himself he wished to avoid.
  - “He did not allow me to slither away with my tail between my legs, insisted that I take responsibility for my actions, yet he also never shamed me.”
- Bob readily accepted the ideas his therapist proposed.
  - “…something about him reached me.”
- Bob saw his therapist as different from any other religious leader he had encountered.
  - “…James was a holy man and not a run-of-the-mill America minister…”

Bob felt that this process, geared at acknowledging his sins before God, helped him to acknowledge unwanted aspects of himself and accept his limitations.

- “Father James forced me into the forest of myself to grieve my loss, to find forgiveness.”
- “He hit right at the core where I needed to be, which was you need to go and you need to deal with the dark side inside of yourself and to acknowledge it and not to run from it, and then to heal from it, to realize
that you don't have to have all the answers.”

- Bob felt that this process helped him acknowledge, analyze and heal the wounds and patterns from his childhood that led him to embrace his previous beliefs and to develop the kinds of relationship he had.
  - “To sit with my grief for a while and to examine it. About what I had done. About my childhood. About everything.”
- Bob became more convinced the beliefs he had come to doubt were false and harmful, and regarded them with disdain.
  - “I mean if you look at it and you look at how you brainwash people, that's exactly what it does.”
  - “I realized it was all a bunch of shit.”
- Bob experienced what he saw as beneficial changes in his spiritual beliefs reflecting the insights he developed in therapy.
  - “I've come to understand great peace in saying I don't know, I don't know.”
- Bob experienced what he saw as beneficial changes in his relationship to God as a result of this process.
  - “I began to feel reconnected with God, the real God, the one who loves us, allows us to suffer the consequences of a sin, of our sin”
- Bob experienced what he saw as beneficial changes in his relationships to other people as a result of this process.
  - “And I understand that's not really what love it that love is, that love is a - - I have come up with a new thought for that. That I'm looking for a woman that I can go walking in hand in hand with through life, and that occasionally I may have to carry her, and occasionally she may have to carry me, but if I ever have to drag somebody, that's not a relationship anymore.”

Situated Themes—Camie.

Camie entered therapy caught up in painful questioning about whether or not her life (or life in general) held any meaning. (“Questions like: what is my purpose? Why am I here? And is there a point to life?”)
  - This questioning was, in part, rooted in the apparent incompatibility between her beliefs and the course of her life as she experienced it.
    - Camie believed in a higher power that had some kind of benevolent interest in and purpose for her life.
      - “I would continue to believe that there of is a higher power until I was in therapy... Yeah. Like there was a higher power as in there is a reasoning, there is something that governs our existence in our life.”
    - Camie perceived that she had experienced and was experiencing considerable suffering.
      - “I had suicidal thoughts, and just to end the pain, the pain of being so stuck, so, I mean life really sucked.”
Part of Camie’s suffering was the feeling that she had not been allowed to direct her own life or live for herself.

- “There was no time for me to be a kid and have a life basically for myself as a kid should experience things.”

These perceptions of suffering appeared incompatible with her belief in a benevolent higher power, leading Camie to question whether a higher power existed.

- “For a while I would question if there is a God?...For a while sometimes I felt that I was a joke and just a player in the scheme of things, as if life was just a game.”

Camie felt unable to trust her perceptions of suffering and the feelings she had in relation to those perceptions.

- “I wasn’t crazy, and really did make me feel okay to question, to have feelings of erratic behavior.” [This statement suggests that one of the major benefits or therapy was that she felt “okay” and not “crazy” in her perceptions of suffering and her questioning. This implies that at one point she was unsure if these perceptions were valid.]

Camie’s questioning prior to and during therapy followed on a lengthy history of questioning her religious beliefs.

- “And because of the background, because of the Catholic and Baptist, they say all these things and I still question the back of my head is like, okay, well how do I know that that’s true? Or, I don’t see it. I don’t see, I don’t understand -- it’s like a great idea and everything, but it’s not applying to my life at all.”

Camie felt that many meaningful possibilities had passed her by.

- “I was under the impression that, well I’m 24 years old. By the time I get my degree and go to dental school I’m gonna be 32 which is way old, so it’s like I’m already past my prime, so everything is negative.”

In therapy, Camie felt able to explore and more fully acknowledge the suffering she had experienced and openly express her feelings about that suffering.

- “So that’s what a lot of the therapy had to deal with, was being okay with my past and what has happened and moving forward from all the struggles.”

- “Psychotherapy analyzed my life experiences and I was able to cope with the past.”

Camie felt that her therapist affirmed and understood the sentiments she expressed, even those she found erratic or difficult to understand.

- “It was really a roller coaster of emotions and questions and he was there for it all. He was there with me. He never did say, well I don’t get it. I don’t understand what you’re saying. He always tried.”

Camie associated her therapist with a larger sub-cultural group of people who shared certain values.
• “He was a third party. He was somebody completely outside of my realm as most therapists I would think are.”

• Camie experienced her therapist as someone who wished to help her rather than control her.
  o “That was a great -- because I've always had those coaches, and I've always had my parents that are higher above me, but he helped me. He was there with me by my side.”

• In therapy, Camie felt that her therapist followed her lead.
  o “He went along with it...Yeah, if I saw something was ridiculous he would agree or understand.”

• In therapy, Camie felt that she was able to re-craft an identity that better fit who she wished to be.
  o “[I] Took every microbe bit and separated everything and looked at everything, and as I rebuilt myself I did it, I rebuilt myself without religion. I built it up on who I am and not who I was and kind of rebuilt my beliefs on my self and my future and where I'm going and I didn't include any religious avenues.”

• Camie became more confident in her feelings and perceptions as a result of therapy. (“I wasn't crazy, and really did make me feel okay to question, to have feelings of erratic behavior.”)
  o Camie became more confident in her perception that there was no clear or strong evidence of a benevolent higher power in her life.
    ■ “So it really -- the therapy put my life in my perspective as in I'm the one that has control and not anybody else. So that's kind of where it's like I can't rely on something that I don't know is factual, cause I was thinking about this the other day, the whole -- God to me is like karma and coincidences and the afterlife, you don't know any of that for sure. It's not hard factual evidence.”

• Camie felt much less compelled to entertain the question of whether a higher power existed or whether there was a greater purpose for her life.
  o “So I choose not to question, because there is no hard evidence.”
  o “…I'm okay with putting it all behind me and just continuing with life and going forward.”

• Camie developed and embraced a new belief about the purpose of her life that did not involve a higher power.
  o In particular, Camie developed the belief that the purpose of her life is determined by her alone and that the course of her life is determined by the natural consequences of her choices.
    ■ “But I'm the one that chooses where to go and what to do. I can't rely on some other existence, some other person. I can't blame a God. I can't ask a God. It's me that I have to ask. It's I that I have to blame when I do wrong or I do right or such.”

• Camie experienced a sense that her life had greater possibility.
  o “So that kind of opened a door for myself and it allowed me to make a decision, decisions for myself.”

• On very rare occasions, Camie continues to entertain the possibility that there is a
God or higher power with a purpose for her life. (“How do I feel? Maybe not 100% completely okay with it, but I'm in the 90's% okay, believing that it's okay that there is no other, cause sure, there's always gonna be that little bell in the back of my head like, hey it's me over here, and like questioning, well there's a God, or not, but I'm okay with it”).

- This possible perception engenders worry that she will face negative consequences for ignoring his or her will.
  - “Well, what if I'm wrong? What if I'm wrong and there is a God and you know get up there and he's like: what were you thinking? Why didn't you trust in me?”

- When faced with this possibility, Camie reiterates her perception that no higher power had intervened in her suffering and that it is she alone who determines the quality of her life.
  - “And I'll say: Look how crappy it's been. It's a joke. What I've had is a joke. Why would you do that to somebody, all the crap that I've been through? You know that's not very nice.”
  - “No matter how hard I tried to believe that there is a higher power that's there for us. It never was. It was never there.”
  - “It comes down to me making the decisions. There is nothing else. I can't - - there's nothing else that helps but me.”

**Review of Situated Themes**

After deriving the situated themes, I provided each participant with a copy of his or her situated themes and gave them a chance to review it. Afterward I spoke with each participant and asked, “Have I accurately described your experience of having your religious views called into question in therapy?” To this question, the answers were, “I think so. (Angela)” “Yeah, I think you did a really good job. (Bob)” and “Absolutely (Camie).” I then asked if there were any changes each participant would make in order to make the description better fit their experience. After some encouragement Angela inquired about the following phrase from the original situated themes:

“Angela maintains relationships outside of therapy but recedes from full engagement in these relationships, including the members of her religious community and her graduate school community, feeling that her perceptions cannot be understood or accepted.”

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She suggested that she had not receded from full engagement in her relationships with the members of her religious community, although she had become more reserved with regard to her religious questioning. Despite the fact that Angela had clearly indicated that she had withheld her feelings and views about her church from the members of her religious community and was “going through the motions” in her church services, I decided that the definition of “full engagement” may be debatable as individuals are able to be engaged in relationships without sharing all of their thoughts, views and feelings. The wording was changed accordingly to:

“Angela maintains relationships with members of her religious community, but refrains from sharing her uncertainty and negative reactions to their shared religion, feeling that her dilemma cannot be understood or accepted.”

Bob suggested that although I had addressed the topic of his first therapist, who had warned him against escalating his relationship with his girlfriend and had even terminated the therapy when Bob refused to end his relationship, he felt more details about this interaction would be helpful. I decided to stay with the description in its original form as I determined that more details would not add to the understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Camie commented on the first constituent theme, which read:

“Camie entered therapy caught up in painful questioning about whether or not her life held any meaning.”

She suggested that rather than being concerned with the meaning of her life alone, she was concerned with the question of whether there was a meaning to life generally. The wording of the constituent theme was changed to reflect her more general concern.
**General Themes**

The General Themes that follow are the result of an attempt to arrive at what was essential and common to each of the collections of Situated Themes presented. Again, they are comprised of constituent themes accompanied by illustrative quotes from each protocol. By highlighting those themes that are common to each collection of Situated Themes, the General themes represent an attempt to arrive at those aspects of the experience of religious questioning in psychotherapy that constitute the experience itself. As they are, to some degree, a re-presentation of those themes that are common to each the Situated Themes, they are, by nature, somewhat repetitive. Many of the quotes used will be the same as those used in the Situated Themes. However, this repetition is necessary as each quote serves to ground my most general findings in empirical evidence.

- Whether in therapy or without, the participants encounter an experience that seems to stand outside the religious or spiritual beliefs they had ordinarily relied upon to order and make sense of their world and their identity.
  - For Angela, this experience was her history of abuse and neglect as a child: “During my work, I disclosed a substantial history of neglect and physical/verbal abuse that I and my three siblings experienced growing up.”
  - For Bob, this experience was seeing his girlfriend threatening to drive away with her daughter while deeply under the influence of drugs: “...she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave...”
  - For Camie, this experience was the sum total of her suffering in life: “...Look how crappy it's been. It's a joke. What I've had is a joke. Why would you do that to somebody, all the crap that I've been through? You know that's not very nice.”

- In response to this encounter, the participants experience an opening in which they entertain other narratives or beliefs that might account for the experience that challenged their worldviews. This includes potential beliefs that appear to conflict with the belief or set of beliefs they had initially embraced.
  - Angela, having believed in a just, merciful and all-powerful God, began to entertain thoughts that called this belief into question: “I mean there are a lot of questions that would pop up... Or you know, where was God? And
everything happens in God’s divine will, but he didn’t will these things to happen.”

- Bob, having come to believe that evil was non-existent, begins to entertain the belief that evil exists: “So those are the things that are starting to pop up in my mind: wait a minute, how can there not be evil? There’s things happening on television every day. You can’t tell me that those are not just confused people. Innocent people are suffering. Innocent people are being subjected.”

- Camie, having believed in a benevolent God or higher power, begins to wonder if her life is meaningless or even the product of a malicious joke: “For a while I would question if there is a God?...For a while sometimes I felt that I was a joke and just a player in the scheme of things, as if life was just a game.”

- This tension is meaningful as it is experienced by the participants as making a difference in their lives.

- “...I think [her questions were] very scary in the sense that, well like desperate. Like if what I believe isn’t true or there is some flaw with this, you know what do I believe or what’s going to happen? Like falling out of a skyscraper, like there’s just nothing stable anymore...” (Angela)

- “And then I saw this woman that I was here to love, no matter what she did. ... and that she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave and I thought...What would the Course tell me? That, let her go, there's no fear. Let her go? There's no evil, let her go? “ (Bob)

- “I questioned life as it is. Questions like: what is my purpose? Why am I here? And is there a point to life? For a while I would question if there is a God?” (Camie)

- The participants experience some degree of anxious ambivalence with regard to their relationship to both their initial beliefs and the opposing beliefs.

- The participants vacillate in their perception of the degree to which they agree with either belief.

- The participants vacillate in their perception of the degree to which either belief is their own belief.

  - For Angela: “I got older in college and... started coming into my own with my own experience that I kind of learned that it was okay in my book to have those negative feelings about God especially.” vs. “So yeah I was and I just tried to ignore it or not. I mean there are a lot of questions that would pop up, but you just kind of ignore them because either it’s irreverent to go there or it just doesn’t feel helpful.”

  - For Bob: “Yeah, I was scared shitless [regarding the prospect of marrying his girlfriend.” vs. “[My previous therapist] wrote me, he said, I think [continuing your relationship to your girlfriend] is very dangerous for you,
all the wise things that a therapist has to say. But I was like, he doesn't understand."

- For Camie: “I would continue to believe that there of is a higher power until I was in therapy.” vs. “For a while [just before entering therapy] I would question if there is a God.”

- Despite their ambivalence--at different times, and in varying degrees--the participants prefer one perception or set of perceptions over the other.
  - For Angela, the preferred belief that God is just, merciful and all-powerful.
  - For Bob, the initial preferred belief is that there is no evil and that it is God’s will for him to marry his girlfriend. The preferred belief becomes that Evil exists and that denying this fact causes suffering in the lives of innocent people.
  - For Camie, the initial preferred belief is that there is a God or higher power; however, this preferred belief quickly becomes that God, if he or she exists, has not intervened in her life and that Camie is the only one who controls her own destiny.

- Living with this ambivalence, the participants experience the narratives, perspectives or ideas that emerge from the therapy as having meaningful implications for the dilemma at hand.
  - Sometimes these ideas or perspectives appear to the participant to be those of the therapist.
  - Sometimes these ideas and perspectives appear to the participants to be ones they have already held and that they are now more fully uncovering, engaging or embracing in a new way.
  - At other times, the exact origin of these ideas is unclear, being either a shared view between therapist and participant or a product of the process between them.

  - “It was more like you know you plant a seed and even if you don’t think that you think very highly of your therapist, like those things are inside of your head kind of going around. I guess I just felt like well I’m being confronted with or I guess I’m running from and been ignoring, I can run from and ignore these questions anymore, like they’re in my face now, or my anger about this.” (Angela)

  - “He hit right at the core where I needed to be, which was you need to go and you need to deal with the dark side inside of yourself and to acknowledge it and not to run from it, and then to heal from it, to realize that you don’t have to have all the answers.” (Bob)

  - “[I] took every microbe bit and separated everything and looked at everything, and as I rebuilt myself I did it, I rebuilt myself without religion. I built it up on who I am and not who I was and kind of rebuilt my beliefs on my self and my future and where I’m going and I didn’t include any religious avenues.” (Camie)
In each case, the ideas and utterances of the therapist have a greater influence than those of the average person in the participants’ lives, in part, because they also represent large, powerful cultural groups and/or narratives.

- “[Angela did not wish to be openly resistant to her therapist’s interpretations that God had failed her] Because if I was being resistant then I’m not doing the work that I was supposed to be doing in the therapy… or at least being open to exploring that it’s a possibility… I mean to me, I just wanted to feel like I am doing a worthwhile therapy.” (Angela)
- “Perhaps because James was a holy man and not a run-of-the-mill America minister…something about him reached me.” (Bob)
- “He was a third party. He was somebody completely outside of my realm as most therapists, I would think, are.” (Camie)

The therapeutic process or the therapist’s utterances and comportment (in combination with other influences from the participant’s life) significantly affect how the dilemma is experienced.

- “This experience in therapy was a huge part of what I can only explain as an existential crisis.” (Angela)
- “Then through weekly sessions the therapist… I began to understand what evil is and how it works into the hearts of people… also learned the mercy of God who still called David after a sordid affair a man after his own heart.” (Bob)
- “In therapy, you know, we really took everything apart. Took every microbe bit and separated everything and looked at everything, and as I rebuilt myself I did it, I rebuilt myself without religion. I built it up on who I am and not who I was and kind of rebuilt my beliefs on my self and my future and where I’m going and I didn’t include any religious avenues.” (Camie)

The participants’ experiences of questioning in therapy result in changes in their relationships, identity and overall way of taking up their existence.

- The participants take up their relationship to other people differently.
  - “The only reason why I kept going [to church] is because of people, like my church family and I knew they really cared about me and they were a tremendous support. But you don’t talk to other people about it because they won’t either relate, and I just couldn’t go through having someone else give me some stupid, over simplified thing…” (Angela)
  - “I have come up with a new thought for [what a relationship should be]. That I’m looking for a woman that I can go walking in hand in hand with through life, and that occasionally I may have to carry her, and occasionally she may have to carry me, but if I ever have to drag somebody, that’s not a relationship anymore.” (Bob)
  - “I think the worst part is letting my dad down is cause my dad had high expectations and expected us to be Catholic, raise our kids as Catholic, get married in a Catholic Church, and he expected that,
and even, we don’t talk about it now but even if we were to I know that he would still be disappointed that I don’t believe.” (Camie)

○ The participants take up their relationship to “God” differently.
  ▪ “I don’t know, I just got really in touch with how angry I was about God and was just really enraged and... That’s pretty much it.” (Angela)
  ▪ “And that’s what I've learned about God is that I don't know. I have, I do have some beliefs about Him, but I don't know his mind. I believe that he's forgiving and loving and wants what's best for us, and that he's with us through whatever we encounter.” (Bob)
  ▪ “I can't just let life happen to me. I got to make it happen. I can't say, well God's gonna take care of me so I'm just gonna be here and rely on him or her, but it’s me, I'm the one that makes, that goes forward, and nobody else.” (Camie)

○ The participants take up their relationships to broader cultural narratives (both secular and religious) differently.
  ▪ “I believe a text in the Bible that says something to effect of: ‘each person is given a measure of faith.’” (Angela)
  ▪ “I believe some people decide to have.../invest or place their faith in science and evolutionary theory, Buddhism or the worship of ancient ancestors. I don’t think that placing my faith in a man immaculately conceived 2000 years ago, crucified and now risen is any more absurd than the belief systems that I just referred to.” (Angela)
  ▪ “…I just couldn’t go through having someone else give me some stupid, over simplified thing like...well you know “God never gives you more than you can bear...” (Angela)
  ▪ “And I realize, I think that that's kind of what God tells us throughout the Bible...that he's taught us about the people, they were all imperfect, and yet he still used them, and it was only those that were willing to learn from their mistakes that he really, really used.” (Bob)
  ▪ “And that science, you know, science has the hard factual evidence for the vast majority of research and such, so but there's no found answers for me in religion.” (Camie)

○ The participants experience changes in their identity.
  ▪ Speaking about the turmoil she experienced as a result of her questioning in therapy: “...Being afraid of, “oh no, does this mean I’m becoming an atheist or something?” Which I’m not, but just like I said somewhere towards the end about feeling like a doubt of my own loyalty to what I believe in.” (Angela)
  ▪ “…by doing that [engaging in therapy and acknowledging his sins] I actualized myself, I achieved this, I became the man that I wanted to be.” (Bob)
  ▪ “Psychotherapy analyzed my life experiences and I was able to cope with the past. As for the future, it lies in my own hands, my
decisions and choices. I cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are but I choose my future. I control my destiny. I choose to categorize myself as an agonistic, which, okay, I find out, I might find out there is a god or gods after I die, or I might not.” (Camie)

- Throughout the process of questioning and therapy, the participants continue to find ways of reducing existing tension or of maintaining their new found sense of security.
  - They may seek affirmation or guidance from a respected person who embraces their preferred view.
    - “…I don’t know any other way to reconcile this or make sense of it. In an attempt, I contacted an old religion professor from college.” (Angela)
  - The participants may turn their thoughts elsewhere.
    - “I stuffed all my feelings and distaste at the horrific deeds Carol was involved in, deep within myself.” (Bob)
    - “I mean there are a lot of questions that would pop up, but you just kind of ignore them because either it’s irreverent to go there or it just doesn’t feel helpful.” (Angela)
    - “That they can't be answered. They won't be answered. I think that once I’m dead either, A I can know or B, I won’t know. So I’m not gonna worry about it now. I’m not gonna think –“ (Camie)
  - The participants may avoid discussing their beliefs with others who appear to embrace the opposing view.
    - “…It probably kept me from being as genuine in therapy... just kind of made a decision to just not to talk about certain things that much.” (Angela)
  - The participants may develop arguments against the opposing view and in favor of their preferred view.
    - “The 10% [questioning about her current agnostic stance]? Well, what if I’m wrong? What if I’m wrong and there is a God and you know get up there and he’s like: what were you thinking? Why didn’t you trust in me? And I'll say: Look how crappy it's been. It's a joke. What I've had is a joke. Why would you do that to somebody, all the crap that I’ve been through? You know that's not very nice.” (Camie)

- The participants attempt through various means to arrive at a position that accounts for the uncertainty they have encountered while still allowing them to believe and live with functional conviction.
  - “I don’t have any proof to back up the justice of an all knowing, all powerful God who can’t protect three and four-year-olds. I don’t ignore the questions I have, I just live with them being unanswered. I believe a text in the Bible that says something to effect of: ‘each person is given a measure of faith.’” (Angela)
  - “And that's what I've learned about God is that I don't know. I have, I do have some beliefs about Him, but I don't know his mind.” (Bob)
“How do I feel? Maybe not 100% completely okay with it, but I'm in the 90's% okay, believing that it's okay that there is no other, cause sure, there's always gonna be that little bell in the back of my head like, hey it's me over here, and like questioning, well there's a God, or not, but I'm okay with it.” (Camie)

Contributions of the Researcher to the Interpretive Process

I believe my dual identity as a religious person and a person steeped in the narratives of psychology is likely to have influenced the study in a variety of ways. In the journal of my responses to the various interviews, I was aware of the effects of my role as a religious person and a psychologist-in-training on each interview situation. I sensed that Angela related to me as someone that might both understand and negatively judge her. Our interview felt tense and it seemed that she chose her words carefully as she spoke to me. She shared that she felt considerable trepidation about sharing her personal details with me and expressed fears that I might judge her to be both a deficient Christian and a neurotic individual. At the same time, she did agree to meet with me and to share many personal details. Bob appeared to relate to me as a person that could understand and identify with his thoughtful brand of Christianity. He seemed to share freely any aspects of his experience that came to mind. Camie seemed keenly aware of my status as a religious individual and responded with what seemed like continual reminders that her therapist had not forced any views on her and that she alone had decided to abandon religion. In our interview, I found myself continually trying to reassure her that I had no agenda to see her therapist as an oppressor. This tendency carried over to my interpretation of the data as I found myself reluctant to view her experience as anything but the self-guided process, unbiased process she described.

My experiences of each of my participants affected the way I understood and
interpreted their experiences. The feeling of tension in the room with Angela cued me into the deep tension, isolation and defensiveness she felt in relation to others including her therapist and the members of her church congregation. My experience of Bob as affable, yet loquacious and somewhat unfocused, allowed me to become attuned to his search for reliable authority in the form of a father figure. In effect, it led me to see the relational nature of his religious conflicts. Camie’s struggle to make me acknowledge her experience, seemed to mirror the struggle she experienced with other key religious figures in her life and helped me understand how satisfying and influential her therapist’s empathic mirroring must have been for her. Again, this experience highlighted the relational nature of her conflict of faith.

**Discussion**

**Ambivalent Identity, Receptivity and Sources of Power**

The results of this interpretive study indicate that for religious and spiritually devoted individuals, being called into question in psychotherapy is a relational event that occurs when the patient engages in therapy, living out a meaningful, conflicted and anxious tension between possible perspectives and relational affiliations that touch on their religious or spiritual beliefs. This tension corresponds to a tension in the participant’s identity, sense of self, relationships with others and relationship with God. In short, for each participant it is experienced as a tension between conflicting ways of taking up his or her overall being-in-the-world. The patient experiences the therapy and the therapist as having meaningful implications for the dilemma at hand. Accordingly, the therapy combines with other aspects of the patient’s life to shape the dilemma as it is
lived out by the participant, resulting in significant changes in the participant’s overall mode of existence.

Certainly, these results illustrate the foundational role of religion and spirituality to those who are devout or committed. Indeed, religion’s binding power appears to go beyond the power to bind oneself to God, it appears to be a means by which a person is bound up to the world and to others. It is through religion or spirituality that patients find themselves bound to an organizing purpose. This insight implies that therapeutic change (even in a seemingly unrelated realm of the patient’s existence) may be far more likely to influence the spiritual world of the patient than the therapist realizes.

In the case of each participant, questioning reflected and resulted in ambivalence in the key relationships in the participant’s life. As they encountered conflicting beliefs, each participant entertained not only the question of which belief was true or better, but also the question of whether these beliefs were their beliefs or the beliefs of another. This was not a mere conflict of ideas, presumed to be held by imagined others; but rather, corresponded to actual changes in relationships with actual people. In effect, each participant experienced not just a crisis of faith, but a crisis of identity in relationship to others.

For Angela, this crisis became evident prior to entering therapy and continued throughout the therapy as she entertained the perspective that God had failed her or dealt with her unjustly. In each of these instances, Angela experienced confusion over what perspective was hers. At times she perceived that it was her religious community that discouraged anger toward God, while she had developed the opinion that anger toward God was acceptable. At other times, Angela felt keenly that her anger and her perception
that God had been unjust were irreverent and dangerous. On the other hand, in her relationship with her therapist, Angela seemed to experience confusion over the degree to which the perception that God had failed her was her perception or the perception of her therapist. This ambivalence was lived out in Angela’s relationships as Angela receded from full and honest engagement with individuals and groups reflecting both of the conflicting ideas. Springing from this ambivalence, Angela experienced a profound sense of loneliness and a corresponding feeling that her identity was tenuous and unpredictable.

Bob lived out his crisis of faith and identity as he encountered key events which led him to doubt his basic spiritual beliefs and to experience a disjunction in his relationship to his mentor and his girlfriend. These moments stand in contrast to those in which Bob fully identified with both his beliefs and his mentor. Bob’s ambivalence is also exemplified in his relationship to his first therapist who vigorously warned him that his continued involvement with his girlfriend would prove harmful. Despite experiencing his own doubts, Bob encountered his therapist’s warnings and doubts as coming from a foreign perspective, one that could not appreciate the “big picture” that he was, in fact, spiritually destined to continue in this relationship. Bob’s most serious questions about his spiritual beliefs followed upon disillusionment with his former mentor and girlfriend and the establishment of a therapeutic relationship with a man he admired. In each case, Bob’s crisis of faith is lived out in his shifting loyalties to key figures in his life.

Camie’s crisis of faith and identity became evident as she entertained the belief that there was a higher power or God who had a purpose for her life and the conflicting perception that she had suffered without any meaningful or beneficial intervention from
this higher power. Camie’s belief in God and her desire to determine God’s purpose had their roots in her religious past and in her relationship to her religious parents. As she explored the suffering she endured growing up, suffering in which he parents had played a role, she came to believe more firmly that there was no God and no purpose in her life except the one she assigned to it. Following this realization, Camie experienced an added disjunction in relationship to her parents and felt reluctant to talk openly about her new spiritual state. She also came to identify herself with cultural narratives that supported the agnostic views she came to embrace.

Before continuing to explore the effect of cultural narratives in the experiences of these participants, it may be useful to explore what is meant by the word “narrative.” Narrative theory as it is presented by Polkinghorne (1988) is characterized by the contention that human experience is given shape and rendered intelligible through the use of narratives. That is to say that, at a basic level, people interpret their experiences (which might otherwise be seen as a dizzying and meaningless bundle of disconnected perceptions) through the use of stories or plotlines. Within the framework of the story, events and perceptions are afforded a temporal framework by which they come to be seen as related in a particular way and an overall telos or end that endows them with meaning for the subject. In effect people who shape and interpret their world through the use of narrative structures come to understand not only the world, but themselves in the world as they see themselves as actors within the narrative. For this reason, narrative theorists posit that it is through narratives that individuals shape and take up identities or ways of being-in-the-world. Another key facet of narrative theory is that narratives are provided and delimited within cultures and groups. Accordingly, our ability to make sense of our
world and our role within it are, to a significant degree, limited and provided by our group affiliations as each of us draws on available narratives to shape our own stories.

The stories of the participants in this study demonstrate that each of the participants entered therapy experiencing a meaningful tension between seemingly conflicting views and loyalties; and that this tension served as a precondition for being called into question in therapy. In essence, each participant’s experience of questioning is rooted in his or her capacity to be of two minds—to believe and to disbelieve—and to see the potential value of another perspective. Furthermore, in each case, the participants encountered some experience that disturbed their sense of their beliefs and affiliations as good enough and created a clearing in which another potential belief could be brought to the foreground. This new belief, which corresponded to beliefs about God, religion, the self, the world and relationships) was experienced as a distinct and personal possibility, rather than one of the many possibilities in the world to which they felt no affiliation.

It is important to point out that for each participant, this anxious tension was not solely a tension between beliefs; rather, it was it was a tension between potential ways of being-in-the-world with others. Each participant anticipated real and meaningful changes in their relationships, identities and possibilities as they weighed the conflicting beliefs. Likewise, the potential beliefs they considered gained and lost power in response to changes in their worlds and relationships.

Furthermore, I would argue that the conflicts the participants experienced were not just individual conflicts; they were conflicts between cultural narratives that communicated differing world-views, beliefs, values and overall ways of being-in-the-world. Although, not every participant described an experience of explicit cultural
conflict, there is evidence that each participant encountered a meeting of cultures in therapy. Angela found herself in a very distressing conflict between narratives of faith and meaning held in her religious community and the narratives of rationality, humanism and secularism that underlay the psychodynamic theory that guided her therapy. Bob found himself in a struggle between differing narratives regarding sin, God and redemption. Camie experienced a conflict between her initial theistic views of ultimate meaning and the humanistic narratives of self-determined meaning she encountered in therapy.

Something had to create the possibility of such questioning for each patient. It is not surprising that for each participant, it was suffering that created the clearing in which meaningful questioning could take place. The existence of evil and suffering has long created a dilemma for those who believe in a benevolent and omnipotent deity. Furthermore, given that the express purpose of psychotherapy is to address and hopefully alleviate one’s suffering, psychotherapy patients are likely to enter therapy with some sense of having suffered and to become more aware of their suffering throughout the process. Aside from the cognitive puzzle posed by the problem of suffering, there is also the problem of alienation that so often seems to accompany suffering. This problem has been discussed by various thinkers, not the least of which is Van den Berg (1972) who suggested that neurosis was founded in what he called *loneliness*, or the inability to share a world with others. In other words, van den Berg suggested that neurosis involved the inability to interpret and engage in the world in shared ways, embracing a community or sub-culture. This state of being is evidenced in the very common expressions of those who enter therapy having felt as if they were the only ones who experienced what they
experienced. As was discussed previously, each participant found herself or himself at least temporarily unable to find a group with a shared set of narratives that satisfactorily accounted for their suffering and each person made some movement toward a set of beliefs that better allowed them to account for and manage the pain they had endured.

However common it might be to engage in questioning in response to suffering, the experience of suffering as a catalyst for questioning was not included as a constituent theme. This is because it seems that other events could create an opening for questioning to occur, including any meaningful event that was perceived to stand outside of the narratives that had previously grounded ones existence. For example, a person might engage in a relationship with a person or group that embraces a different, competing set of beliefs and see the beauty or power of that way of experiencing the world. Or a person might find themselves in a new cultural milieu, in which the rules of good sense and truth are very different, and come to wonder about the validity of their familiar belief. More than one thinker (e.g. Taylor [2007] and Gergen [2000]) has pointed out that modern Western culture has become one in which questioning has become increasingly likely.

The findings of this study indicate that the psychotherapeutic relationship is fertile ground in which such questioning can grow and be shaped. Several thinkers -- Guignon (2006), Cushman (1995) and Bergin (1980) to name a few -- have argued that the therapeutic relationship might best be thought of as ethical or value based dialogue in that it involves an implicit or explicit conversation (held with varying degrees of mutuality) about how to best live one’s life. One of the clear messages from this body of literature is that the therapist and the therapy influence and shape the ethical lives of therapy patients. The stories of the participants in this study are consistent with that line of
thinking. In each case, the comportment of the therapists and the process of therapy itself were seen by the participants as having important implications for their religious or spiritual dilemmas and therefore, played an integral role in their experience of questioning. In each case, these dilemmas were ethical dilemmas, as they corresponded to question about how each participant should live his or her life.

These ethical dilemmas were a source of considerable suffering. Each of the participants in this study found themselves caught up in an anxious and threatening tension as their religious beliefs and practices were called into question. In effect what they faced was not a conflict between mere ideas, but, as has already been mentioned, a rupture in their identities, their futures and in their overall being-in-the-world. Not only would such a conflict result in anxiety, as their very being was at issue, but it also seemed to lead to alienation. In the process of each conflict of faith, the participants did not just feel ambivalent about ideas; they felt ambivalent about relationships, communities and cultural affiliations. In effect, each participant faced, for a time, the perception that nobody in their life saw things the way they did. For these participants, to question was to feel, at least temporarily, alone.

Angela was caught up in several ethical questions. She questioned whether her stance on sexual behavior was defensible or pathological. She also found herself caught up in the question of whether it was right to be angry with and question God or whether doing so was a manifestation of ingratitude. Bob faced the question of whether it was God’s will (the ultimate good) to forgive his girlfriend and overlook her destructive behaviors or whether he should acknowledge her behaviors as evil. Camie entered therapy caught up in painful questioning about whether her life had any divinely given
purpose. In each case, the participants in this study anxiously wondered about and ultimately addressed ethical questions in therapy.

The stories of these participants make it apparent that the psychotherapist’s or the therapy’s power and influence with regard to these questions were variable and contextually given. Given this variability, the question of what leads a therapist to become influential in the life of a patient, such that a patient might be called into question in therapy, is worth exploring. Based on the findings of this study, I would argue that, in large part, the therapist’s power resides in the perception of the therapist (or even the therapeutic process) as a potential healer and fullfiller of wishes. Furthermore, the therapist’s influence in matters of religion and spirituality is heightened because the particular kind of healing a therapist offers requires that patients enter into relationships with their therapists and engage their views, interpretations and even their beliefs.

This finding is significant as it adds nuance to the idea of the psychotherapist as an authority figure by pointing out that the psychotherapist is a particular kind of authority figure whose influence is exerted in specific ways. The therapist need not be overtly doctrinaire or forceful in advocating a particular view of the world in order to deeply influence the religious life of a patient. Rather the powerful therapist is often one who, for any number of reasons, both commonplace and idiosyncratic, comes to represent personally significant and compelling possibilities for the patient. Whether the therapist does so is, of course, relationally determined.

Despite her reservations about her psychotherapist, Angela was deeply affected by her therapist’s interpretations, in part because she trusted the process of therapy, in which a patient considers the views of the therapist, and because her therapist’s views
echoed views Angela had fearfully entertained. Bob felt relatively un-phased by his first therapist, who vigorously disputed some of Bob’s beliefs. He was, however, deeply influenced by his second therapist, who he described as a “holy man” and the “father figure [he] never had,” a man who waited patiently for Bob to acknowledge his own doubts before expressing his misgivings about Bob’s relationship to his girlfriend. The process of therapy had a great impact on Camie’s religious life, despite the fact that she and her therapist never discussed religion. Instead, it appears that Camie’s therapist became influential precisely because he appeared to be a neutral (perhaps even objective in her eyes) “third party” who sought only to understand her, in contrast to other authorities (i.e. parents and coaches) who she felt had controlled her according to their own agendas.

In addition to demonstrating how the psychotherapist represents the possibility of healing and even wish fulfillment, these examples also suggest that the therapist acts as a cultural agent representing powerful narratives with which the patient already has some relationship. Angela appeared to have associated her therapist with psychoanalytic theory and the institution of psychotherapy, both of which she held in esteem. Furthermore, as a result of therapy, Angela felt the need to address and defend herself against broader rational and empirical narratives present in our larger culture that suggested to her that her religious beliefs were absurd or unfounded. This indicates that she might have associated her therapist with ideals of rationality and objectivity. Bob seemed to experience his therapist (“Father James”) as a representative of a type of traditional religion (similar to the Catholic faith of his childhood) that avoided the pitfalls of the religious and spiritual traditions he had previously embraced. Camie appeared to
associate her therapist with ideals of objectivity and themes common to the humanistic theory that grounds many psychotherapeutic approaches, as she encountered the idea that her experience is inherently valid and that she could lead a meaningful life without the existence of a God or higher power.

As a cultural agent, the psychotherapist holds the promise of healing—a new and beneficial way of being-in-the-world—through affiliation with the powerful narratives (and accompanying ways of being) they represent. One could speculate that for Angela, embracing the psychoanalytic narratives that she associated with her therapist might have held the promise of hard earned stability and peace as she acknowledged and integrated the difficult truths she had been avoiding. Bob might have anticipated a similar promise implicit in the narratives (seemingly a blend of Christian and psychological narratives) of his therapist, namely the promise of redemption and at-one-ment through acknowledging his “dark side” of sin and limitation. The narratives Camie encountered in therapy may have promised for her the possibility of control, stability and certainty, as they held that she could ultimately make the choices that would change her life for the better and offered support for her perception that God had not been present in her life.

In each case, a significant portion of the power of the psychotherapists—and the narratives they come to represent for their patients—is the power to entice. The therapist offers the possibility of building one’s life and identity in line with a respectable and powerful pattern. In effect, the therapist offers affiliation with a community of the psychologically informed that sees and acts in common ways. Associated with this possibility is the possibility of no longer experiencing oneself as alone, absurd, erratic, crazy, misguided or ultimately vulnerable. Some might argue that there are therapeutic
approaches that aim not to settle conflict and advocate conformity, but rather to heighten
conflict and bring the patient’s vulnerable individuality to the fore. Even so, one cannot
escape the idea that even these therapeutic ideals are founded in a specific set of
historically situated values (ideas of what makes a worthwhile life) held by certain groups
of people, and therefore, represent a path to some form of the ethical end (Gantt, 1994).

In this way, the role of the psychotherapist as healer is intertwined with the
therapist’s powerful role as an arbiter of truth, sanity, health and good sense. Therapists
need not explicitly suggest to their patients that if they do not conform to a given set of
values, they will be outside of the acceptable norms (although this certainly happens).
Instead, a therapist only needs to communicate that a certain path, associated with certain
narratives and values will lead to well-being or a solution to painful dilemmas. For
patients who have become unsure of or conflicted about their identity, beliefs and their
group affiliations, the therapist’s implicit promise of affiliation and well-being is a
powerful one with which they may feel compelled or enticed to reckon. Likewise, a
therapist’s power in such situations may not come in tacitly or openly weighing in on one
side of the dilemma or the other (although this does happen), but may instead come in
communicating a set of values that a patient sees as applicable to his or her dilemma and
as holding the promise of healing.

In addition to shaping an existing and fully conscious dilemma, psychotherapists
can have a powerful impact on the experience of religious questioning through other
means. A therapist, holding the promise of healing, may facilitate the emergence of a
more conscious dilemma by calling attention to or amplifying unformulated or avoided
experiences that could potentially lead to conflict or by highlighting views and beliefs
that the patient has entertained but avoided. A therapist may also shape or heighten the conflict by interpreting an experience in a certain way. This was the case with Angela’s therapist who interpreted her abuse as the failure of God. This interpretation held power as it touched on a perception Angela had entertained, and shaped the dilemma as it was experienced, framing it as a question of whether God could be just despite having failed her.

The process of communicating values and offering a path to healing can be accomplished in a variety of ways. For some psychotherapists, a new path is communicated in the slow process of re-examining experiences, questioning certain assumptions, thoughts and feelings and reinforcing others. In some therapies, this process takes the form of overt moral teaching and open confrontation with less favored (or “irrational”) views. Whatever, the guiding assumptions, the work of therapy consists of advocating for a certain way of understanding experience and discouraging other ways.

Viewed within this light, it becomes apparent that the psychotherapist’s role is not altogether different from that historically occupied by the religious leader or spiritual guide. Indeed, as van den Berg (1961) suggested, over the last hundred years, it is the therapist who has taken on the role of moral guide as Western culture has become more fragmented, and the authority of religious narratives have been called into question. In response to their patients’ dilemmas, therapists now apply the moral philosophies that undergird the fields of psychology and psychotherapy (e.g., Humanism, Empiricism and Rationalism among others). Replacing the moral exhortation and overt guidance of old religious leaders, the therapist’s mode of indoctrination is now less overt and, in some
ways, more powerful. This is especially the case when psychotherapists couch their moral and ethical messages in the language of health, rationality and objectivity.

Of course, the therapist’s influence is one of many factors that bring on and shape the experience of questioning. The patient’s pre-existing relationships to people, to him or herself, to cultural narratives, to previous experiences and deeply held wishes all contribute to this experience.

**Ambivalent Identity and the Unconscious**

Among the most salient themes of this study is that each participant encountered thoughts and beliefs to which they had an ambivalent relationship, regarding them as not fully their own while not merely the thoughts of another (or group of others). These conflicts preceded therapy but were significantly amplified and shaped within the therapeutic process. In response to the anxiety, relational conflict and shame caused by this ambivalence, each participant also appeared to find ways of avoiding awareness of the conflict they experienced, at times forgetting or disowning threatening thoughts completely.

In and of itself, this theme is not remarkable as it is common for a patient to struggle to integrate an idea or experience. However, the stories of these participants stand out for several reasons. Among these was the way each story highlighted the integral role of relationships in determining which ideas the participants would embrace and to what degree they would embrace them. For Angela, it was apparent that her ambivalence in relation to her beliefs reflected and resulted in ambivalence in relationships to her fellow church members, her boyfriend and her therapist. Bob’s perceptions of the truth and his level of conviction rose and fell with the status of his
relationships to his mentor, girlfriend and therapist. Although not mentioned in the situated themes, Camie’s first and most substantive experiences of questioning followed upon experiences of alienation from her church congregations as a child. Her subsequent questioning went on to contribute to her feeling of alienation from the members of her religious community and her parents. Clearly in each case, belief seemed to hinge more on the status of key relationships than on the evaluations of pure reason.

Furthermore, although each participant found ways to forget and avoid thoughts that threatened their familiar way of seeing the world, if we look at their experience more broadly we see a more complex phenomenon at play. Each of the participants also demonstrated the capacity to create distance between themselves and their more familiar beliefs, forgetting or disowning the virtues of the beliefs on which they had shaped their identities. If we think of repression and unconscious defense as a way people defend against the ideas that threaten their world, it is difficult to explain the participants’ penchant to distance themselves from comforting and familiar narratives. It is also hard, within the traditional framework of repression, to make sense of the rapidly shifting nature of the participants’ conflicts.

Seeing these phenomena, the question arises: How and why did these participants forget or disown views and beliefs they had previously entertained and sometimes even cherished? Certainly there are many theories that could be used to answer these questions. However, the participants’ descriptions of their questioning, saturated as they are with disjunctions and alliances in interpersonal relationships with attendant shifts in the content of the “repressed” seem to fit well with the ideas of Dutch phenomenologist and psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg (1961).
Van den Berg understood phenomena such as neurosis, the unconscious and repression as individual manifestations of societal fragmentation. In effect, van den Berg contends that, at one time, people inhabited smaller communities made up of smaller tightly knit groups. Change within these communities took place far less quickly, leading to a sense of continuity and greater cohesion as old and young took part in the same cultural knowledge. Within such cohesive communities, there were fewer intrapersonal divisions. Sex, work, religion, family life and any other facet of existence were not experienced as separate from the others.

Van den Berg contends that these conditions changed gradually during the modern era leading to greater social fragmentation. Today, he argues, we live in a culture comprised of large, impersonal and separate groups in which each of us takes up a different part of our existence. Change in this culture comes rapidly, leading to alienation between old and young. These changes have resulted in greater interpersonal alienation. Furthermore, for van den Berg, our potential for taking up and making sense of our existence (or being-in-the-world) is disclosed and delimited by our relationships to others. He contends that as society has become increasingly fragmented, individuals have developed fragmented or plural selves through which they relate to and identify with the large, diffuse and sundry groups in their lives. Each of these disconnected groups shapes the multiple ways a person might understand and take up their existence.

As a result of this situation, each of us is only ever a partial self, taking up those possibilities (and understanding those experiences) that are comprehensible, acceptable and available within the group with which we are associating at a given time, and leaving the other possibilities dormant. According to van den Berg, it is precisely these dormant
possibilities, which are both one’s own and not one’s own in a given moment, that have come to be understood as “the unconscious.” Stated differently, the conscious self—what I think, feel, do, etc.—emerges as I engage in relationship to others and take up the possibilities given in that relationship, while the unconscious or dormant self remains partially silent. “The subconscious is, “as van den Berg puts it, “…the index of nearness or remoteness in one’s relationship with other people (p. 177).” As I grow closer in my relationship to a person or group, the knowledge possible within that relationship becomes a more proximal and likely possibility, even to the point of becoming my own. On the other hand, as I experience distance from a person or group to whom I relate, the knowledge and ways of being associated with that person or group fades and becomes an increasingly remote possibility. In other words, it ceases to be experienced as mine.

If we take this theoretical framework and apply it to the experience of religious questioning or ambivalence, we are not surprised to find that possible perspectives vacillate in the degree to which they are seen by the participants as their own and that this vacillation occurs in accordance with the state of relationships in their lives. For instance, Bob, despite acknowledging in hindsight that he was “scared shitless” about the prospect of marrying his girlfriend, felt unaffected by the vehement warnings of his first therapist that this marriage would be damaging to him. If we look at the state of his relationships at the time, we see that he was still deeply engaged in a relationship with a man whom he admired and saw as a mentor in the spiritual teachings he embraced. In contrast, he did not describe a close or special relationship with his therapist and even mentioned specifically that he did not see him as a mentor.
Seen through the lens of van den Berg’s theory of the unconscious, Bob’s inability to recognize his therapist’s misgivings as similar to his own might be understood as the product of his relational alignment. Bob found himself deeply engaged in a relationship with his mentor that revealed the world in a certain way. Within this relationship, Bob found himself aware of a specific delimited set of possibilities and therefore engaged the world in a certain way. For Bob, the world had become a place where there was almost certainly no evil or at least a place where maintaining that belief was of vital importance. Indeed, it was a place where reunion with the “Father” and spiritual healing were guaranteed if he could just learn to forgive, to sacrifice and to love, despite the appearance of evil. Engaged as he was in the world he shared with his mentor and distant as he was from his therapist, it is not surprising that he experienced his therapist’s ideas as alien. Van den Berg would suggest that, at the time, he had no relationship that would allow him to view the world differently.

It is also not surprising, within this theory, that Bob experienced a radical shift in the way he saw the world after entering into a relationship with a therapist he admired as a “father figure” and after experiencing significant disillusionment in his relationship to his previous mentor. Van den Berg might suggest that his growing relationship with his therapist opened up new ways of viewing and engaging in the world, just as his failing relationship with his mentor caused his previous views to fade in their familiarity, slowly becoming alien to him. It follows that Bob did not become aware of a new set of possibilities because his therapist told him about them or advocated for them. But rather, it seems his relationship to his therapist opened up new ways of being. Acknowledging
imperfection and evil without shame and finding healing became possible, whereas before they were not.

If we apply this analysis to the earlier discussion of the therapist’s power, we can see that therapists, with their particular way of being-in-the-world, which includes their particular way of being in relationship to their patients, shape and change the world of their patients. We also see that their influence grows as their relationships to their patients grow closer.

The unconscious, as it is understood in various theoretical perspectives, reflects, in part, our relationship to power. Indeed, the superego is often thought of as the internalization of cultural taboos, and the ego’s defenses, as a means of adapting instinct to cultural demands. What van den Berg’s theory of the unconscious adds, and what is confirmed by the findings of this study, is that the narratives of power in our society come not just in the widely held assumptions of a given culture or age, but can also be varied, local and contextually dependent. Not only does the repressed (or the impossible) change from culture to culture and era to era, it may change from day to day depending on the narratives and relationships we take up. Accordingly, the participants in this study found themselves shifting and taking up their lives differently, depending on the narrative, group or person to which they found themselves affiliated. And as they shifted, so did the dormant, disowned or “repressed” possibilities in their lives.

Of course, there are broader and more enduring trends in our narratives of power and, therefore, the content of the unconscious. As van den Berg (1961) points out, Freud observed the effects of such a trend when first treating hysterics in the 19th century. Although it would seem impossible by definition to identify what has become
unthinkable or repressed in our time, there are some who have attempted to describe the most prominent narratives of power. Taylor (2007) suggests that the defining feature of our secular culture is the understanding that one’s view is not the only view. He further points out that this realization is reflective of a basic moral injunction to seek truth and avoid illusion. Being a member of secular modernity, one cannot, in good conscience, take the truth to be self-evident, lest one be deceived. Rather, the truth is something with which one must grapple.

Although van den Berg’s theory elucidates the phenomenon of “unconscious ambivalence” as it is played out in relationships, it is unclear how this theory applies to the experiences of individuals who endure a conscious and disturbing conflict between two seemingly divergent worldviews. If we take Angela’s experience, we find that after entering therapy she endured a very conscious and disturbing “crisis” in which she failed to feel completely at home in any group, finding herself inwardly oppositional and yet drawn to the ideas of the groups representing both sides of her dilemma. Far from van den Berg’s suggestion that each of us takes up the possibilities given by our group at the current moment and leaves the other possibilities largely dormant, Angela’s experience suggests that in each case, the thoughts and ways of engaging the world of the other group were disruptively present, preventing her from any sense of uncomplicated attunement.

In part, this phenomenon may be seen as evidence of the shift toward greater secularity from the 19th century until today. Angela, like many modern religious people, was no stranger to concepts like anger toward God or the possibility that her beliefs were false. In order to experience herself as a questioning self, she did not need to forget or
foreclose her religious self completely. Accordingly, when faced with the belief that God had failed her, she was able to invoke, in memory, her identity as a religious person and respond accordingly. What kept her questioning self from becoming dormant appears to have been her therapist’s persistent interpretation of her suffering as the failure of God and Angela’s personal alignment with a group that respected psychological theory and the process of psychotherapy.

In effect, we see that Angela, through her affiliations in the world of psychological theory, began living out a broader, more hidden and more influential affiliation, her affiliation with secular modernity described by Taylor (2007). Consequently, when Angela encountered the views of her therapist, views that were disclosed to her as views she herself might also harbor, she took up her existence as person that could not, in good conscience avoid the threatening perspective.

**Implications for Therapists: Embracing Limitation and Fostering Mutuality**

Among the most important questions to consider with regard to this study, is how these findings should affect the practice of psychotherapy with religious or spiritually devoted patients. To that end, I believe one of the most important insights to take from this study is that psychotherapists shape the religious conflicts of their patients, not just by what they say, but by who they are *in relation to* the patient and by what possibilities and narratives they uncover for *and with* the patient by virtue of their presence. Furthermore, it is important to note that the power to shape (in both beneficial and harmful ways) is tied up with the therapist’s power to be a healing agent in the life of the patient.
One implication of these ideas is that the therapist’s influence cannot be completely predicted or controlled. First of all, it seems that few of us (if any) are able to be aware of every aspect of our being. Even if this were the case, we could not be aware of the possibilities we might awaken and cover over in our patients. Secondly, the effect of the therapeutic relationship is as much the product of the conflicts, wishes and relational alignments of the patient as it is the product of the therapist. These effects cannot be eliminated by avoiding the subject of religion or by trying to remain neutral. In effect, if we are to be helpful to our patients, we will influence them and we will not be able to know or completely control the influence we exert.

At the same time, I believe that the findings of this study suggest that greater humility, curiosity and mutuality of influence advocated by so many in contemporary psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1993) and other theoretical frameworks (e.g. Humanistic, Existential and Gestalt approaches to name a few), are likely to be beneficial to patients who encounter a crisis of identity and faith. One way for therapists to foster greater mutuality of influence is to enter into dialogue with their patients about the therapeutic relationship, with an openness to being shaped by the world of their patients and an eye toward the ways in which they, as therapists, are resistant to being shaped. Of course, as Orange (2011) points out, this can be an extraordinarily disquieting process for the clinician. Furthermore, developing an open dialogue with a patient takes time and is fraught with resistance and difficulty for both parties. With that said, it seems that a therapy that strives toward an open dialogue about the relationship itself offers several benefits when it comes to working with religious patients. In pursuit of that ideal, a
A reflexive attitude in which therapists actively seek to reflect upon and explicate their own values, perspectives and interpretive horizons, would serve the therapists well.

Among the benefits of this approach is that it provides questioning patients with an avenue in which they can talk about how they have been affected by the therapy and the questioning. This means that patients will be able to speak freely about their hopes and fears with regard to the questions they face, about the very compelling reasons why both sides of their dilemmas may be true or false and about the love, disjunctions, loyalties and wishes that hold each side in place. It also means that they are able to express their resistance, love, and wishes for relationship to the symbolic figures (and real people) sitting with them in the room. Hopefully, this process will help patients find a path through their questioning that feels like their own.

Another benefit of seeking out dialogue is that it can, if done in the right spirit, dispel the myth of the objective therapist. I think a fair conclusion to draw from this study is that questioning can and often does occur outside of the therapist’s control because, to a large degree, the patient who encounters questioning is grappling with modern Western life in all its complexity. However, I also believe that the questioning patient is benefitted by a therapist who, as Yalom (2002) might suggest, approaches the therapy (and the question itself) in humility, as a “fellow traveler” through the landscape, rather than as a GPS sending down signals from on high.

In the midst of his discussions of the factors that led the modern person to become a divided person, van den Berg (1961), wrote of the large and impersonal group that grows all the more influential in the life of the person, precisely because it is so impersonal. Within such a relationship, the person becomes a passive recipient of
influence with little ability to shape the group. I think a similar dynamic occurs for the patient in relation to the “objective” therapist (the representative of a large and vague group of those who supposedly look at things “rationally” and “realistically”). If we look again at the example of Angela, whose therapist declared that God had failed her (not that she thought or believed God had failed her), we see the result this had. Angela receded from full engagement in the therapy, passively acceding to her therapist’s interpretation of her reality, while inwardly feeling the need to defend herself against other “objective” narrative systems in which her beliefs would be seen as “absurd.” While this may be an artifact of Angela’s individual circumstance and personality, it is worth wondering if, in a more general way, the “objective” or single-minded therapist shuts down the patient’s capacity to freely wonder, explore or fight back in the room.

Of course the real danger is that such psychotherapists may only rarely hear about their effect on their patients, unless they actively and repeatedly seek out overt and covert feedback about their comportment. There are certainly patients who welcome and even seek out a seemingly objective or clear answer to their dilemma. Others may find it fruitless to oppose a view that appears to come out of the ether or, worse yet, from Science or pure Reason. It is certainly no secret that many of those who have expressed opposition to the ideas of their objective or single-minded therapists have been interpreted away as merely projecting or defending themselves against the truth.

Another therapeutic ideal that seems to make a difference in the degree to which questioning is experienced as beneficial or destructive is patience. This therapeutic quality is closely connected to the therapist’s commitment to attempt to learn and bear witness to the experience of the patient while keeping an eye on the ways that experience
might be beneficially expanded. Indeed, rather than implying the passive and apathetic acceptance of the patient’s current horizons, patience requires that the therapist hold and learn from tension; this includes the tension between limitation and desire and the tension between the world of the therapist and the world of the patient. One practical benefit of such a stance appears to be that the therapist is able to learn from the patient and, consequently, aid the patient in developing creative ways of looking at and managing dilemmas. Another important benefit is that such a stance fosters mutuality and is likely to be experienced by the patient as doing so. The views and interpretations of the therapist who leaps ahead of the mutual understanding developed in the therapy are more likely to be experienced as alien, adversarial and even traumatic, even if they have some potential footing in the experience of the patient.

If we look at the experience of Angela, we see that her therapist’s repeated and insistent interpretation, that God had failed her, was experienced as foreign and traumatic, despite the fact that it was a perspective Angela had entertained. I do not believe this phenomenon can be explained away as mere resistance or denial on the part of Angela. Rather, I think it could be viewed as a legitimate perception of what was occurring in the therapeutic dyad. It would seem that the interpretations of Angela’s therapist did not respect Angela’s dilemma as she experienced it. Instead, they communicated intolerance for Angela’s dilemma. Angela brought confusion and anger as she contemplated a God that she loved, trusted and to whom she felt loyal, who also appeared to be strangely and disconcertingly absent in a time of great suffering. Her therapist’s response was foreign precisely because it was clear and unequivocal: God had
failed her. It is not surprising that the end result of Angela’s therapy is that she is left feeling alone, as if no one could understand her dilemma.

In contrast, if we look at the case of Bob, we see that his therapist’s unequivocal stance was experienced as beneficial and welcome. Bob’s very different experience was likely the result of many factors, one of which was his therapist’s patient sensitivity. If we look more closely at Bob’s story we see that his therapist waited, working with Bob to improve his relationship with his girlfriend. It was not until Bob came to his therapist asking for help that Father James clearly and unequivocally revealed his feelings about the beliefs Bob had embraced and then come to doubt. Had he expressed those feelings in that way earlier in the therapy, Bob might have experienced him as a stranger, one more person who did not understand “the bigger picture.” This is precisely what happened when Bob’s previous therapist vehemently warned him of the danger of continuing in his relationship and even terminated the therapy when Bob refused to end his relationship with his girlfriend.

In addition to exercising patience, Bob’s therapist embraced his own partisan humanity when he revealed that he was, in fact, an Orthodox priest. Certainly this was a risky move. In a different situation, with a different patient, the results could have been problematic to say the least. It is difficult to say how he would have responded if his patient had not taken to his interventions as readily as Bob had. Nonetheless, Father James proclaimed himself to be a certain kind of person with a certain set of beliefs and in doing so became a deeply influential (and if we take Bob’s account at face value, a deeply beneficial) force in Bob’s life.
This case of Angela is worth contemplating, not as an example of an incompetent therapist who failed to embody one of the most basic therapeutic ideals, but because it raises a valid question. What should therapists do when they encounter worldviews or perspectives which they feel unable to tolerate or whose virtues they cannot appreciate? Of course there is no clear and unequivocal answer to this question. As in most therapeutic dilemmas, it is important in such cases to seek out supervision, consultation with colleagues, relevant literature or personal therapy. However, the question itself is important as it calls attention to the disjunction between therapist and patient.

Most therapists have likely had the experience that by acknowledging and simply attending to an experience of disjunction, they are often able to grow in their ability to empathize with and tolerate certain aspects of their patients. There are certainly a growing number of theorists within the psychoanalytic movement who conceptualize therapy as the attempt to understand the disjunctions and enactments that occur between therapist and patient (Orange, 2011). It would seem that the decision to contemplate, to foray into the world of the patient, is evidence of the therapist’s willingness to entertain uncertainty and conflict and to be affected by a world not their own.

This approach stands in contrast to the decision to merely avoid the topic of religion in therapy, focusing instead on more “secular” matters. Such a decision would seem to be a means by which the therapist avoids full awareness of the disjunction in the room. Unfortunately, like most defenses, this one comes at a cost. The avoidance of religious topics can often lead the religious patient to feel stigmatized in therapy (Griffin, 2006). Mutuality in the therapeutic relationship needs to be actively sought as the momentum of history and of the doctor-patient relationship seem to go so
overwhelmingly in the direction of authoritarianism. Furthermore, the findings of this study clearly indicate that delineating between secular and spiritual matters in the life of the patient may not be as feasible as it seems, as changes in either facet of existence send reverberations throughout the whole of the patient’s life. It would seem that there is no alternative to engaging areas of disjunction directly.

As therapists attend to their experiences of disjunction, their reflections may take on the form of a conversation between two worlds: the moral world of their patients as their experience it and their own moral world. Engaging in this process with an eye toward empathic understanding, they may be able to gain a fuller appreciation for experiences that stand outside of them. I do not think this is accidental. Rather, it points to the hermeneutic process, described by Gadamer (1989) and others (Orange, 2011), by which people come to expand and interpret their world. Put simply, it is by struggling to encounter the world of the other that my view is expanded and understanding is developed.

Certainly this suggests that an actual conversation between therapist and patient could be beneficial when it comes to areas of disjunction. Many therapists fear that such a conversation will lead them to a conclusion that will be unhelpful for the patient and uncomfortable for them. A therapist might wonder how their patients would be affected if they learned or deciphered that their therapist struggled to empathize with their religious views. Furthermore, many therapists wish to avoid blurring the line between ecclesiastical authority and therapist.

It is not difficult to imagine a conversation about a religious disjunction that could do harm. If a therapist enters the conversation without a sincere desire to learn and
understand, such a conversation could easily lead a patient to feel defensive and intimidated. However, much of the danger in this situation can be avoided if therapists are able to enter the conversation with a genuine sense of humility, recognizing that they are ultimately in the same boat as their patients (or at least temporarily allowing themselves to be so), struggling to live a meaningful life in the face of their vulnerability and limitation. Holding this realization in mind, it would seem that a therapist would be more able to discard the cloak of objectivity and engage the patient in a more honest, circumspect and less intimidating way. It may be difficult for a therapist to genuinely take up this stance in relation to one’s patient, particularly when the patient embraces views that the therapist finds distasteful and harmful. However, as in all cases when personal limitations and biases interfere with the therapeutic process, therapists can benefit from the opportunity to contemplate and seek consultation about their areas of disjunction with their patients. Doing so can help the therapist engage the disjunction in a way that will be therapeutic.

In effect, it may be helpful to think of therapist’s role in a religious conversation as that of a student rather than an authority. That is to say that the therapist enters such a conversation not to evaluate the validity of religious claims or to advise the patient on the proper way to take up her religious life. Rather, the therapist’s role is to understand the patient’s religious world, to see how it may (or may not) spring from and form an integral part of the patient’s humanity. This is a process that has the potential to prove beneficial to the patient in and of itself, but also forms the foundation on which future beneficial therapy is built.
To summarize, the findings of this study suggest that therapists can play a significant role in the religious questioning of their patients and that this influence cannot be completely predicted, controlled or eliminated. However, it can be illuminated and discussed. In light of these facts, it is recommended that therapists foster a dialogue with their patients about their religious lives as they are affected by the therapy. It is hoped that doing so will create greater mutuality in the way the patient’s religious dilemma is shaped, dispel the myth of the objective therapist and aide the therapist in developing empathic understanding.

Limitations

The themes elucidated by this study are the product of a methodical and careful interpretation of the experience of three people with diverse stories and diverse backgrounds. It is hoped that these findings will serve as the beginning of a conversation about the experience of religious questioning and identity formation in psychotherapy and about the best ways to serve the many religious patients that enter therapy looking for help. As the beginning of a conversation it is anticipated that these findings will reverberate, call into question and be questioned by the reader. It is also anticipated that these findings will be challenged, changed and developed through further research and dialogue.

One limitation of this study is that it accesses the stories of only three people. Although an attempt was made to arrive at themes that were not only common to these three individuals but also appeared to be essential to the experience itself, the patterns found in common between these individuals cannot be said to be representative of the population at large with any degree of certainty. Rather, this study is intended to produce
a nuanced model of the phenomenon of religious questioning in psychotherapy. Certain aspects of the findings of this study will likely resonate with and clarify the experience of the reader; others will not. Reading the findings of this study will also call attention to the aspects of experience that were overlooked. It is hoped that this study will represent the beginning of a line of research devoted to understanding the experience of religious patients in psychotherapy that will lead to increasingly conscientious and sophisticated practice.

Another limitation of this study is that it is the co-constituted product of my interpretive foray into the texts produced by my participants. Because they are my interpretations, they are the interpretations of a limited and historically situated human being who attempted to engage in a dialogue with the worlds of his participants. This was a process fraught with ambiguity and multiple possibilities, requiring me to take up certain ways of understanding my participants’ experiences and dismiss others. Despite my dedication to represent the experience of my participants in good faith, it is clear that my interpretations are shaped by the horizons that form my world. This is not to say that my perspective is particularly biased; only that it is one of many.

The nature of is study also placed limits on the types of experiences represented. First of all, participants in this study were required to write and speak about their experiences. By virtue of their ability to meet these criteria, the participants in this study are more likely to embody certain traits and to have had certain kinds of experiences. They are more likely to be thoughtful, literate and articulate. Indeed, one participant had nearly completed a doctoral degree, another had completed a master’s degree and the other was working toward her bachelor’s. Two of the participants had significant
experience with psychotherapy and had worked in psychology related fields. These historical factors certainly shaped the way they experienced, wrote and spoke about their time in therapy.

The participants in this study are more likely to have had an experience of questioning that provoked some sort of thought or reflection. This sort of experience may be significantly different from the experience of a person who technically met the criteria of having her religious views called into question but who did not experience that questioning as a noteworthy event. Such might be the case with people whose therapists question their views, but do not incite any sort of noticeable change. It is unknown what nuances would be added by speaking with individuals who did not see being called into question as a thought provoking incident.

The selection of individuals who could speak and write coherently about their experiences is significant in that it may have limited access to individuals who were likely to be most vulnerable to the experience of culture shock and even oppression in the psychotherapy setting. Such people may be less able to engage, understand and dispute the narratives they encounter in therapy. A research study designed to access the experience of these people would be useful as a way of representing the full range of religious questioning in psychotherapy.

The participants in this study were diverse in terms of their socio-economic status, gender and racial or ethnic background. Socioeconomic statuses ranged between working class and middle class. Two of the participants were female and one was male, just as two of the participants were Caucasian and one was African American. All participants came from a Christian background, although two had identified with some
combination of a Catholic and Baptist upbringing and the other identified as a Seventh Day Adventist. It is unknown how the addition of other ethnicities, cultural affiliations and religious orientations would affect the phenomenon of religious questioning in psychotherapy.

There are also limitations inherent in the kind of research methodology used for this project. The qualitative method used to interpret the data gathered in this study is not based on a hypothesis testing model. As a result, the results of this study are not intended to make any definitive statement about the efficient causality of religious questioning or any other variable. Rather this interpretive analysis was designed to re-present an evocative picture of the stories of each participant in a way that highlights the essential aspects of each experience. The particular kind of qualitative method chosen for this study relies on participant self-reports as a way of accessing experience. It is important to remember, however, that participant self-reports are not equivalent to actual experience. Rather, they are utterances given within a certain context and for a certain purpose, and as such, may be thought of as interpretations of experience themselves. An attempt was made to take the interview context into consideration while performing the interpretation of the data. Nonetheless, these findings cannot be said to represent the unmediated experience of the research participants.

**Future Directions**

The findings of this study reveal questioning in psychotherapy as a relational event that points to the multiplicity of the self and elucidates role of power and culture in shaping identity. Certainly there are innumerable avenues by which to study these phenomena and other related phenomena. However, a few areas of further inquiry appear
to be most salient in terms of understanding the experience of religious questioning in psychotherapy.

One area of further inquiry might be the interaction between patient and therapist itself. While this study has attempted to gain greater insight into the experience of the patient, it was not designed to give direct access to the therapeutic relationship. A study geared toward the therapeutic relationship and therapeutic conversations themselves would provide useful insight into how issues of power and mutuality are negotiated in the therapy. Such a study would provide a useful contribution to the already existing body of literature analyzing psychotherapy as an institution of power.

Another direction for future study might be to attempt to identify therapist attitudes and interventions that lead to both beneficial and harmful experiences of questioning. The results of this study provide a few hypotheses that might be tested empirically. Among these is the hypothesis that mutuality of influence within the therapeutic relationship leads more often to beneficial experiences of questioning. Another hypothesis might be that patients who feel comfortable sharing their feelings about the effects of the therapy on their religious views are more likely to have positive experiences of questioning.

Furthermore, natural scientific research methods might be used to outline descriptive statistics related to religious questioning in psychotherapy. Such statistics might include the prevalence of an experience of religious questioning in psychotherapy, the percentage of patients who experience this questioning as beneficial versus non-beneficial or the percentage of questioning patients who experienced some form of questioning prior to entering therapy. It might also be useful to investigate if there is any
statistical relationship between therapist beliefs and values and the values questioning patients come to embrace through the process of psychotherapy.

Aside from these new directions, it appears that more research is required to understand the experiences of the religious psychotherapy patients themselves. I have outlined several limitations with regard to participant selection. Further studies, designed to understand the experience of religious questioning, with expanded participant criteria, would certainly add useful information to the conversation on this topic. Furthermore, I have focused on the broader narratives of the therapeutic process as a whole. Certainly, valuable information could also be gleaned by closely examining key experiences that were thought to contribute to experiences of questioning in psychotherapy.

Another avenue for exploration that I was unable to pursue in this study involves the effects of race on the experience of religious questioning in psychotherapy. Although Angela, an African-American woman, did not address race in her description of questioning, I was left to wonder if this was an unspoken component of her experience. Certainly, there are meaningful parallels between religious oppression and racial oppression. In therapy, Angela found herself in conflict with powerful narratives of Western Rational Empiricism. Looking at her beliefs through the lens of these philosophies, they appeared “ridiculous” and “absurd” to her. This experience bears a striking resemblance to the experiences of people of color whose very being is evaluated based on the degree to which it meets White European ideals. Aside from, but related to the issue of the clash of narratives in therapy, is the issue of racial differences in the therapeutic dyad. Future studies would do well to address how differences in race between therapist and patient affect experiences of religious questioning.
Another question that remains is how to train therapists to engage sensitively with their religious patients. As was mentioned in the literature review, there is a growing body of literature addressing this question. What this study might add to this conversation is that a therapist who is more sensitive to spiritual concerns, more tolerant of uncertainty and more contemplative about questions of ultimate meaning, maybe more likely to engage her religious patients in a beneficial way. To that end, training programs would do well to look beyond teaching technique and toward fostering a culture of epistemological humility and an appreciation for the diversity of human experience. This may be reflected in broader exposure to the humanities, in multicultural education or in a more sophisticated and humble approach to the science of Psychology.

Along those lines, there is much to be learned by a dialogue with the broader literature on multicultural counseling. In their influential book, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse*, Sue & Sue (2008) skilfully paint a picture of the therapeutic encounter as a clash of cultures and a potential instance of racial or cultural oppression. They advocate for a multicultural training regimen that goes beyond cognitive acknowledgment of bias, fostering instead, a culture of continual, honest self-reflection. For Sue & Sue, it is not enough that counselors acknowledge the existence of prejudice; rather, if they wish to practice in a culturally competent manner, they need to confront unpleasant and even unconscious biases and process the feelings associated with it. Furthermore, recent research done within the realm of multicultural studies, such as the research on racial and heterosexist microaggressions (Sue & Sue, 2008) could be fruitfully applied to work with religious patients.
In conclusion, I feel the need to share a snippet from my memory that has reverberated in my mind as I’ve worked on this project. It involves the Rorschach response of a psychotherapy patient who found himself in a crisis of faith. In the first card he saw the image of a tormented man. Mounted on this man was a pair of Griffins in the process of tearing him apart. When asked later what this response might mean, he responded intuitively that he was the man and that the mythological creatures that tormented him were psychology and religion.

I share this story because I think it evokes the painful conflict that is sometimes endured by religious psychotherapy patients. It is a story that has not been adequately represented in the psychological literature and can all too easily be eliminated from the therapeutic conversation. This is unfortunate, not only because these patients are left to choose between the psychological healing they desperately desire and the faith that has grounded their existence, but also because they are often left to do so alone. I hope that by better understanding these conflicts, we as therapists will be better able to assist those who face them and avoid needlessly creating or worsening them by our inhospitality. What is more, I hope that by understanding their struggles we may also better understand our own struggle to live with meaning and purpose in the world as we know it.
References


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Appendix A

Transcribed Interview—Angela

A: During my fourth year of graduate work I entered individual Psychodynamic focused psychotherapy with a master’s level therapist.  
J: I’m going to stop you there. Can you tell me, was there any significance to you that it was a masters level therapist?  
A: Um, I guess I tried not to make a big deal about it at first and I felt okay with it. But I guess as therapy progressed on through the year, I kind of wondered about her competence or if I would get better therapy with a doctoral level therapist.  
J: Did uh did your wondering about her competence have anything to do with some of these questions that are the questioning you experienced later on? Or did that feel like it was a separate sort of a thing?  
A: Well I think it was related to that in a way that um this person, this woman was much older and I just felt like that competence would be related to how issues of difference are dealt with, especially in terms of um…yeah just being sensitive around issues of difference, which I think spirituality is one of those.  
J: So it felt like maybe she would have been more sensitive to difference if she was-  
A: I mean I just wondered, I mean that she was probably at least in her 60s and I wondered what cultural or multicultural competence training looked like at that time for her and if she had much experience working with people with issues of difference.  
J: Go on.  
A: Prior to this I had three years of therapy/counseling at my undergraduate university. I felt that my psychotherapy experience called into question several issues related to religion/spirituality and my practice of faith. Two major issues I will take a leap of sharing-  
J: Actually, can you tell me a little bit about what feels like a leap, or a leap you feel like you’re taking?  
A: Well it’s a personal topic. And um well I don’t know what you think about what I am sharing and then I guess you don’t want to, if you are a religious person and you identify with a particular group if you are having questioning, I guess you don’t want to like bring a bad view onto that group.  
J: So as a part of it is you’re feeling like in some way if you start to have questions or talk about other questions at all, that will kind of I or whoever else will have some kind of negative feeling about your group that you come from.  
A: Uh ha, I don’t think I said my, what name my religion is in this what I wrote, but yeah.  
J: Yeah, anything else? That makes so it’s something about you that you’re not sure how I will think about it?  
A: Mmmmm.  
J: Well go on.  
A: Two major issues I will take a leap of sharing, the first involves sexual purity, as Biblically defined as abstaining from sex until marriage. At the time of this psychotherapy I was in a close two-year relationship with a young man of my own faith. We were having challenges because of our sustained long-distance -I being in Chicago and he in North Carolina- status. My therapist inadvertently communicated to me that she
thought our decision not to live together prior to marriage and to work hard at abstaining from sex was rooted in some psychopathology. More specifically her line of questioning was directed at assumptions related to my being repressed or over controlled.

J: Okay, so you had this experience where it felt like the line of questioning was pointing to that. Like that was an assumption she had in mind?

A: Uh ha.

J: Can you think of some specific experiences or do any pop in your mind where you felt that way? Like the questions were getting to that or she was feeling that way about you?

A: Some things that she said as an example?

J: Yeah, or if there was any things that lead you to feel that way or any memories of a particular experiences where that happened.

A: Um… yeah just kind of her trying to emphasize that sexual feelings or sexual intimacy is important or a normal part of a relationship. Almost I felt like she was trying to make me more well-rounded into this area or domain in my life that wasn’t really…I don’t know I guess she didn’t think I was functioning in that area.

Then the next issue that I talk about where she kept trying to, she would ask questions about or just parallel like, well your parents failed you like God did, or something like that. She would draw these; I guess her interpretive statements would kind of include some of this. Like her elaborations on what I was saying.

J: So sometimes it would feel like her elaborations were communicating that there was something off balance or wasn’t quite right about the way you were going about things?

A: Uh ha, or maybe I need to rethink about it, especially, you know, my being upset about finding out about my boyfriend’s habit. She kind of, it really took from me kind of the right to feel upset about it. So I kind of stopped talking to her because she was almost kind of ―Well maybe that’s his way of like dealing with the fact that you guys aren’t being intimate and maybe that’s you know functional- or not functional but an adaptive way for him to…

J: You said it took from you having a right to feel mad about it or angry about it? Is that right?

A: Yeah, yeah

J: You just mentioned that. Can you tell me what you mean?

A: It kind of just made it seemed like it just took the steam out of my, not my- because I wasn’t trying to make an argument, but just it just undermined it. I’m struggling with how to, sorry.

J: Like you being mad wasn’t warranted or there wasn’t really a reason for you to feel that way.

A: Uh ha

J: Ok. I noticed you kind of put quotes around “repressed and over controlled.” Were those things that you heard at any time or were those some words that stuck out to you?

A: She never said that, no, she never said those words. But because I am in the field I definitely feel like that was a…I guess I worried if she was going to think that and the way she responded, the things that she said kind of made me to believe that okay she is probably is seeing it this way.

J: Can you say what made you feel like maybe she thought that already? It sounds like you already had an idea in mind that she might be thinking those things about you. Is there anything in your mind that kind of signaled that might be the case?
A: Um… Well I guess when I would talk about just church or my church family, the way she would emphasize about, so you found that to be supportive to you? It was like in this cliché kind of way and umm… It’s hard to explain…

J: What was it like for you to hear that? “So you found that to be supportive to you.” What was it like to hear her or see her offer that?

A: I mean it was, I know she didn’t really, well I can’t say “know” because I didn’t know her like that; but I just felt like it’s like that kind of neutralizing statement that people make, but not really knowing what it really means to the person.

J: You felt like she really didn’t know what it meant to you?

A: Na, uh.

J: So you had this feeling that she had those assumptions about you, I mean what was that like for you? What did you feel and think feeling that she had those assumptions?

A: Umm maybe, it probably kept me from being as genuine in therapy. Then I feel like sometimes I’d think about it after the session was over and feel mulling over, just kind of made a decision to just not to talk about certain things that much.

J: What were some things that you might of mulled over at the end of a session?

A: Well you know am I being too repressed or this really that being of a deal as I am making of it to make a decision based on something that I believe?

J: So really kind of questioning that stance that you had to feel that way?

A: Uh ha, and how much of deal I would make out of the whole porn thing with my ex or, you know should I let it go and just not really make an issue of it?

J: And you said that, you know, that you became hesitant to share things with her.

A: Well not a lot of things, but I just kind of stopped going into that whole area.

J: Anything else you can tell me what made you feel like you didn’t want to go to that area?

A: I just didn’t want to be judged by her or invalidated what I was thinking.

J: Go on. I think what we are at ultimately…

A: Ultimately this led to her not expressing any concern at my distress in discovering my boyfriend’s frequent use of Internet porn.

J: Can you tell me a little bit about the distress that you felt finding out about his use of Internet porn?

A: Um, at first I really didn’t have, I kind of just didn’t say anything I just kept it all to myself because I really didn’t want to shame him or anything. Then I just, I guess later on as we started having other issues, you know in the back of my mind I was wondering about when he was doing that or how it was impacting us, or different ways that I felt like it was. So um… I think I felt disgusted and I just was really, I guess kind of hurt about it. And then, you know, from her, I don’t know if I wrote in here, but his therapist also said some undermining things that he would bring into the discussions we had and you um…yeah.

J: So there was some point where you felt like you didn’t want to share it at all. Can you tell me more about what was going on for you then, that you felt you had to keep it to yourself or something like that?

A: With him or with?

J: Sure, were you keeping it yourself with him or did you discuss it with him?

A: Well no, I really didn’t tell him how upset I was about it and I didn’t really say anything about it for at least five months or longer. Then I don’t remember what brought
it out…well what brought it out is he very critical of me in terms of some of my where I am in my walk, kind of thing and not very patient. Sometimes I use profanity and that was like this big issue to him. I felt like there was this other secret thing that was way more of a problem in terms of, like a compromise on the quality of our relationship. So I really just didn’t have any reactions. I didn’t share any. I didn’t know how to react actually.

J: So you didn’t know quite how to react and felt it like kept you from doing anything until you finally kind of felt a little angry about the way things that had gone and his own criticism of you?

What is your religious stance on porn? Does your faith say anything about porn? Does that play a role for you or is that mostly about how that affected your relationship?

A: Well I mean it is both, it’s not supported. It does, it’s kind of… it’s not condoned, not supported and so, its a violation of our trust, of our relationship. There’s that and in terms of our relationship it undermined trust and then I would worry about things, about, you know, is it going to be a problem after, like if we were to get married is this going to be a problem, is this an addiction? I just didn’t know how big of an issue it was for him.

J: So I mean a violation of the trust or violation of the relationship, and you said that you didn’t feel like she expressed any concern. Are there any instances that pop out in your mind that that concern was lacking? Or she heard something about how you were feeling about it and it felt like she just wasn’t concerned?

A: Well I said any concern, maybe that’s too strong of a statement, but it just wasn’t, it was very brushed over, it wasn’t…like I think she rushed passed my feelings about it to get to this thing about, well maybe this was his way of having that release since you guys are not doing whatever umm...

J: What was that like for you when she brushed passed that?

A: I don’t know, I guess I just felt kind of hopeless and kind of a shrug shoulder kind of reaction, like “oh well” it didn’t- you know just whatever. The whole reason why I was keeping it to myself in the first place probably. In terms of telling him how upset I was about it, because his reaction would be a lot of remorse of shame and it would make me feel guilty, like I’m making him feel this way.

J: So when you say that you felt hopeless, you felt hopeless about…what do you think you felt hopeless about?

A: Just not heard, like just unheard and in this bubble where, just like the weight of what I was dealing with didn’t really click for her.

J: So you are in bubble like there is some kind of disconnect between and her, there was a barrier between you?

A: Uh ha.

J: Okay wanna keep going?

A: His therapist actually told him that we should reconsider our decision not to become sexually active until after marriage and normalized his use of porn- And also that we should, I didn’t write this in here but, the whole reconsider if we should live together too.

J: How did you guys take that up as a couple? That advice he gave you, how did that affect your relationship?

A: I don’t even know. When my boyfriend told me this part that his therapist was telling him, it was almost like he just said in this way, like “well my therapist said we should reconsider blah, blah, blah” and then like left a question mark. Then I thought that, okay
now he’s starting to think this. I was just scratching my head about so many different things. The part about him normalizing his use of porn, he never explicitly told me that he was doing that, but I just knew because of the way he would talk. I just felt like he was getting justified on the other end in terms of what he was doing… Because he’s basically telling me you guys should live together. Basically told him you need to really think twice and really reconsider about ya’lls decision not to be sexually active. I’m like, if he thinks that’s okay then he obviously…I felt like I was probably being demonized and your girlfriend is trying to keep you from expressing yourself sexually and she has an issue and all of this other kind of stuff.

J: Sometimes it felt like that maybe your boyfriend was taking in some of that and kind of agreed?
A: Yeah, he would never tell me that, but just the longer he was in that therapy the more excuses he came up with for what he was doing. His therapy was not leading him trying to act in a way that was more congruent with his belief or our belief as a couple.

J: Where did that all leave you? I mean what was the affect of all that on you? How did you feel about all that?
A: Just really upset, it became such an issue that I was like I’m not willing to get engaged, and we had talked about that, because like I said I didn’t know what the implications this could be on marriage and I really didn’t know…I mean I don’t really think magically about marriage, like people just drastically change and I’m not going to try to change a man. We had watched this seminar thing called “Fire Proof” and it’s about like infidelity. Talking about, kind of like marriage and even we watched the video, this man was married and part of what he did was he got rid of his computer until he got control of it and he thought that was like overboard what the guy did. So it was different ways that it popped up that he would agree with me that it was a problem, but the way we qualified the problem or the seriousness of it was way different. I guess he thought it was like a $2.00 offense and I thought it was like a $150,000 kind of thing.
J: And you say when you saw this difference kind of crop up for you that that left you really upset? Can you say more about the upset you felt?
A: Yeah I was very un-in touch with how angry I was about it and it would only be in the context of an argument when I really got provoked that I would blow up about it. I would feel more guilty about bringing it up because I felt the way of the context and the way I brought it up wasn’t fighting fair, but it was an underlying thing for me. I was feeling really sad about it and you know it made me wonder intimate things about what we did do, like what was on his mind and that kind of stuff.

J: Looking back, what do you think that anger was about or what do you think you were feeling angry about?...
A: It’s hard to say which part if it I was more angry about…Maybe like this, well I guess for it to be more of an issue I felt like I wasn’t worth it to him. He didn’t think highly enough of me to stop doing it. I’m having a hard time describing it, but the thing that bothered me was; it was this private thing, secret thing that was wrong was okay, but as long as other things that other people saw, those things needed to be kind of in order for him…

J: So I don’t know where we were, but if you know where we were. I think we can just start at “Although.”
A: Although this behavior was distressing to us individually and as a couple, so the whole part about what he’s doing.
The second issue has been most painful for me and is ongoing. During my work I disclosed a substantial history of neglect and physical/verbal abuse that I and my three siblings experienced growing up. My therapist pushed me to explore what anger I might have toward God for allowing these things to happen.
J: Can you tell me about feeling pushed and what that was like for you?
A: Yeah, just like I said the things that I remember most were just comments like, “well God failed you too,” “God didn’t protect you, just like your parents didn’t protect you” that she would say. I didn’t want to be resistant to them so I would just kind of either nod, kind of passively agree, but not really. I just tried to stay away from that.
J: You didn’t want to be resistant? Can you tell me about that?
A: Um, because if I was being resistant then I’m not doing the work that I was suppose to be doing in the therapy.
J: So there is something about what therapy, where the expectations there, where you had to kind of comply with what she thought or not fight against it.
A: Yeah or at least being open to exploring that’s a possibility.
J: What if you weren’t doing what you were supposed to be doing in therapy? What would that have meant or what would it feel like that would have meant you were resistant to what you were supposed to be doing?
A: To me or to her?
J: To you…or to her, whatever you felt like it might have meant to her?
A: I mean to me I just wanted to feel like I am doing a worthwhile therapy, just not paying for doing nothing. I don’t know what it really meant to her, she probably would have just said it again or found a way to come back to it, but she was not very confrontive(?). She wasn’t very pushy, some therapists are very pushy, she wasn’t very pushy or confrontive and she wasn’t classically, analytically minded. So it’s not like she interpreted every single thing. Another therapist might have went even farther with that.
J: So you kind of felt like although she wouldn’t have necessarily been trying to confront you on that, there was something there that if you were going to get something out of this work you had to kind of roll with and be open to what she said.
A: Uh ha.
J: You know you mentioned…actually go on, go on.
A: Okay, my therapist pushed me to explore what anger I might have toward God for allowing these things to happen. I really don’t know how to articulate how this impacted me, my faith and my relationship with God.
J: Sorry, so there is something there that is really challenging about articulating that. Can you say what makes it challenging?
A: It’s just a lot and I just feel like I went through a lot with that, I just get overwhelmed when I think about it.
J: Feels overwhelming?
A: Uh ha.
J: Go on.
A: First, I don’t blame my therapist, I was already angry at God and I knew it.
J: Maybe you can tell me about that. So you already had an experience of being angry at God at that time. Can you tell me about that experience, the experience you had of being angry with God before the questioning?
A: Yeah, I mean the thing I have to say I always remember growing up that older people, like old people and my parents would always say you don’t questions God, you don’t be angry with God, you know “God is Just” and all this stuff. It wasn’t until I got older in college and had my own - started coming into my own with my own experience that I kind of learned that it was okay in my book to have those negative feelings about God especially. So yeah I was and I just tried to ignore it or not. I mean there are a lot of questions that would pop up, but you just kind of ignore them because either it’s irreverent to go there or it just doesn’t feel helpful.
J: It doesn’t feel helpful?
A: Uh ha.
J: What were some questions that might have popped up that you quickly kind of ignored?
A: I mean just stuff like if somebody has a guardian angel, what was the angel doing while this person was being abused? Because that was another thing as a kid, as always God is watching you, there is a recording angel noting everything you are doing. Or you know, where was God? And everything happens in God’s divine will, but he didn’t will these things to happen. Um there was something else I was going to say… I used to ask my parents too, “Why did God create Satan?” In my faith, before, he was a good angel before everything went bad, so why would somebody all knowing look down in time and know this is going to have a bad outcome and then make this person or make this being? Stuff like that.
J: So when you had these questions it felt irreverent? It felt- what else can you say about what it felt to have those questions?
A: Irreverent and I think very scary in the sense that, well like desperate. Like if what I believe isn’t true or there is some flaw with this, you know what do I believe or what’s going to happen? Like falling out of a skyscraper, like there’s just nothing stable anymore…
J: So you’d move to say okay we’re going to avoid those questions for now?
A: Yeah, I wouldn’t really think about it or try not to think about it. It’s just something you can’t integrate, it doesn’t make sense basically.
J: Uh ha, go on.
A: But she called in to question the justice of God and compared his failure to protect me as a child to that of my human parents.
J: Maybe you can tell me…so here you just told me about how frightening and I think how really you had no way of making sense of those questions, what was it like when she started questioning and really was pushing that questioning? Did it feel like she was pushing the questioning?
A: I don’t think she knew that all of that was there, but…
J: All of those questions and what all of that would mean to you?
A: I forgot the other part of the question, but
J: I guess what I was wondering if on the one hand did it feel like she was really pushing that question? And if so, what was it like for you when she started calling those things into question?
A: It wasn’t like being confronted, like walking and realizing, oh there is a wall in front of me. It was more like you know you plant a seed and even if you don’t think that you think very highly of your therapist, like those things are inside of your head kind of going around. I guess I just felt like well I’m being confronted with or I guess I’m running from and been ignoring, I can run from and ignore these questions anymore, like they’re in my face now, or my anger about this.

J: And when she compared God to human parents, what was your feeling about that? That comparison?
A: Um, I don’t know I just got really in touch with how angry I was about God and was just really enraged and… That’s pretty much it.

J: Go ahead.
A: This experience in therapy was a huge part of what I can only explain as an existential crisis.

J: Can you tell me about that?
A: Because it’s not really resolved. I don’t know. It’s not resolved and it’s not like something that can be fixed, I just felt really in turmoil and just confused, I think.

J: Can you tell me more about that experience; just of being in turmoil and being confused…give me a picture of that?
A: Well I mean that’s how it is in your heart and in your mind, you are still a part of this community of people and so you just kind of go through the motions. I would just find myself just sitting in church getting really angry because of things that I would hear and just feeling like want to shout that this is a “bunch of bull shit.” The only reason why I kept going is because of people, like my church family and I knew they really cared about me and they were a tremendous support because I was not, I didn’t have family there. But you don’t talk to other people about it because they won’t either relate, and I just couldn’t go through having someone else give me some stupid, over simplified thing like John 3:16, well you know “God never gives you more than you can bear” something really…People that haven’t been through this don’t understand it. I think that is the only way I can explain it.

J: So it feels like the people at church really can’t understand it, at the same time there’s something about feeling like also they are this family, this source of support and love. That’s part of what kept you going back, or you said I guess the only thing that kept you going to church.
A: Yeah, it was just like the family/fellowship and friendship….

J: Anything else that comes to mind when you think of the turmoil that you were feeling?... Or that you are feeling?
A: Yeah, just wondering how it was going to resolve, how it was going to impact me being afraid of, “oh no, does this mean I’m becoming an atheist or something?” Which I’m not, but just like I said somewhere towards the end about feeling like a doubt of my own loyalty to what I believe in.

J: And what does it mean to you to doubt your loyalty in your faith? What would it mean to be disloyal?
A: Um, I don’t know why I keep thinking about the word “ungrateful” that is just what comes to mind.

J: Ungrateful to…?
A: To God…
J: Should we keep going?
A: Uh ha,
J: I think we are at “I don’t”
A: I don’t have any proof to back up the justice of an all knowing, all powerful God who can’t protect three and four-year-olds. I don’t ignore the questions I have, I just live with them being unanswered. I believe a text in the Bible that says something to effect of: “each person is given a measure of faith.”
J: Can you tell me more about that text and how you take that?
A: Um, I don’t really know where it is, I forgot…but yeah it’s just like each person is born with, given like…when they come into the world each person has a portion of faith that they have.
J: So what does that mean to you, that “each person has a portion of faith?”…
A: I don’t know, I guess other people, you could call it optimism or hope.
J: The faith? You could substitute those words for it?
A: Uh ha.
J: So each person has a measure of optimism or hope.
A: Uh ha.
J: Ok. And when you bring it up is there…actually maybe you can go on, I think maybe you go onto explain it and we’ll get back at trying to do that.
A: Ok
I believe some people decide to have…/invest or place their faith in science and evolutionary theory. I didn’t proof read this.
J: It’s alright.
A: Buddhism or the worship of ancient ancestors. I don’t think that placing my faith in a man immaculately conceived 2000 years ago, crucified and now risen is any more absurd than the belief systems that I just referred to.
J: So umm, placing of faith, what do you mean?
A: Just deciding to believe in something, even though the only proof of it is your experience of that. Like there is no empirical evidence of some things.
J: Uh ha.
A: And say you decide believe that.
J: Uh ha. Is there a, you mentioned that “I don’t believe in someone that was immaculately conceived 2000 years ago, crucified and now risen is anymore absurd than the belief systems that I just referred to.” Is there sometime where you felt that those beliefs were seen as absurd or is there something…sounds like maybe you’re saying that this isn’t anymore absurd than the rest of these things. Is there some experience you’ve had where you’ve been lead to feel that maybe that was the case, that maybe that was an absurd belief?
A: Um, yeah being throughout just my whole process of being in grad school I came to realize as a process of socialization, you are being socialized into a field or a practice. It’s like the pendulum is swung to the other end of the extreme. You know if you are a person of faith and you say that in a class people will assume that you are going to be biased in how you are, like at your practicum or have concerns about how you are.
I have heard negative and things that are probably, I consider blasphemous things said by peers and professors and it wasn’t until my fourth year that I disclosed that I was a religious person in my school. That’s kind of like a personal background… Then my own
questioning that came up, I do just sit and kind of just said some of these things to myself, “ok, do you actually believe this?” Just think about how it sounds like a fairytale, this person born doesn’t have any earthly…that’s pretty far fetched. I just really kind of thought about just concrete factual, non-facts that are apart of my belief system, but this time as a distant, like as an outside person looking at those things. It’s like, that does sound kind of out there.

J: Did your experience in therapy affect part of this process? It sounds like grad school had to do a lot with it. Did it also feel like the questioning you went in therapy?

A: Well the personal part about it, the part about God and the anger. Then what I didn’t write about in there too is that…she brought up -- one of the examples you were asking for was that God expected me to forgive. There’s something about forgiveness because my Dad asked forgiveness for something in a very insincere way. So just these opposing views or ideas that just don’t go together. I guess she would highlight those, I don’t know why, just highlighting the conflict, or I don’t know. But that’s what happened.

J: The opposing views? What were the opposing views again?

A: Ok that God could be just and caring, but still allow those things to happen. But then still expect you to forgive somebody that did something to you that is not even sorry. It’s kind of...

J: It almost reminds me of what you said about questioning the justice of God. Where you felt like you had to prove, or you couldn’t prove the justice of God. Something about that she pointed to was unjust.

How do you think that grad school and your experience there affected what you were going through in therapy? Did it feel like that had an affect on that whole experience as well?

A: At first when you were first asking that I was going to say, “no” because I just really hadn’t thought about it, but intellectually and being psychodynamically oriented myself, I’ve been trained to think a certain way about these kind of issues. So there’s like an academic way that I could justify kind of, “well she was kind of going that direction” then it could be pretty supported by theory.

J: So maybe you were thinking that there is some theory you ascribe to that could defend the direction she was going and what she was doing was kind of like okay or sanctioned or something? Somewhat?

A: Uh ha.

J: Okay. I think we are at, “my whole experience in psychotherapy.”

A: My whole experience in psychotherapy and process of questioning my faith has left me with this question, “What’s the better alternative?” “What other God, deity or power or system of symbols or rituals better answers the question of why?”

J: What do you mean the questions of why?

A: Just why did I have the experiences that I had growing up, why there is there evil in the world, why is there injustice?

J: So although it’s been hard for you to answer the question of why all those things happened from within your faith, one thing you’ve come to is, is there any other way to explain that? You felt like there isn’t a better way?

A: No, not really.

J: Okay, go on.
A: I have studied other religions and there are no better alternatives. Regardless of whom I pray to tonight a child will starve to death tomorrow, an innocent man will go to prison, a woman will be rapped. But I can sleep with a peace of mind that I believe in something that God’s word promises to be eternal.

J: So what does that mean to you? “I believe in something that God’s word is promised to be eternal?” Can you tell me more about kind of the background of that or what you mean?

A: Well what I understand about what I’ve been taught about faith is that, that’s just how it works. You just believe that it’s God’s word and because it is God’s word it is true.

J: Are there particular words of God that you’re thinking of that you’re believing in the promise that they are true?

A: That he is a loving God, that there is a better life, that evil won’t prevail in the world...

If at the end of life I find that I believed a lie, at least I would have lived believing in something. This is where I am and I admit it is extremely over simplified, but I don’t know any other way to reconcile this or make sense of it.

J: So you feel like that’s oversimplified?...

A: Kind of? I don’t know.

J: What makes you feel like it’s oversimplified?

A: Because it’s like that thing about loyalty again. You know I remember when I was like 13, I went through a period of questioning. And I actually told my parents that I didn’t want to go to church anymore. Probably a lot of teenagers say that to their parents and of course parents that are really religiously convicted, it’s like well as long as you are under my roof we all go to church. But my mind of reasoning that I told then was that, I said that I feel like religion is like painkillers. Like Advil is better than Tylenol according to Advil commercials and Tylenol is better than Aleve and Aleve is better than Motrin. It’s just like, I told them…I said I feel like I don’t know what’s true and I feel like the only reason why I believe what I believe is because it’s all I’ve been exposed to. I want to take a break from this so I can see what… like find out what, try to think about it some other ways. I was just trying to figure something out basically. I think my Mom’s response was, well the best way to do that…well you still have to go do church and ask the pastor questions and talk to us.  But they wanted it to be this guided process, not--which didn’t happen.

My question and my loyalty about this being at this point where it’s oversimplified is, am I just here because I don’t know something else? Am I ascribing to this just because I don’t know something else or am I ascribing to this until I feel like a better option walks by? Which means I’m not really committed to it.

J: So when you say it is oversimplified, you’re wondering if maybe have you really questioned it enough or are you just kind of...?

A: my motivation for remaining true to it. What is my motivation?

J: So you are really questioning your motivation to remain true here?

A: Uh ha.

J: And then you’re oversimplifying this because there’s something where you need to stay true? Is that what you’re saying or are you saying something else?
A: Um… I don’t know. I guess this whole process probably isn’t good because people--
your worldview needs to be stable. And if you undo this big a part of your worldview
then how do you fix that? So, I don’t know.
J: And you felt like there’s something very big, very basic to your worldview that’s been
undone and right now you’re trying to fix that? Is that right?
A: Uh ha.
J: And sometimes you’re not exactly satisfied with your attempts at doing it?
A: Well where I am is the best that I could do with it, I guess for right now.
J: Ok.
A: Did I answer your question about the faith part? About each person?
J: Being given a measure of faith? I am still curious about what you mean by that. But
what you said is you felt like each person is given some degree of hope or faith. I guess I
wonder what motivated you to share that part or what is the special significance for you
of that verse?…Why does that end up mattering to you to read that “each person is given a
measure of faith” especially given what we’re talking about today?
A: Because then it’s like if you don’t choose to use it appropriately, it’s your fault. You
were given faith, but you just chose not to use it or place it in the right thing.
J: So that you’ve been given something, a gift of faith and there is some feeling that you
got to use it in the right way. And right now that the path you are going is the best that
you know or is the right way.
A: Mm hmm.
J: You know when you mention, so there’s the oversimplified, I noticed that you went to
this feeling of ingratitude. Can you help me that connection again from the feeling like
this is oversimplified to this idea of being ungrateful.
A: The ungrateful part was more about something that you were asking me, something
about, I guess just what it means in this process of having the questioning going on.
J: So that feels that there is something about you have this feeling that you are even
ungrateful for having this questioning, is that right?
A: Especially the anger towards God.
J: So not just the questioning, but the anger?
A: Uh ha.
J: Go on with, “in an attempt…”
A: In an attempt I contacted an old religion professor from college. This experience
caused serious doubt in the mind of my ex about my commitment to God/our faith and
also lead me to question my own loyalty to God and my own faith.
J: Which experience? The whole experience?
A: The questioning because I told him about it and I didn’t want to pray for a long time
and or it was just very distant, and he knew because we would have devotion together.
J: How did that affect things? So it caused him to doubt your commitment to the faith?
How did it affect things between you and your ex?
A: Well it undermined, I guess or lead a lot of questionings like I said of him of my
commitment. It is a big deal because, you know it’s suppose to be a lifestyle of how you
live and so you want a mate that is going to live in accordance with these certain ways
and beliefs. If this person is now telling you that I don’t know what I think of because I
said, I don’t know what I think about God anymore or I don’t want to pray, or he would
ask to pray and I wouldn’t pray. I would just say well you can pray, but I wouldn’t say a prayer…things like that.

J: How has it affected you to have this change in your relationship because of these questions?
A: Well he didn’t move here because of that when came to internship. Well not only because of that, but this in addition to was just a huge part of everything that added up in terms of us being like, well we don’t know if we need to be moving towards getting engaged and umm…so yeah.

J: So how has that been for you?
A: It’s been difficult and because we still talk and we’re still in this thing of not together officially, but still a lot dependent on each other. Now I am blaming myself, well now I should have just…it was like 1,000-miles away and I didn’t want him to move here and make this move because it would have been primarily about my career and not his and things not work out. I mean I don’t take all responsibility either because I had a huge issue with things he was doing, as well as I was aware of my issues. And I was trying to work on it, but part of the problem is I feel like he’s had a tendency to be judgmental about my spiritual decisions or whatever. So it’s been a challenge. It’s been pretty challenging.

J: Looks like you have one sentence left.
A: Ok. I have also experienced anger, sadness and confusion.

J: I know we’ve talked about some of that, but I wonder if there is anything else that you can add about your experience as whole with the questioning or even about these feelings that you felt.
A: About the feelings…probably more sadness and confusion. I feel like the confusion is going away somewhat, I mean it’s there, but more not as close to the surface.
I mean I just wonder is it like just a phase that people go through or am I going to be lost?
Like am I just like not a person who can be a Christian, like I just don’t have what it takes or umm... Is it really resolved? Is it going to come up again like later when I’m like 40 or 50? You know is something going to happen that’s going to bring it up again?
Sometimes maybe I feel like my ex wants me like to give him a guarantee that this is resolved that is never going to come up again.

J: So it’s just not about your own questioning, but it’s about how this is going to affect this relationship:
A: Yeah, how’s it impacting other relationships. Because two, how would I ever explain it to my church family?

J: How do you feel that would go if you had to explain that?
A: Not good.

J: Can you tell me more?
A: Um, they just wouldn’t get it. They would just probably say a lot of things that are very cliché, well not cliché, and I feel irreverent for just saying that. Quote different things or different scriptures or say different things that support. Also that you are allowing or entering a bad state of mind, like entertaining doubt that’s somewhat going on the Devil’s ground.

J: How would you feel about that advice that they’d be giving you or that response that you would get.
A: I mean I would be very invalidated, so I would probably wouldn’t share it. I just wouldn’t. I’d just kind of say something neutral like, “I’m kind of struggling” or something, but not really. Maybe one on one, but I just think about my church family that they took me in when I was in Chicago and they’re all a little older and married, have kids. They are very loving and they kind of took me under their wing. So um…I just feel like it just wouldn’t be taken seriously, like they would just think that I was just having a bad week or a bad month and I would be okay. They’ll say that they’ll pray for me. Then maybe some of them would be very real and would say a personal story of how something happened and that eventually they came around.

J: You said that maybe mostly what you feel now is sadness. What do you think the sadness is about?
A: Because I just feel like alone, so…
J: Well I think, unless there is anything else. Is there anything else that as you’ve talked or as we’ve talked that has come up for you or any part of this experience that feels like would be important for you to share?
A: No, just I grew up in a very religious family and my Dad is a minister. I guess that is the point I had.
J: What feels important about that idea? I mean how does that affect the whole mix of what we’ve been talking about?
A: Um, I mean well I guess I don’t what data you are looking for, but I just I thought that adds background in terms of how the level of involvement my family is in. So I mean growing up there were times where we were at church, like every single day of the week. It was ridiculous. I actually think you can over do it. There was a time when I was 17 and I can remember we got to church at 7 a.m., because my Dad was an Elder, but kind of different from. So we were the ones that put the lotion in the bathroom, put the hymnals out, turn the AC on and got everything ready. So then there’s the study part in the morning, then divine hour, then the whole service, potluck. Then there’s like some kind of prayer thing going on. We’re there all day and then there is Vespers to close out at the end of the day. Then there was like an Elders meeting, of course my Dad was in that. Then we’re renting the church from another church of another denomination, so we have to clean up. I remember us helping clean and clean out the trash and clean out the bathroom and vacuum out the sanctuary, and leaving like at 12:30/Midnight. And I was a teenager; I told my Dad I really hope somebody somewhere is writing down brownie points because this is like ridiculous.
A lot of people I knew growing up like that, that their parents were like that; they’re not even in the church. Like they’re very, it was just too much for them. I just felt like that was important. My Dad can also be very critical and kind of overbearing about beliefs and things. So I felt like it took me going to college to finally feel like I owned my own spirituality, it really did.
J: Well it sounds like part of what you’re point to your upbringing, sounds like maybe brought with it, it’s own kind of – it complicated things for you. That your pointing to part of it is you, things felt overdone and there was some need to get away from some of that and find your own way.
A: Uh ha.
J: You said a lot of people in your position left the church?
A: Well I know of people. When I just think of families that were ultrally conservative with their kids and overly involved in church that their kids kind of had this point where they just went buck wild. It’s like over, especially in the adolescent years if you’re living that kind of lifestyle in a small, religious community it can be the same impact as overcorrecting a car. Like when the slightest amount of freedom…like for a prime example, I knew a girl that I grew up, somewhat around the time-- once again my Dad was an Elder at that time. Her parents were very strict, some of it might have been cultural, but they were very involved. In her first semester of college she got pregnant. So just stuff like that where…

J: As you think about those stories from you life and these things that you’ve heard, and these other people that you have known, does that, what does that mean to you? As you think about that, that has some meaning to you?
A: Uh ha, it means a couple of things. It definitely set very clear picture in my mind of what I don’t want my life to be like. In terms of especially when I do parent and have a family, how I expose my children to spirituality. I’m also very sensitive to like certain types of people like within my own religious community. Like people that are-- like I think every religion has a continuum with it so there are people that are more liberal or conservative. I can like sense those types of people a mile away. Like I become extremely reactive and just angry if they try to approach me. I don’t know if in your church that you have people that are like self proclaimed, ultra devoted and they always have some freakin’ book that they’re giving people or want people over to study, people like that just make me want to just go off. Like I can’t deal with them, just like no.

J: Has it always felt this way? Or have you felt like the questioning in therapy affected how you felt about those people?
A: No I think I always was that way about that part.

J: Was there anything else that you think would be an important part about this experience? Another important part for us to know about this experience of questioning that you’ve been through?
A: No, I just have always been very, very spiritual person. Even as a kid I think I was preoccupied with these existential issues. I think I accepted really early. I got baptized at 10. It’s just always been there.

J: Great. Well thank you for taking the time and sharing with me.

Transcribed Interview—Bob

J: Go ahead.

B: Okay. The name of this is called the devil in the details. This is my experience with spirituality and psychotherapy -- cannot be told without some background information. I was born to a mother what was an alcoholic. She was drunk almost all my life, only sobering up after I threatened to keep her then four year old granddaughter away from her, and then only 7 years before her death, long after I had left the house and started my own family. My father's role in my childhood was that of someone very detached and self-absorbed in his job. He was also, I believe, very codependent on my mom for his
albeit sick emotional needs as a devout maybe better loyal -- maybe loyal is a better world -- Catholic. He stayed married to her through many years of alcoholism and never allowed the subject of her alcoholism to be raised to the surface. This I learned much later was the role model I was to attempt to follow. He coped by locking himself in the room and leaving me under the care of a drunk mom, who's alcohol abuse then fanned the flames of insanity and fueled the rants and raves of a very angry and scared woman. You see my dad had been involved with another woman years before I was born. But every time my mom got drunk, resentment and anger of his affair boiled up, as if the unfaithfulness was still going on. And while I was being raised -- and I was being raised living with a ghost of a woman I had never met haunting my existence.

J: If I can stop you right there. I mean you just shared some of your experiences growing up. Did you feel at all that some of those experiences were related to this later experience of questioning in therapy?

B: Absolutely.

J: Can you tell me about that?

B: Yeah. You know I think that the analogy I kind of like to use with what I ended up with later was kind of someone sacrificing themselves in the name of "love", and that somehow that was going to change someone, heal someone with deep emotional scars, that while love can do many great things, I don't believe that it can do all things. And so my dad was kind of a martyr in a way and so that was kind of what I grew up with, was that you stayed with whoever you ended up with, no matter what. And then I think his failure to ever address it and to ever really protect me then left me with this feeling that -- and you know what came out later in psychotherapy was that I was really trying to do two things to heal my inner child and to try to heal my mom through healing Carol. And so I saw my mom as kind of as a child, kind of, with two views. You know I saw her very much as a victim, because when she would get drunk and sad and crying and stuff as a small child, I wanted to fix it, very much so. And then the other end of it was that when she became raging and stuff like that and my dad wouldn't do anything about it, I thought I guess this is the way it's supposed to be for "a man and a Christian" because my father prayed every night, but it was like the gigantic elephant in the room, the whole alcoholism and the whole -- And I was the last of 7 kids, so all my brothers and sisters had grown up. And the sister closest to me is 10 year older than I am, so she was pretty much out of the house. So I had older parents. In fact when I talk to my brothers and sisters about it, they don't even recognize, except for my ones that are closer to me, because my mom drank while they were around. But like I have a sister who's 75. It's a different mom to her, because it wasn't the same dynamic at the time. But that's where the whole root of this, you know, you sacrifice yourself in the name of love. This is where that inner almost obsession that I had that love is gonna fix this. Love is gonna heal this person and me. You know that if I could somehow do the right things, say the right thing, act the right way, show this woman God, that all of her torment and all of her pain and misery would be healed as well. It's a real mobile thing, and I don't want to get ahead of myself but a lot of what came later in my life, AA and my own spiritual beliefs, there's a real fine line there. Yeah, love is a wonderful beautiful thing, but I don't think that God or anybody else intends for us to -- and I, you know I almost lost my life over this woman to give so much that you lose yourself.

J: Thank you, go on. You can go on. As soon as I turned 18...
B: Okay. As soon as I turned 18 I joined the Navy where I too learned to drink. My navy career lasted just four years. I returned to my town and the mom and dad that I had left only four years sicker. I married within a few years and got busy with my own life. Alcohol was still a problem with me and a little after four years of marriage my then wife, sick of the empty promises and stupid behavior, threatened to leave me if I did not get help. Functionally, I had been 12 stepped by a man who had been in treatment at a local recovery center a few months later. And that night, afraid of the loss of my wife, I checked myself into treatment. 42 days later I emerged and knock on wood thank God so far I never had another drink. Over the next 24 years I enrolled in school, became an RN, and helped raise 3 beautiful children. I was then going to a mainstream Baptist church at the time and was very active in the church band playing drums. That involved Wednesday night practice and Sunday morning service, and then there was Sunday school and homegroups. I also had a depressive episode somewhere around the year 2001, required a brief inpatient hospitalization, but this time in 2005 I had seemed to stabilize. I had been sober for almost 20 years and very active in AA both as a member and as a sponsor for newly recovered alcoholics.

J: Maybe I can stop you there. Can you tell me about what your feeling was about that that church congregation that you were going to over those years?

B: You know at that time I was very accepted. We went to the church groups, we went to the, you know, I love playing music. I had a real good relationship with -- I thought -- a music minister of the church. We wanted to raise our kids in the church so it was a pretty, I would say traditional religious -- it was Baptist -- Baptist belief system, you know, I didn't really have any bizarre beliefs or anything like that. We were busy raising the kids and everything.

J: Did you feel as if you fit with those beliefs? That those beliefs made sense to you and were good for you?

B: Most of them, yeah. I think most of them, you know. I've always had a problem with people that are kind of phony baloney's that live their lives one way six days on week and then on the seventh day on Sunday they dress up and come to church and God is great, God is good, everything's okay for the next six days kind of deal. And I think that was, part of that might have been what then later attracted me to this course of miracles, because it was so anti that. And I've always had -- and I still do to this day -- I don't like people that -- I have a sister-in-law who's a very fundamentalist Christian, married, you know, and everything is Jesus is gonna get you, God is gonna get you for that. Be careful of this. Be careful of that. One thing I'm proud of -- my 17 year old lives with me. The one thing I'm proud of is I've always taught my kids to be free thinkers and whatever they believe is to me what they believe in. I'm going to try to give them a role model and try to teach them, but if they don't accept that -- I think that God is God and I am not, and that's the lesson I learned through this whole recovery thing. I don't know need to do God's job. He does that well enough without me, you know. But yeah, I do think that looking back on it, those were very pretentious -- not all of them. There was some very genuine loving kind people there, but there were the pretentious holy roller kind of people that later -- after Carol and the way that I was treated by the church -- really drove me far away from that, you know, okay. In 2005 I was working as a quality manager at a local hospital and, like my dad, had became somewhat self-absorbed in my work. Our oldest daughter had just moved off to college. My then wife suffering from the aftermath of the death of her
father began to become more and more detached. She would lose herself in romance novels and any intimacy between us dwindled to a trickle. I seemed to counter this with work and with more AA. It was at this time that first met Carol and I hired her to work for me, and little did I know at that time it would begin the downward spiral of my life.

One thing I probably want to say here is that AA also played a very big part in my life. There's a kind of two -- if you talk to people that have been in AA a long time -- there's kind of two off shoots of AA; there's the AA that is kind of the hard-core people that are AAer's, and they're like: "You're gonna make it, or you're not." But then there's this kind of codependent AA that's -- one of their beliefs is that: we're gonna love you till you can love yourself. And so AA is a very altruistic, very -- it's a very selfish program, too, because you stay sober by helping other people. It's very easy to get your boundaries blurred. I never worked with women when I was in AA. I kept that rule pretty intact. I always worked with men, but there's a lot of sick people, and not everybody in AA is healthy. There's a lot of them that are in AA for to promote their own stuff. But that too was part of this, the pieces that were all coming together that were going to create this turmoil later in my life, because you know I felt this, hey I'm helping somebody else, I'm giving them myself, and I watch people, not because of me, but I watch people that I work with recover, and you begin to get this sense of hey it is possible kind of almost. So, anyway, Carol was 16 years younger than I and when I hired her I thought she was a little hyper but otherwise fairly normal. She was a fairly good worker for the first six months or so I maintained a strict boss/worker relationship. That changed the day she came to work after she had been beat up by her husband. She had bruises on her face and a black eye. And after closing the office door proceeded to tell me horror stories of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her then husband, and of early childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Looking back now I think it was at that moment that something switched on inside of me. I began to pray in earnest for Carol, even suggesting to my then ex-wife that she too pray for her. But prayer was not enough. Several weeks later she came back to work again beat up. She's afraid for herself and her then four-year old daughter, and expressed a desire for "a fresh start." So being the altruistic Christian, and in hindsight, the extremely stupid and arrogant man that I was, I offered to pay to move Carol from her town where she was living with her husband to my town. I even offered to pay the first month's rent in an apartment. So one Saturday while her husband was working Carol and I packed up her and her child's belongings and moved her to my town.

For the next month the attachment between Carol and I grew, though I pretended not to notice.

J: I notice as you were reading that you had some response to what you were reading. Is that something you'd like to share?

B: Yeah, you know, I mean, I'll be honest with you, I'm probably 97, 98, 99% over the guilt, but there's still some. It's a little, you know, a little smidgen. Looking back on it in hindsight I'm like, look what I've done to prepare, you know. And looking back on it in hindsight, it completely destroyed my family. There was no doubt about that, my immediate family. Not destroyed, but broke up my family. But the lessons that I learned through this whole thing were invaluable. I mean I don't think if there would have been a Carol, who knows what would have happened with Jane and I. It was not a good relationship at the time. What I was extremely hungry for -- I was already depressed a little bit, and then she went into a gigantic depression when her dad died. He was like
John Wayne to her. I would come home and there was like we didn't talk. She was engrossed in romance novels, and I wanted to talk to her, but yeah, there's still a little bit of guilt. I came home and told Jane, we need to pray for Carol; there's this woman I work with that's beat up and getting beat up, and at the time I didn't know what she was. I didn't, I had not a clue. But when you put it all together, yeah, I feel real guilty, because now I do know. But I wish I would have maintained my boundaries a little bit better. I wish I would have known the things I know, but I didn't, so, you know. It's just the way it goes. It was a tough time.

J: A little less than a month later...

B: A little less than a month later Carol asked me to talk to me alone in my office. She confessed that she had a strong emotional attachment to me, and when I asked her to clarify, told me that she was "in love with me." She smothered me with comments; I never met such a kind wonderful man as you, et cetera, et cetera. I was taken aback but to be honest somewhat excited by the fact that this woman, heck any woman for that matter, actually had such deep feelings for me. The first thing I did was tell my boss what had happened and asked to have Carol moved out of my department and out from underneath my supervision. I then went home and tried to explain to my then wife what had happened and explained my mixed emotions. I told her that I wanted our marriage to work, but that I was empty inside and would like to go to marriage counseling. My wife's reaction was to tell me that if I had mixed feelings that I needed to move out. Having no place to go I moved in with Carol. And that is what happened. Part of the deal is -- I didn't put in this letter -- is that my ex-wife is very introverted. She keeps her feelings very, very, very close to her chest. And I'm what I like to describe as a blather. Whatever I am, people know instantly. Mark's pissed off, Mark's not, Mark's happy, Mark's sad, something's on my mind, you know it comes out. She's not. She's a very, very tight-lipped, even with her dad she suffered in silence over his loss. I mean, I saw her cry, but it wasn't anything like that at all. We had tried therapy when, that first depressive episode I talked about. We thought maybe some group therapy would help both of us, because we were both feelings that pulling away as early as 2001. And June went to therapy and she sat there. (Laughter.) I mean it's like group therapy for one or family therapy for one. I did all the talking. So when it came to Carol and I said, "Jane I want to go to therapy with you. I want to find out." I mean I was like, there was a part of me, and to be honest with you, that was surreal. This was a fairly attractive woman who was -- now I know, but then I didn't -- was in the midst of an enmeshment in her borderline phase, and just smothered me with the greatests. I mean, that should be a warning, but you're the greatest this, you're the greatest guy I ever met, you know, you're wonderful, blah, blah, blah, blah. So I had those mixed feelings, and I went to Jane and I said, "I don't know, there's a part of me that feels alive for the first time in almost 5 or 6 years, that feels wanted, and feels excited, and feels desired." I said, "But you know we have three kids, and I made a vow with you, and I want to stay married to you." And her immediate reaction was if that's how you feel then you need to get out of this house. And so it was like I went to Carol. I did look for other places to go with other guys that I had known, but I really could not find another place. And I'm paying for a house and everything else, so I moved in with Carol in the little apartment that we had set her up in. Well, to cut to the chase, over the next four years Carol --

J: It actually it said: it should be noted... Sorry.
B: I'm sorry. It should be noted that while I was an RN working at a psych hospital, I really did not have a clear understanding what borderline personality was, certainly did not have the slightest inclination that Carol suffered from it, and an equally disruptive affliction of substance abuse. Over the next four years I would come to earn my Ph.D. and living with a borderline. And what's suffered on account of this torment that comes from trying to love someone and being better. Sound familiar? That was my father all over again. To cut to the chase, over the next four years Carol and I went through at least four separations and reunions. I learned that she had an addiction to cocaine, and when I confronted her and told her I would not stay that way, is when she began to cut herself. Understand that I've never experienced anything like this before, and these were not superficial scratches, but deep incisions into her flesh. The implication was always that I had caused her to do this. The first time I moved only to have her show up at my door, clothes in the car with the her daughter in tow, telling me she loved me and she and her daughter couldn't stay any longer with her ex-husband, whom she'd return to every time we'd separate, so it was just kind of bouncing back and forth between him and I. As far as my spiritual life, what can I say? The church that I was a member in shunned me when I went to the assistant pastor, who was a music minister, asking for counseling. He told me simply to return home.

J: I can stop you there. So this experience of being shunned when you go back, did you feel like that played a role later on in the questioning and all this stuff that you had?

B: Absolutely. I'll never go back to those kind of churches again.

J: Tell me more about that.

B: You know? And that's going to come out later on when Father James who helped me a whole bunch, because he was like this gift from God. He was an Englishman who was an unusual Greek Orthodox, he was a Greek Orthodox. Again it goes with the people that are -- how can I explain that? Let me try to find the right words for -- Well, number one, I was offered no help. I mean I was offered no counseling, no, "Why do you feel this way?" It was straight out of the Bible. Here's what it says. Don't do it. Go back home. And at that point I became almost like a leper because I even acknowledged the fact that I had these feelings. And this might not be for your study, but I'll make a good comparison to that. I don't know if you know, but the pastor at Trinity Baptist Church -- the other Baptist Church, the big fancy Baptist Church here in my town -- recently killed himself. That has been kept as close-knit a secret as they can possibly keep. I mean, he suffered from depression. I was friends with the old minister, and I saw him that he was devastated. They closed their circles around that so tightly, it's as if being a Christian you can't have human experience. You're not allowed to be imperfect. You're supposed to live this life of mentally stable, just praying it will go away. If you live a good life, God will punish you, I mean reward you. If you live a bad life, God's gonna punish you. Bad things only happen to bad people, and that whole thing. And so when I came out and said hey I have these feelings for this woman, I'm married; I don't know what to do. My wife's telling me to move out, and they're like, you need to move home. That's it. There was no acknowledgment, no validation that, gee, this guy is struggling with this, maybe we can help him come to some -- something. It was just a flat no. Don't be human. Don't be imperfect.

J: Where do you think that left you in terms of your faith and also just otherwise? Where do you this that experience left you?
B: I don't know if I've ever had a doubt about "God", but it definitely left me with a bad taste for religion, especially traditional religion, you know? Traditional religion, it left me with a horrible, nasty taste, because it was like, what are you a bunch of -- what's the Bible verse? White wash tombs with dead man's bones. It's kind of how I felt.

J: You're at: So Carol and I...

B: Okay. I'm sorry, I'm lost here.

J: You're on the third sentence in that paragraph that starts: As far as my spiritual life...

B: So Carol and I began in I believe my quest to heal her somehow to attend Unity Church. Unity is a fairly liberal church. And one of its core beliefs is that people are not born into sin, and that sin is a result of a poor choice. Essentially that they're born good. While I was never really clear on all their precepts, they accepted any and all into their members, membership. Sermons were a mixture of New Age, and eastern philosophy, and positive thinking. Attending this church was a door that opened up a more bizarre belief system a few months later. It's also really important that you understand that I've always been a little attracted to eastern religion, while maintaining my warped Christian beliefs, and that's said with sarcasm. I've read Taoism (phonetic) and Buddhism. And while I knew Jesus to be the Son of God, I'm still uncertain he's the only son. I was even a member of an occult, believe it or not -- an offshoot of the Children of God -- for a short time in the Navy. While it really doesn't fit in the story, it was a weird time. Carol and I's relationship continued the borderline cycle; her fear of abandonment and its associated professions of never ending love and passionate pleading to never leave her. And then, just as passionate, her attempts to destroy the relationship with her fear of enmeshment. This phase was always accompanied by drug abuse and self degradation. I mean while it was determined to love this woman into health, she became addicted to prescription pain meds, hydrocodone, and then methadone, and anything that would numb her. Yet as insane as it sounds now, I believed through statements that we were "spiritually connected," and came to believe that it was God's will that I stay with this woman and love her until she changed, and saw herself as I saw her, a perfect creation of God.

J: What can you tell me about how you came to this belief, this belief that it was God's will that you should stay with her and love her till she changed?

B: This is straight from my dad. I think some of this, part of the, you know, I wanted to heal her, again was this -- it's almost like a delusion. I look back on it now, it's almost like it was and it wasn't a delusion, it was just that this is the desire to heal her so intensely, that somehow if I would heal her -- and this is gonna add on later on why we even end up getting married was like if I sacrificed for her, if I showed her that I'm gonna love her in spite of all this horrendous stuff that she did, in cutting herself in front of me, was horrendous, I mean terrible. But that if I would continue to love her, that that's what God wanted me to be, that that was somehow what Christ's life was, the living example of they sacrificed through love for people, in that my old religious beliefs, it said be like Christ. Well what more can you be like Christ than to sacrifice your life and your everything for another person. I can't quote it anymore, but I don't know if you remember Saint Francis Assisi's prayer about pray that I seek not to be understood, but to understand, not to be loved but to love, for it is in giving that we receive. It's an old Catholic prayer, but it's a great prayer, because along with this, it's like give everything that you have and through that you'll receive. And that's -- for a non-dysfunctional
relationship, that may work. And that may be the core beliefs of religion is that you love someone with that kind of passion that you're willing to give. But I had grown up in this dysfunctional family and probably had a dependent personality disorder anyway, and then you tie me up with a borderline who's got me on a yo-yo string, is like, "I love you so much." And those were her words. We were “spiritually connected.” Every time we'd break apart and she'd come back together again she'd say: "You know, we can never break apart. We're spiritually connected. God has put us together and we're spiritually connected. We're soul mates." That was her term. “We're soul mates.” And then turn right around and then do this horrendous stuff, with the manipulation, and the cutting where she would take a knife. And the first time she tried to cut herself I tried to fight her, which was a mistake because I realize later she could have killed me. But take a knife in front of me and just (makes cutting sound). And it was normally after a drug, I would find out that she had stole drugs, or got drugs, or got loaded, or -- I'm on an anti-seizure medicine. I have a temporal lobe epilepsy, and so I have a medication that she liked, and she would steal my medicine. Bizarre stuff, I mean I had to hide it from her and lock it in my trunk, and she would take it take it out of my trunk. I bought these containers that had 1 through 30 on them so we would all know how many pills were in there, and she took a knife and carved Tylenol to make it look like my medicine, like I wouldn't notice. I mean it's how drug addicted she is. It's just a strange thing. But I forgot what the question was.

J: I think you addressed it, yeah. It was during our separation...

B: Okay. This is when it gets really strange. It was during one of our separations that I met John, a fellow member of Unity. John was a little older than I and had also been through many relationships in his life. And I was attracted to John. I liked -- he was cool and he began to counsel me, to sit with me as he liked to call it. And through John that I was introduced to a book that almost killed me, called The Course of Miracles. John was an avid follower of the course, and soon I had a copy. To explain the course I've attached the page from the Web site. It says:

A Course of Miracles began with the sudden decision of two people to join in the common goal. Their names were Helen Schucman and William Thetford, professors of medical psychology at Columbia University and College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. They're anything but spiritual. They're relationship with each other was difficult and often strange, strained, and they were concerned with personal and professional acceptance and status. Generally they had considerable investments in the values of the world. Their lives were hardly in accord with anything the course advocates. Helen, the one who received the material, describes herself:

Psychologist, educator, conservative in theory and atheistic in belief. I was working a prestigious and highly academic setting. And then something happened that triggered a chain of events that I could not have predicted. The head of my department unexpectedly announced he was tired of the angry and aggressive feelings or attitude reflected and concluded there must be another way. And as if on cue, I agreed to help him find it. Apparently this course is the only way. Although their intentions were serious, they had great difficulty in starting on their journey. They'd also the holy spirit giving them little willingness, as the course itself was emphasized again and again was sufficient to enable him to use any situation to his purpose and provide it with this power. Continue first,
Helen's first person account, 3 startling months preceded the actual writing during which Bill suggested I write down the highly symbolic dreams and descriptions and strange images that were coming to me. Although I'd grown more accustomed to the unexpected by that time I was still very impressed and I wrote: this is a course in miracles. This is my introduction to the voice. It made no sound, but seemed to be giving me a kind of rapid inner dictation which I took down in shorthand notebook. The writing was never automatic. We’d interrupted anytime and later picked up again. It made me very uncomfortable, but it never seriously occurred to me to stop. Seemed to be a special assignment I had somehow, somewhere agreed to complete. Represented a truly collaborative adventure between Bill and myself, much of the significance I’m sure lies in that. I would take down what the voice said to read to him the next day and he typed it from my dictation. I expected he had his special assignment, too. Without his encouragement and support I would never have been able to fulfill mine. The whole process took about 7 years. The text came first, then the workbook for students, and finally the manual for teachers. Only a few minor changes had been made. Chapter titles, and subheadings have been inserted in text, and some of them more personal references occurred at the beginning had been omitted. Otherwise the material had substantially unchanged. Names of the collaborators in the recording of the course did not appear on the cover, because the course can and should stand on its own. Not intended to be the basis for another cult. It's only purpose: to ride (phonetic) a way in which some people will be able to find their own internal teacher.

And that's the end of the introduction to the course, although writing that comes next is mine. Essentially one of the most basic precepts of the Course in Miracles is there is no evil, only the belief in evil. And to become peaceful one needs only to forgive. Work in the course consisted of daily readings and work on the more complex text. John became my mentor. J: Stop here and if you could just tell me more about that relationship with John. He was your mentor? B: Yeah. He would call me every day or come over. He would encourage me, especially during the off times with Carol. We was on and off all the time. The borderline, then she would leave, and come over, and would always say- And some of the stuff was pretty profound. I mean, he would say I really don't have any answers for you, but I'll sit with you. He said I'll be willing to sit with you. Which was exactly -- here's the paradox for you -- which was exactly what the church would not do. You know? John would sit with you, and I forgot the guy's name, but the music minister would send me away. They wanted me far away. And John would sit, and we would read the course, and as some of its pretty hard to take. Everything you see in this room is not real. The only meaning it has is what you give it. How do you take that? And he would give me lessons. And when it came to Carol and her bizarre behavior and the more I began to hurt, the more he would reassure me this is really not real. Nothing, none of this is real. What you experience, your fear is just fear based, and it's all ego based. And the course really teaches you to try to eliminate ego, and so you know he was a friend, a mentor, he was there if I called him at 2 o'clock in the morning he would come and sit with me. So he was what the church was not, I guess is the only way I can describe that. He was involved in relationship with a woman, had a child with her, you know, was never ruffled, then never
seemed like anything ever bothered him, and just kind of helped me. When I would have questions about the course he would give me his opinion and help me go through it. But you know I liked him. He was hip, and he was everything that was not holly roller sanctimonious phony baloney. I felt, I came to learn later on that's not what it was, but at that time he was like the guy.

J: Carol, my lesson...
B: So working the course consisted of daily readings and work on the more complex text. John became my mentor, Carol my lesson. I was to forgive everything that she was doing to realize that she was confused, but not evil. I was told that my love would indeed heal her and me. This only made matters worse, obviously. I stuffed all my feelings and distaste at the horrific deeds Carol was involved in, deep within myself. Then one day after opening up an envelope that was mailed to me, only to discover nude pictures of Carol taken in a sexual threesome she had with a man and his girlfriend in exchange for drugs, I blew up. I confronted Carol and told her she had to leave, and that her love was, excuse the word, shit. The word she claims she had been called by her parents all her life and I knew it hurt. She countered by swallowing three hydrocodone pills as I watched in horror. After calling the MS and watching her depart for the hospital, and convinced I just killed a woman God had sent to me as a lesson. I called John. At that point he scolded me for what I had done. Just remember forgive, there is no evil. I then called my AA sponsor who called me a cunt for ever becoming involved with Carol in the first place. So I really didn't have any support at that time at all, and it all just bottomed out. Alone, feeling totally separated from God, I attempted to end my life. I did not die, but at the time that's all I wanted to do. I ended up spending 7 days in the inpatient psych hospital. It was pretty hard. I was released and the first call I received was from Carol. She too had not died, thanks to what I now know was her exceptionally high tolerance to the drug. She expressed a deep sense of remorse and expressed once again her undying love and the nightmare began once again. For the next two years we played the on and off again game over and over. At that time Carol did finally get seen by MHMR, and had been put on antipsychotic medication, and was taking massive doses, and this is not a misprint, was 2400 milligrams of seroquel, along with any hydrocodone that she could get. So pretty much at that time she was numb. I mean 2400 milligrams is a massive dose of seroquel, and she would normally try to sneak one or two extra ones, until they begin to just give her just the amount that she needed. I don't know if I put in here about the cogentin, but they put her on cogentin because she was having some effects of the seroquel, and she took 30 cogentin in a day and a half, which is like anticholinergic. It will kill you dead as shit. Yeah. After brief a separation and yet another reunion, Carol and I were able to hold it together with a semblance of peace. This was -- she said she got her stuff together, she was on the medication, she had a caseworker. She had promised to take only the meds prescribed to her, and even went to one AA meeting with me. Was then that she began her campaign to marry me. I began to think that all the suffering I had endured was worth it. God had been right. Thanks to my love she was healing. (Delusional, huh?) So then in April 19th, 2008, after several months of living together and much pleading by Carol and the constant encouragement of John, we married. Ironically enough the song played at our small wedding at Unity Church was sung by Sean Mullin called Love Heals Everything.

J: Maybe you can stop. So on the one hand there's this growing belief or this idea that
God had been right, that she was beginning to heal. And then and also there's this part where sounds like there was still a lot of pleading that had to be done on her part, and John was encouraging you. Was there some part of you that was holding back from that?

B: Yeah, I was scared shitless. (Laughter.) But you know there was a part of me that believed that, you know, and this is the part where I'm gonna go off this page that I don't write about. I had to marry her. I had to marry her. I had to marry her because if I wouldn't have married her, I think all my life I would have wondered if I would have done that, maybe that would have made the difference. And I think I would have been incomplete. I don't think that I would have been answered. That's a hard concept to understand, but it was like if -- and I've known guys that have been like that, that are like, jeez, you know I wonder if I would have married the woman, maybe if things would have changed out. You know, changed. That was the ultimate for me. Apart from the killing myself, which I already tried to do, or literally hanging myself upon this cross of love for her, the ultimate to Carol was to marry her. And so it was like, what the hell. Plus I felt like there was this other part of me that felt like I lost this 24 years of marriage, which is a long investment. This has got to work out. This has got to work. I didn't lose all that for this drug infested crazy borderline woman for nothing. I was gonna make it work. And she was like, yeah, you know let's get married. I want to marry you. I'll love you forever. She got my name tattooed on her, okay? I mean, she had 14 tattoos. She only had one tattoo with her sister's name who was killed in an automobile accident, and she got a heart with my name tattooed on her. You know, for God sakes. But that was her, to Carol that's like the deal, and so, yeah, this was like I lost this 24 years of marriage, which is a long investment. This has got to work out. This has got to work. I didn't lose all that for this drug infested crazy borderline woman for nothing. I was gonna make it work. And she was like, yeah, you know let's get married. I want to marry you. I'll love you forever. She got my name tattooed on her, okay? I mean, she had 14 tattoos. She only had one tattoo with her sister's name who was killed in an automobile accident, and she got a heart with my name tattooed on her. You know, for God sakes. But that was her, to Carol that's like the deal, and so, yeah, this was like I lost this 24 years of marriage, which is a long investment. This has got to work out. This has got to work. I didn't lose all that for this drug infested crazy borderline woman for nothing. I was gonna make it work. And she was like, yeah, you know let's get married. I want to marry you. I'll love you forever. She got my name tattooed on her, okay? I mean, she had 14 tattoos. She only had one tattoo with her sister's name who was killed in an automobile accident, and she got a heart with my name tattooed on her. You know, for God sakes. But that was her, to Carol that's like the deal, and so, yeah, there was some fear, and there probably was in the back of my mind this realization that the chances of this working out are probably very slim, but I have to do this. I have to follow through this act to show her that I'm willing to do what I said I was going to do, so I did.

J: But one thing changed...

B: One thing had changed. As a result of my action on my license because of my RN due to my suicide attempt, I had to attend counseling on my own. They required that I go to psychotherapy for six months, seven months, I don't know, a year. Then my first therapist fired me when I told him that Carol and I were together again. So I was forced to find another therapist, the man I believe who finally returned me and restored me to sanity.

J: So this first therapy, did you see anywhere where that played a role in the experience of questioning, did that affect anything in terms of your beliefs at the time?

B: None. I mean I understood. I mean he wrote me a letter. He's still my friend. I respect him greatly. He doesn't live in the area anymore, but I respect him greatly, and I'd seen him a couple of sessions. And then I told him I am going back to Carol, we were going to get married. He said, well, I can't be your therapist anymore. He wrote me, he said, I think this is very dangerous for you, all the wise things that a therapist has to say. But I was like, he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand the big picture. The big picture whatever that is. The big --

J: When you say the big picture do you have a sense of what you thought it was at the time?

B: Yeah you know that this was gonna be the healing. This was going to be the healing for her, the healing for me, the fulfillment of almost my life's purpose at that point, up to that point. I mean between AA, and Unity, and Course in Miracles, and John, and then my dad with what he did with my mom for all those years, you know -- here's this man...
who thinks that God wants you to give your life because this is what love is. Love is this. Love is this giving up of yourself. This is what I called you to do. And I could open the Bible and show you versus that can be misconstrued to make you very much believe that. No greater love has a man that he gives his life for his brother. I'm not quite sure that's what he intended in that context, but, yeah. I believed that this was the deal. And maybe some of my old Catholic -- I went to Catholic school for 8 years, and some of my old Catholics beliefs, Catholics are very strongly in believe in that. And maybe some of that played into it, too. I'm not for sure what it was all about. Anyway, Father James, which I didn't know, I need to make that point here. When I first went to therapy it was just a community at that time called New Hope. I think it's a new name, but it was a therapy clinic. So when I first met him, he was James and not Father James. I didn't even know he was a priest. He was just dressed in civilian clothes and he was my therapist. I later found out that he was a Greek Orthodox priest, but at the time, you know, from England. And for a while he saw Carol and I together, to try and help us. Later he told me he had to restrain himself from slapping me upside the head when I -- but he was there to support whatever if wanted. And if I wanted marriage therapy with this woman, he was gonna try and provide that, but that he thought that I was totally insane. The marriage of course was doomed from the start. It was about a month -- I need to say something here, too, about the therapy with Carol; Carol was much like Jane in therapy. She didn't say anything, except one occasion in -- I don't know if this is part of your story of anything but it will probably help you as a psychologist -- borderlines have an intense desire to please their children. And Carol's daughter, who's name is Stacy, and this is all confidential, right? Cause her ex-husband works at the state hospital, and he's raising the daughter now. But Carol and Stacy were inseparable when she got to see Stacy. Carol's one thing that she thought she could do right, though she thought everything about her was shit, that she had this gigantic void that she could not fill with anything, not men, not sex, not drugs, not anything. Nobody could ever fill that void. It was horrible. I can't imagine what she must have felt. But the one area in her life that she thought she was gonna be right with, was with her daughter, Stacy. But it's a twisted, sick relationship, where a parent depends upon a child for their emotional well-being. And that's exactly what Carol did with Stacy. Carol was not there to support Stacy, Stacy was there to support Carol. And so the only time that Carol cried when we were in therapy was when Father James said, "You know," and he pointed to her and he said, "You know, you're raising a monster." He said, "If you continue doing what you're doing with your daughter, you're raising a monster. He said you're raising a sick, emotionally dependent, totally dysfunctional child." And he said, "If you don't change what you're doing," he said, "Once she becomes a teenager, I'm not for sure what's going to happen to you." Now she's 12. I don't know what's going to happen to her. And that was true. It was a very, you know, and that helped me very much with my son to realize that, you know, he's not here for me. I am here for him. I need to be the one who, you know, if he gets mad at me, that's no reflection on me. And that's just the opposite of what happened with Carol. If Stacy would throw a fit, Carol was like, oh - -

So, anyway, the marriage of course was doomed from the start. It was about a month before Carol began her old antics, more hydrocodone, increasing her doses of Seroquel. One night only four months after being married, Carol was loaded. She offered the excuse of being very sleepy and went to bed about 6:30 pm. An hour later when I went in
to check on her I found her cold and barely breathing and already blue around the lips and eyes. I attempted to arouse her but to no avail. I then thought of using ice to wake her up, began rubbing ice around her body, under her arms, everywhere. And then she woke in a full blown borderline rage. She began cussing me and packing her stuff and her daughter's clothes. When I asked her -- her daughter happened to be visiting at that time. Her ex-husband had custody of her, but Stacy was over, unfortunately. When I asked her where she was going, she stated that she was leaving. When I pointed out that she was too loaded to drive, especially with a daughter, and then I would not let her drive, she asked me who's going to stop her? When I stood in front of the door, she proceeded to punch me as hard as she could -- and she's not a small woman -- in the face. It was then I made the first smart decision I had in four years, I called the police. They arrived; field tested her, and told her she could not drive. She called her friend and was gone. The next day I filed for divorce. Apart from the signature I needed to keep from having her served papers, I've not seen or spoke with her since. And the divorce was final in a record 61 days. After the divorce the real healing began. It was probably the only part of the story that you need to hear, but I felt it necessarily to paint a picture of the spiritual condition at the time. I was almost literally hanging on a lover's cross for Carol. Thanks to the sick teachings in the Course of Miracles, the belief that evil is only in your mind, the liberal allowances of the Unity Church, and the mentoring of a man who taught peace and love but really wanted me to sacrifice my life for an insane woman, that becomes so brainwashed I really thought it was God's intention that I would remain by this woman's side.

J: If I can stop you here. What can you tell me about the experience of being brainwashed?
B: That's exactly what the Course in Miracles does.
J: Tell me about it.
B: I'll show you the book.
J: Maybe if you can just tell me it will be better.
B: Okay. I don't know if you want to see this thing. It starts with -- I mean if you look at it and you look at how you brainwash people, that's exactly what it does. I mean it starts with, the first lesson is everything that you see, you look around the room and everything you see, tell yourself it's not real. And that is the cornerstone of brainwashing. It strips away your core beliefs and over a period of time through repetition and through countless repetition and with just the right amount of truth in it, I mean there's some truth interwoven in it, sounds great, peace and love and stuff like that. It incorporates this bizarre belief system into a person who's really devoted into studying it. But it starts with the core thing of everything you see is unreal. In fact I think it's kind slogan of is: nothing real can be threatened. Only love is real therefore you cannot be threatened, or some bizarre thing like that. So it teaches essentially that this reality that you see is nothing but a projection of what you made. Nothing but a facade of what your ego is manifesting. And so it starts by stripping away all the core beliefs that you believe. And it does it in such a -- this is why it's such a devious thing. It does it in such a peaceful almost attractive kind of way that you think that: what can be wrong with this? What can be wrong with this? Forgiveness is the answer. There is no evil. Systematic, I mean, and it's like a daily reading, you read every day, and then there's this text that's bizarre. I mean, the text is very esoteric and very difficult to understand, and then so you know you
struggle at try and understand that. And then there’s the beautiful way they did it at the 
back of the book is a manual for teachers, with the idea that if you do this well enough, 
then you become a teacher of the Course in Miracles. Then you become a guru in the 
Course of Miracles, and that you can heal other people through your experience.

J: What can you tell me about what happens so that you came to see that as brainwashing 
or came to your current idea about what it is?
B: That's gonna come up, but only through two things I think; Father James was -- when I 
finally -- well, let me read, can I?
B: Cause it's gonna come up how that happened.
J: Sure, and I think you're at the end of course. In the parenthesis right after God's 
intention that I remain by this woman's side... On the second-to-last paragraph.
B: Okay, end of course. We kind of leave out the great role model that my dad taught me. 
By the way, John crashed and burned a few months later, lost in a sea of alcoholism. He 
lost his woman and his child and became very arrogant and very, you know, there is no 
evil and you just need to get past this. The first thing Father James told me when I told 
him that Carol was gone and I was having second thoughts about the whole course thing 
and my belief that there was no evil, for I had experienced it's fruits first hand, was to 
jump up and shout halleluiah.

J: Well, maybe --
B: Yeah, maybe I do need to stay where that happened. I think… again I think life 
conspired to heal me in this way. At that time John was crashing. Here's a guy that's been 
mentoring me, that's been helping me, who's an alcoholic, who decided that he's gonna 
drink again, and been married to a very beautiful sweet woman, and had a child that she 
had never put him down on the birth certificate as the father, because she was married at 
that time that she got involved with John and wasn't for sure who the father was. And I'd 
gone out to try to counsel him a couple of times. Now the role reversed, and my mentor 
was no longer my mentor. I was now trying to mentor him with AA. And I never drank 
with Carol, thank God. I don't know how I never did, but I never did. I'm trying to mentor 
John into seeing that alcohol is destroying his relationship with Janet, which it was. I 
mean he was drunk and he was quoting the Course at me like this is all. You know, I said, 
"John, come to AA with me." And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "You know 
those people are not going to like me." I'm like, "Why John?" He said, "Because I'm so 
much above them." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" And he's like, "Well, I've 
got the Course, and they're not going to understand me and they're not gonna -- I know 
God so much better than they do." I'm like, "Wait a minute, you're drunk, you know? 
You're drunk, and you're an ass, and you're losing your wife and your child that you love 
passionately, but your arrogance and your denial and your substance abuse wouldn't let 
you say I need help? You know?" And so my mentor crashed. I mean he was like all this 
stuff that he told me I realize was just -- you know, I mean, if there's no evil, everything 
he was doing was just as evil as everything that Carol was doing. I mean, my concept of 
evil is when somebody takes advantage of somebody's compassion that love that's given 
freely, the innocence, that love is given out of innocence. And it might be given in a 
twisted kind of way, but they take that, and they abuse it, and they use it for whatever 
reason they want to use it for, and they manipulate it and twist it -- that's the epitome of 
evil. I mean, that's the snake in the garden, take a bite of the apple is somebody who will
take the innocence of a child, a pedophile that will take the innocence of a child with the trusting of a child and use it for their gratification. Somebody will take the altruistic -- albeit this pretty screwed up love that you have for somebody, and twist it, and use it, and manipulate it. Even though she was sick, and I know she was sick, and I know she still is, that's got to be evil. So those are the things that are starting to pop up in my mind is: wait a minute, how can there not be evil? There's things happening on television every day. You can't tell me that those are not just confused people. Innocent people are suffering. Innocent people are being subjected. And when she hit me, and I knew I never was gonna hit her back, and I had told her, cause she had gotten involved with me before, and I had warned her. I said, "You know you can never hit me again, Carol." She had head butted me twice before. She was into martial arts like I am and my son. He's probably best of all of us, but we all did martial arts. So she was pretty good at martial arts, and I told her she can't hit me. I said, "You know, this time you hit me, you've head butted me twice when you got angry with me, and you punched me one time before." I said, "You can never hit me again." I said, "Because I'm never gonna hit you." I said, "You have to understand that. It's against my nature to ever raise my hand to a woman." I said, "But I'm not gonna live my life as an abused man." I said, "I'm not. I'm not gonna allow you to do that to me. I'm not gonna be -- " Almost said: I'm not gonna be your ex-husband who is pretty much antisocial from [across the state] who did beat her. Now that I know her, I can understand. I mean, I can't understand that, because I don't advocate beating women, but I can understand how she would bring somebody to the point where they would beat her. And then I said, "I'm not that person and I never will be that person." I said, "But you can't do it to me." I said, "You can't hit me." I said, "You can't." I set the line. And that was before we got married. I said, "Here's the deal, you can never get to that point." I said, "I would hope that you would stop cutting yourself. But you can't hit me." And when she did, she popped me in the head, she ruptured the left part of my eye, and it was just in that instant it was like the light flashed, and I said, "You know I'm going to call the police." I said, and I did. And her therapist came. This is how manipulative borderlines can be. She had a caseworker from MHMR who let her stay at her house that night. J: So you said the light flashed? And it seems like there was some realization that you needed to leave. Did this experience in some way touch on the beliefs that you had been carrying, these beliefs in the Course and in other ways? B: Yeah. I realize it was all a bunch of shit. You know I've realized that, I realize that yeah, you know? I realize that: number one, I had attempted to kill myself and that I made a promise to myself through that experience that I was never gonna get that low again. I had at that point at the suicide attempt I had stuffed my feelings so deeply that I had actually, you know, I wanted to die. I vowed that that was never happen again, and then I saw John crash, and I saw the guy that I believed that was the Course the walking talking Course of Miracles just arrogant and uncaring and quoting the Course in the process of doing it. And then I saw this woman that I was here to love, no matter what she did. And I said you can't hit me, and she was almost dead in my bed literally. I mean her aspirations are probably 4, you know, she had taken so much medicine that she was cyanotic. And that I woke her up, and that she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave and I thought, you know, this is not, you know, what would the Course tell me? That, let her go, there's no fear. Let her go. There's no evil, let her go. And so when I stopped, when I went to stop
her and she hit me. Was like, you know, this is done, this is the end. And there was no second -- there was no really second-guessing after that. It was like I went into therapy with Father James the next day, and said, "Father James, I'm really doubting about the Course in Miracles." Cause I had been talking to him about it, and he said, "Well what do you mean?" And I said, "Well, I'm really messed up spiritually." I said, "I really, I'm, you know here's all this stuff." And he began to interweave his therapy, and that's when he revealed he said, "Did you know I was a Greek Orthodox priest?" Because I had been saying the F word around him and everything else, and some horrible -- (Laughter.) "I thought you were James." you know? And he's like, "No, I'm Father James." And I'm like -- I actually even went to one of these; they were meeting at a church in my town. He's since moved on to Hawaii. But actually went to one of his -- He said, "Let me know if you're interested." I'm not. "You don't have to come, obviously, but if you want to come to see what Greek Orthodox is about -- " I said, "I'm not gonna be one, but I've never heard of it. What is it?" So one time after therapy I went to watch their little deal, which is very much like Catholic Church.

J: Well what else can you tell me about how therapy and your relationship with James and then Father James affected this whole process?
B: Well the deal was, Father James, and this is why he was perfect; number one, he's from England. He disdains western religion, and he'll be the first one to tell you that. He says, you know, I can't do an English accent, but in his beautiful crisp English accent he said, "You know you westerners, that you and your rah, rah feel good churches, they make me sick." He said, "You know, you're going to church, you're living your life for 6 days and then on the 7th day you go to church and it's hallelujah, God loves you, amen brother, you're forgiven all is well." And that resonated with me. That is what I had seen when they shunned me, and that resonated inside of me. The second important thing was -- and probably a lot of therapists where they would do a lot of supportive therapy and say, you know, like I done the empty chair before trying to talk about getting to get in touch with your inner child. I've read, you know, I read a lot. I read all the inner child books, and all that stuff of children of alcoholics and everything. Instead of trying to make me feel better, he made me feel worse for awhile. He made me go into what I liked to refer to the forest of my life. And a lot of therapists I think would probably keep you away from that, especially with my history of suicide attempts. But he forced me in there. He forced me in there, he forced me to get in there and to look at the stuff, and what you're hearing now is really joy, because he forced me into places where a lot of people never go.

J: How did he force you? What can you tell me about that, the force?
B: Well the first thing when we finally got to the meat of issue that men are screwed up spiritually, and here's what I believed, and we had worked through the father deal, and he kept copious notes, inner workings, relationships, and all that stuff. He said, "What do you want?" And I said, "Well, anything will help, Father James. I need to find my way back to God." And the first thing he did was have me read Psalm 51. He said, "Your homework is to go and learn about David." He said -- [Off topic.] Can I smoke a cigarette?

J: Yeah, sure.
B: I'm gonna go outside to smoke. I don't want to offend you. I'm gonna go right outside. Or would you want me to keep going or what? I'll just take a few minutes. Whatever you
want.

J: Maybe you can tell me a little bit about that experience and then we can stop and take a break and then you can smoke and come back?

B: Sure, sure. (Indiscernible.) Yeah. I know. You know, he made me -- and it was a hard time. And it was hard. Psalm 51 is all about “Oh God have mercy on me.” And he said -- there is, regardless of what the Course says, he didn't force his belief on me, but he said, "If you want to read about sin, let's read about David. And read about David and read about what he did with Bathsheba, and the consequence of his sin. You know, he lost his first child, never got to see his first child." And so we did that for a while, for maybe a month, you know, every day, said I want you to read this every day. He said, "I don't want you to pray." He said, "The only thing I want you to pray for Carol is God have mercy on Carol's soul." He said, "That's it, and I don't want you to go any further than that, and I want you to pray God have mercy on Carol's soul." So I got out Psalm 51 and I read Psalm 51 every night, every morning. And I read more than, I got interested in about David and his life. And then we did that for a while, and then he said, "Okay, now let's read more about David and what happened to David after that." So anyway, so then he forced me into this forest, into this place that, it was scary, but when I was there, I began to look around, and you come to terms with really I think what everybody has to sooner or later in their life. Some people just they never do. Like a Carol will never go into the forest of her life, because it's just too damn scary. You know, she's going to get to the edge of the forest and she's gonna kick back and say, I can't do this, and go back to drugs and alcohol. And some people maybe they're fortunate enough that they live a life that they never have to do that, but that wasn't my case, I had to get in there, and I write a lot. I wrote some poetry about it, about the greens and the browns and the smell of the forest, the beauty of the forest that you know is pretty scary. So I stayed there for a while and became comfortable with it. He recommended a couple books. I read those and the non-spiritual book is one which is a beautiful book about being broken open and lessons, Learning to Fall which is another great book.

J: Maybe that will be a good place for us to stop so you can take a break and then we can resume and --

B: Okay. Very good. Is there more here?

J: Yeah we were at then through weekly sessions. Maybe we can finish up what you've written and then we can talk some more about it.

B: I've lost my place.

J: Oh, so you're at the last page on the second, the last paragraph, so it's the first one, and then through weekly session...

B: Then through weekly sessions the therapist, while he maintained strictly professional boundaries, led me through a lesson about David. My homework was to read psalm 51, pray for God's mercy. He did not allow me to slither away with my tail between my legs, insisted that I take responsibility for my actions, yet he also never shamed me. Through the weeks and then months of psalms readings he then had me read other psalms. In discussions about what I had allowed myself to be -- why I had allowed myself to become so enmeshed with Carol psychopathology, I began to feel reconnected with God, real God, one who loves us, allows us to suffer the consequences of a sin, of our sin, which is a bad word in the world of The Course and of Unity. Perhaps because James was a holy man and not a run-of-the-mill America minister, preaching American religion, and
that's what we talked about (indiscernible), something about him reached me. I began to understand what evil is and how it works into the hearts of people. I learned about the devil in the details, also learned the mercy of God who still called David after a sordid affair a man after his own heart. I learned how David in spite of his mistakes was reborn. He lived with the consequences of his mistakes, but because of them was a better man, a better leader. Father James forced me into the forest of myself to grieve my loss, to find forgiveness. I quit Unity and though I'm not ready for a mainstream church at this time, I have rediscovered that God had never left me, laughed maybe, and cried for sure, but never ever left me. And then there's the index, which I'm not going to read all that.

J: That's fine. Yeah, don't. So what can you tell me about your relationship with Father James and -- well first maybe you can tell me about just even before this, this instance where he revealed that he was a minister and there's this process that you went through. What can you tell me about your relationship with him?

B: I think he represented a lot of different things to me. One thing I think that he represented to me was a father figure. The other therapist that I had was more like a peer. He was more like a—I'm a fairly intelligent guy, and it was more of a peer to peer kind of relationship. Father James was older and so he kind of represented this father figure that I never had. And he was not stern, but he would not, he would not let me I mean if things got uncomfortable he wouldn't say, well let's not talk about that right now, we'll talk about that later. He -- without being a butt -- he challenged me on things, on my beliefs and this whole distorted picture.

J: Can you tell me about how he did that? How he challenged those beliefs?

B: Yeah, through, I think, through telling me, hey you need to read chapter 51 in psalms first. Which you would think he might say you need to read psalms 23, something that's pretty, pretty, makes you feel good, you know? Psalm 51 doesn't make you feel real good. I don't know if you read it if you haven't read it. It doesn't make you feel real good about yourself when you read. It's like God have mercy on me, I've sinned, I've done this thing, and so that was the first thing you know was like wow, this is different. And you know his talking to me about how a church -- some religions and stuff like that, they have the rah, rah feel good, let's just live our lives normal in the course of the day and not really see God throughout the week, but then on Sunday go to church and wave your flags and do all your stuff and feel better about yourself. But that is this spiritual walk of God through the good and the bad and the ugly and the nasty and through the forest and everything else that that's where God really exists in all of that.

J: Can you tell me about what the forest means to you? What was the forest or what did you find revealed in the forest?

B: Beauty. That's hard for people to understand, a great confidence in myself. A great acknowledgment that a lot of people don't do that, that it's not for everybody, that by doing that I actualized myself, I achieved this, I became the man that I wanted to be.

J: And what does it mean to you to have gone, I mean what does that mean, what was that process, the process of going into the forest? Was it to --

B: To sit with my grief for a while and to examine it.

J: Grief about?

B: About what I had done. About my childhood. About everything. Not just the grief, but the imperfection in my life. A lot of different things that happen at the same time I mean it wasn't just that, but Broken Open was beautiful about you know if you do this thing, do
it all the way, so that at the end of it there's a lesson for you. If you make a mistake, don't hide from it. Learn from it. See what it is that the teacher, what's the teacher in all of that? What's the lesson in all of that? And I realize I think that that's kind of what God tells us throughout the Bible. I realize that I'm not a big Bible scholar, but his lessons that he's taught us about the people, they were all imperfect, and yet he still used them, and it was only those that were willing to learn from their mistakes that he really, really used. And I think that the whole thing with evil that came back to me, that I'm not an evil man, though I made a mistake, there was nothing about it that repulsed God, that God wasn't repulsed from me, that it certainly would be nice to not have caused harm to anybody, but that God is using me now with Him and my son. To be real.

I think that's probably biggest lesson that I learned through all of that; to be genuine, to be -- it's okay to cry, it's okay to feel, and it's okay to be what you are and not be a phony baloney. I can have real empathy with people. Now that will tell you my boundaries there for a long time where extremely high, which I think is natural, and slowly but surely I've let my boundaries down a little bit more. I'm still real, I can get real triggered by women who exhibit borderline tendencies, cause they scare me. But just learning math. But the forest thing man was great for me, I mean I wrote some great stuff about the journey into the forest and the depths. I don't know if you ever listen to Joseph Campbell. Joseph Campbell has a great analogy. He's the guy who did all the stuff about mythology. And he said you know the great myth that most of us live is -- he uses the analogy of Star Wars. He says when man encounters the darkness in himself, and what he does with that, you know, like Luke Skywalker when he discovers that Darth Vader's his father and how he has to -- that's the defining point in a person's life, is when you encounter the darkness within yourself and where do you go with it. Which direction does it point you? Does it point you into a -- you know there's people who live their lives who are bitter and angry. And my mom, you know, she never could get over the affair that my dad had. Years later it warped her life. She could never get past that. But what happens when you encountered that dark spot? When you hit that darkness in you, and you see the imperfection in you, what do you do with it? Where do you go with it? How do you, that's the defining point, especially for a man. I don't think I ever felt like a man before than I have the last two and a half, three years since Carol's left.

J: You know you mentioned here something about where you began to feel reconnected with God, the real God. What can you tell me about God as you understand him now?

B: That I don't.

J: Go on.

B: That I don't. That I write since Carol's left, every year I write lessons learned from the previous year, and they're like 10 or 12 lessons. They're just for me, you know. I put them on my Facebook, just for my friends, and I keep my Facebook locked down so nobody can see it but the people that I let in. But one of the lessons that I learned about God was that I'm real careful when somebody tells me they know the will of God, and I'm really, really, really careful when I think I know the will of God. I think that God is beyond me. I think that God is God, and how dare I even pretend to understand the mind of somebody so much majestic and mighty. Now I can seek his face, which I do in prayer. And I can seek communion with him, but to understand him? Not a clue, not a clue. I don't even know, you know, and it's funny, because I've heard people say you know it’s the will of God oh halleluiah, I was out of money and my income tax came in and I can pay my bills
now, and that's the will of God, and I'm like, and if you had a car wreck tomorrow, what's that? Is that the will of God? I don't know. I've come to understand great peace in saying I don't know, I don't know. And you know, I don't know. I think that it's like the book of Job when he tells Job how dare you, how dare you question me and what I'm doing. Job endured all that suffering and so this was over a bet with the devil? And God says, you know what? I'm God and you're not. And that's what I've learned about God is that I don't know. I have, I do have some beliefs about Him, but I don't know his mind. I believe that he's forgiving and loving and wants what's best for us, and that he's with us through whatever we encounter. Now whether not he calls us it, or he allows it, or if it's the consequence of this or that or anything else, I think we can create a lot of turmoil ourselves thinking that this was the will of God, that this whole story of Carol was the will of God, and that this was the purpose of God, and maybe it was. I don't know.

J: This is a related question, but as you think of your spiritual life now as opposed to before this experience of questioning, what jumps out at you as the differences that the real meaningful differences?

B: Peace. Peace. Knowing that I don't have to fix everything that -- the fact that my son came to live with me was a great healing opportunity, he's been with me for two years. All the guilt that I experienced I probably have the greatest towards him, because he was the most affected by it, because he went from Carol to, you know he lived with me for the weekends. He had to live through the crap. And just the peace of not having to do that stuff anymore. Just, I don't, you know? And then I don't have to figure it all out. That the weight of the world is not on my shoulders, that I don't have to hang on a cross for anybody, that I've become a man that I'm pretty proud of, forgiveness I think to get past the shame, cause there is an incredible amount of shame involved with somebody like that. I mean the shame that she manipulated on me by cutting herself and that stuff was horrendous. The shame of being involved with somebody that was so screwed up, and then going back and forth and back and forth. The shame that the church imposed upon me, the shame that some of my own family members imposed upon me, that I still could not reconcile with. Don't know if I ever will. But to know that God still has me there somewhere. I heard a great analogy. It's like a thread in a tapestry, I don't know if you've heard that, that we're just a single thread in the tapestry, and it's not that we're not important because without that thread that tapestry's incomplete, but we're not the whole rug, either. But we forget that we're a part of this great design. And then I begin to see other men, and this was really ironic. I began to see other men that were, that had gotten involved with woman quite similar to Carol, and realized that I wasn't such a fool after all, that it was tragic, there was no doubt about, that but western I think western men are almost, some men are bred to take on that role of I'm gonna die for you in the name of love. Music is full of it, and movies are full of it. Everything you know everything you know Jenny and her romantic novels that's what it's full of, you know? And I understand that's not really what love it that love is, that love is a -- I have come up with a new thought for that. That I'm looking for a woman that I can go walking in hand in hand with through life, and that occasionally I may have to carry her, and occasionally she may have to carry me, but if I ever have to drag somebody, that's not a relationship anymore. And so I've become just a man that I've wanted to be for a long time. I'm better at my job. I've changed jobs. I got away from the hospital over there and reinvented myself in that way, and I'm more confident, and I'm more -- And the fears that I used to have, which are
Ironic -- I used to have some fears of my own; fear of abandonment, fear of growing old alone and stuff like that, they have pretty much vanished, and I've been -- I've learned to cook, I've learned to -- God I hate it, but I learned to iron. I've learned to maintain my own household, and I've developed great friendships now. You know I have a great friend in very deep intellectual ways, and there's no rush. And so it's just been a -- you know, I am so thankful for him. He could have taken that so many different directions. He could have done the empty chair thing. He could have given me some supportive psychotherapy. He could have gone over the inner child thing with me. But he didn't. He hit right at the core where I needed to be, which was you need to go and you need to deal with the dark side inside of yourself and to acknowledge it and not to run from it, and then to heal from it, to realize that you don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to die for somebody to heal, and Carol and I had almost an addiction. Somebody told me, and they probably were hit, I didn't like it at the time, but they were probably right on. They said you've traded one addiction of alcohol for another, Carol. It was like that. It was like an addiction, and I've been able, I don't, occasionally I'll talk to people about her, but I don't -- I mean, I wish her well, God bless her. I don't have any hard feelings against her. I know she's a very sick woman. She's going to have a hard time no matter what she does but I hope that she can somehow find healing. I know that she's not the person I want to be with. But I have no -- nothing really about her. I wouldn't want to have a conversation with her, but other than that. That's my story.

J: Well, thank you.
B: You're welcome. I hope it helps you.
J: I'm sure it will be very helpful.

Transcribed Interview—Camie

J: Go ahead.
C: Okay. So in 2004 I struggled with severe clinical depression, that's what I was diagnosed as by a licensed psychotherapist. Psychotherapy helped me tremendously deal with my life and move forward from a time in my life when I questioned life as it is.

J: Let me stop you there. Can you just tell me how long you were in psychotherapy?
C: I think about 8 months.

J: About 8 months okay. Was it with one therapist or multiple therapists?
C: It was with one therapist. My brother and I both went independently to the same person. So we both went to him, and we both had issues with our family and upbringing and such. So, yeah.

J: Okay great, go ahead.
C: Questions like: what is my purpose? Why am I here? And is there a point to life? For a while I would question if there is a God? And, if so, what the heck is the point of my existence for him or her or whoever that higher being of some sort maybe, or what we were taught is there's a God. For a while sometimes I felt that I was a joke and just a player in the scheme of things, as if life was just a game.

J: Okay, let me just ask you if you can tell me more about those questions; what brought them up for you? Whatever you can tell me about that experience of questioning like that. C: I had no vision, I had no guideline, I had no future. I could not see what I was doing in life and what my purpose was as that.
J: Yeah, so you had no sense of your purpose or what it was.
C: Direction.
J: No direction. Do you have, as you look back now do you have some understanding of what was going on for you then so that you felt that way?
C: I do as in clinically?
J: In whatever way.
C: Clinically, yeah, with PMDD and just being chemically off balance I think through medication I do feel steadier even more able to deal with everyday life, instead of being so the stressed out, and just stressing myself out about life in general and daily things just -- I mean, it was real bad where I would drive and I just -- I would get so frustrated and so mad just from the simple task of driving. And when I was riding the bus, I was crying in public, and that's when I knew, okay, I need to do something about this. So that's -- and just questioning why I was feeling that way and what in the world is going on.
J: Yeah, part of that you see is just a kind of a chemical thing, but feeling way overwhelmed, and really wondering why, why am I so overwhelmed? Is there anything else you can tell me about it?
C: No. Off the top of my head, no.
J: That's fine. Why don't you go ahead with the next one?
C: Okay, so with psychotherapy I was able to reach far into my past and take a look as to why I am the way I am and give more explanations for things around me. The therapy dealt with my childhood, adolescence, my early adulthood, and the dynamics of my family that in the end left me very confused, helpless and hopeless.
J: Tell me as much as you can about that process. You kind of summarize it there. Tell me, are there key moments that stand out as having made a difference?
C: Sure. My childhood was set in Iowa, and we went to the Catholic Church. Both my parents worked full time and my older brother kind of took care of us, me and my younger brother. So that's what I knew for a long time, and then I started getting into athletics, doing Taekwondo and gymnastics, and I got really good at gymnastics. So it was expected of me to do well. So I was on National Team for gymnastics, and people really thought, had high hopes for me and, I had to fulfill their hopes, basically. So I had a lot to live up to and a lot of pressure from my family and just the people around me. So when I didn't accomplish that, you know, I let everybody down, and it was -- so that kind of sucked.
J: Yeah. So that's part of what you're exploring when you were in therapy?
C: A tremendous amount of it, yeah.
J: Tell me how did that go? What did you guys talk about? What did you say?
C: Well, it's just, I don't even know. So much was expected of me and my whole life was people telling me what to do and how to do it and when to do it. So after adolescence and into adulthood I no longer had that, I no longer had that guidance, that structure. It was a free-for-all for me. I could do whatever I want, go wherever I want, when all I was used to having that structure and having that the repetition in my life. So I think that just, that pretty much broke the camel’s back kind of over-the-hill kind of thing that really tore me.
J: Tell me about that.
C: Just it's like night and day, you know? You have no time for a social life. You have no time for anything that I want, that I wanted personally, cause I always did everything as I was told. And this is the way my life is gonna be, and this is what's expected of me. And
so after that, when I decided that I couldn't take it anymore I was 17, and went back to school, had to catch up a year. And people looked at me different, cause I was a super athlete, but I lacked social skills big time because I was home-schooled for a couple years to train, and I just, I wasn't very likable I guess as in a social atmosphere. I didn't have many friends and such. So at 17 pretty much -- well at 16 is when I pretty much finished doing all of my athletics, doing gymnastics, and cheerleading, and platform diving. And went back into public school and just did like a complete 180 and started smoking marijuana. I got pregnant at 17. Got married, got divorced, and then graduated high school, in that order.

J: All? And when you were 17?
C: 17. Yeah. I got divorced when I was 18, but everything happened when I was 17. So it was just a big ball of hello here's the left curve ball. So it was completely from every day somebody telling me what to do into adult parenthood. There was no time for me to be a kid and have a life basically for myself as a kid should experience things. So that's what a lot of the therapy had to deal with, was being okay with my past and what has happened and moving forward from all the struggles.

J: What can you tell me about your therapist?
C: He was good. He was -- well, it's been like, what? 7 years? I liked him. He helped a lot. Tremendously, he helped. I wish I could have written down a lot more. He did -- there was a couple things that he taught me. One of the big ones was: it was okay to say no, and because I was always the one to say, "Okay let's do this." I mean, peer pressure, and besides the fact that I was always being told what to do. It was okay to say no. So that was like one of the biggest things that I learned from him was how to say no.

J: How did he teach you that? What did you see him doing that brought you to that point?
C: Probably just after a couple months, a couple sessions. I went at least once a week. If I couldn't make it that week I would go every other week. But it was -- I don't know if you just said it and it just made sense, or if I gave him hypothetical situations, he would say, "Okay, well you don't have to do that. It's okay. You don't have to fulfill or do this or need to do that because somebody says or that's what's expected of you." So that kind of opened a door for myself and it allowed me to make a decision, decisions for myself. So I thought that was pretty cool.

J: Yeah. There's also this part you talked about where you kind of went into your past and looked at things. Can you tell me about that? What role he played in you going back there, and how he worked with you in that process?
C: It's kind of my family. I have a lot of problems with my mom and my dad. They were married the majority of my life until I got divorced, they pretty much got divorced too. It's the same year. They're two different personalities. My dad's a funeral director and deals with the dead, and my mom's a labor and delivery nurse that deals with newborns. So it was beginning and end. My mom is a drug addict and she's just crazy. She's a functioning kind of Munchausen kind of person. She's always in the hospital, but you can't tell her, quit, stop doing it, because she really thinks something's wrong with her. And then my dad, my dad is just kind of there, kind of not there, in his own world. He's a very selfish person, and yeah. So yeah just between those two and dealing with my parents it was just a chaotic situation being raised.

J: Did you remember what happened in therapy that allowed you to explore that? Was it just, did you feel like you came in wanting to explore that? Was he kind of guiding you
back there, or how did that work?
C: Well I think he guided a lot of it. I think kind of he made the point that just because
my mom is the way she is, and the way that my dad, because the way that my dad is
doesn't mean that makes me-- a person-- it doesn't define me. But I still go to counseling
now. I still talk about these issues. As for the therapy that he -- he really put things in
perspective as in just how the past made its way all the way up, how I made it through all
that until now.
J: How you made it through?
C: Yeah. And how I dealt with it and how no matter if it was a good experience or bad
experience, it still happened regardless, and there's nothing really I can change.
J: Did you feel like that process somehow had something to do with the change that you
had in your religious beliefs?
C: It kind of put things to the side, religious beliefs to the side.
J: Tell me about it.
C: Okay. Well background, you know, being raised Catholic is kind of like: sit down,
stand up, kneel, sit down, stand up, kneel, and you just kind of repetitively go through
that. And then when I was 10, came here, went to Baptist Church and that was, it was
very I guess hoity toity. I'm kind of like: why are all these people so happy all the time.
And it was fake to me even at that age. I was like: why are these people acting so fake?
So that was an early bell in my head. I'm like, okay, this is weird. This whole idea of the
book and the Bible and these stories is when I started questioning. So in therapy -- well, I
think I might be jumping ahead.
J: Don't worry about it. Just, you know, don't worry about it.
C: So yeah, that was pretty confusing.
J: So that was some confusion that you brought into the therapy still? That confusion? Or
--
C: Yeah, and you know asking why do these things happen to me, and why is my life,
why am I here now? Cause it was a really, really bad time. I had bad relationships, and
just money issues, and living issues, just one issue after another after another. And it's
just kind of like, okay, well, why is -- that you always have those why questions. Why is
this happening? Or what's the reason? And because of the background, because of the
Catholic and Baptist, they say all these things and I still question the back of my head is
like, okay, well how do I know that that's true? Or, I don't see it. I don't see, I don't under
-- it's like a great idea and everything, but it's not applying to my life at all.
J: So when you were finding yourself in those questions about why am I here and what is
this all about, those answers that they gave were kind of in your head, but they weren't
satisfying you, they weren't working the way you wanted?
C: No, because the things in my life are my choices and it's my decisions and it’s all, it's
me that makes decisions. This is how I see it of course. But I'm the one that chooses
where to go and what to do. I can't rely on some other existence, some other person. I
can't blame a God. I can't ask a God. It's me that I have to ask. It's I that I have to blame
when I do wrong or I do right or such. So it really -- the therapy put my life in my
perspective as in I'm the one that has control and not anybody else. So that's kind of
where it's like I can't rely on something that I don't know is factual, cause I was thinking
about this the other day, the whole -- God to me is like karma and coincidences and the
afterlife, you don't know any of that for sure. It's not hard factual evidence. So I choose
not to question, because there is no hard evidence. And that science, you know, science has the hard factual evidence for the vast majority of research and such, so but there's no found answers for me in religion.

J: Did it feel like therapy helped you in coming to this new stance or this stance that you have now?
C: Yeah, and I'm okay with it.
J: Yeah. So tell me about how you got there.
C: You know what? When was I younger I felt really guilty for questioning it when I see -- cause I had family friends that I would go to church with. And I would feel bad for questioning the whole baptism -- when you choose to be it baptized -- in just a lot of the stories, just question the whole factual like how can that really happen? And I would feel guilty about not believing it and just seeing all the people around me believing it and happy and then here I am kind of like, well I'm not really happy, and I don't really believe it. So that could have been one of the rubber bands to the rubber band ball that just developed into the whole depression questioning life, cause it sucked, you know? It was, had suicidal thoughts, and just to end the pain, the pain of being so stuck, so, I mean life really sucked, but it was me that…

J: So I'm getting the feeling that part of what therapy did was it brought things back to you that you could understand what was going on in your life based on you and your choices and then your past and things that have happened. And those religious answers became put to the side. And by that you mean? What would you say you mean by put to the side?
C: That they can't be answered. They won't be answered. I think that once I'm dead either A I can know or B I won't know. So I'm not gonna worry about it now. I'm not gonna think --
J: So like you no longer had to worry or trouble yourself over those questions?
C: Right.
J: Okay. Let's go on. You have here that: "I was baptized Catholic."

C: I was baptized Catholic, went to Sunday mass until I was 9. At the age of 10 our family moved to Texas and began going to the Baptist Church as my, against my father's wishes.
J: Go on tell me.
C: He hated it.
J: Oh, he hated --
C: He hated it. He was just -- well first he hated Texas, and then second, he just, he thought that my mom was just -- you know, "What in the world are you doing to our kids." And it was bad. He maybe went once or twice, but he had high expectations for all three of us that we would all go to catechism and we would all abide by Catholic rules and we were gonna be raised that way. So it was very disappointing to him when we went to the Baptist Church.
J: What can you tell me about life as a Catholic, I would guess up until age 9? You already said something about what it was like. Maybe you can tell me more about that?
C: Well, yeah, it's just, it was funny, is going to the Catholic Church as a kid you always got to shut up, be quite, and the monotone da la la Latin or whatever they, the Bible verses, speaking in the monotone voice, and I would always be so bored. But the funny thing is once I got older, when I was in my 20's, I would go to the Catholic Church on
Easter and stuff, just for my dad, just to appease him. And the funny thing is, when I would go I would be so relaxed in the church. I was like, wow this is really nice. Even though, I mean, I would sit there in the church and I would think, oh this architecture's pretty. But these stories and these -- you know, they have stained glass windows that tell stories and you know verses from the Bible and such that depicts lambs or what-not -- and just thinking, well it's pretty stained glass, but the story's crazy.

J: So back then it felt crazy to you back then?
C: Yeah. It just didn't seem humanly possible. Well, that's not a good choice of words, but logical; it didn't seem logical at all. But --
J: Did you ever share how you felt about things? Did you feel like you had to keep that to yourself?
C: Yeah, I had to keep it to myself, definitely. My dad when he was a kid he did the whole Catholic up-bringing and that was what was expected of him. He was molested by the priest and he was molested by his Boy Scout troop leader in the '60's. So even with knowing that, my dad would always tell us kids that “no matter what nobody ever touches you.” So from his experience we learned through him that people just don't mess with you. People don't touch you, you don't talk to strangers, stuff like that. So even I mean that in some sort of weird way affects me too.

J: Tell me about it.
C: I mean how I mean my father was molested by a priest is just -- how does that work? How is that right? In any -- so why should we continue to, I mean, to me that should have been it. You know what I'm saying? Like if you see a troubled bridge and you cross it and you cross it and you cross it and then one day you fall through it, okay, did you learn your lesson? Or are you gonna keep going over that bridge, or are you gonna -- you know what I'm saying?

J: And so to you there's something that seemed troubled or unsteady or unreliable about the Catholic beliefs and part of it has had to do with your dad and part of it has had to do with just the way these stories felt and played out for you?
C: What happened to him being molested. So that was kind of a nice little, it's so weird with that (pointing to the recorder), because you feel like you have to say something. I don't know what it is.
J: You feel like you have to say something or what?
C: Or not, it's just like dead air.
J: Oh. Don't worry about the dead air. Don't worry about it.
C: So yeah, that was crazy. And then my mom, okay well my mom's just, she's just crazy. I love her to death, but, you know she's -- she was raped when my older brother was a toddler and so many things have happened to my mom that a lot of it's questionable. Like, obviously I wasn't there when it happened. I wasn't born and I don't know what happened, and in 1985 or so we had a house fire, and supposedly it was started one way, but who knows, and then after that she got into an accident at the apartment complex where she got a piece of like a half foot piece of rusty metal into the back of her leg, had to have surgery and surgery and surgery and nobody was there when that happened, so -- All these things, nobody was ever there, but all these things happened to my mom. We had another house fire in '90, and one time she was driving to work, she worked the night shift, and her cat had died, and she was pulled over by a cop that had one of those lights that go on top that you put on top. And she pulled over. Well, she got out of the car. She
didn't know why he was pulling her over, and he pushed her and stole the cat and the	rash that was in the back seat and took off. And you know she was bruised up, and I
mean, that's just to name a few. That's the gist of my mom is things happen to her, and, so
I don't want ever be anything like her.
J: Tell me more about that.
C: I don't know. She's just -- man, I don't know. How can I -- it's like I have to love her. I
do. But I don't ever want to have -- I'm so tired of her. She lives in Germany now, and I'm
just so tired of: oh this is wrong with me, or this is wrong with me. I swear to God when
she dies and they do an autopsy she's already gonna look like a Cabbage Patch. She's just
nothing I ever want to be. I don't know why she is the way she is, either. But, going back
to where I think it stemmed from was the whole rape issue. So both my parents come
from kind of a messed up sexual background, so that's just, it's not cool. It's like, why do
things like that happen? I don't know.
J: So you have these kind of tragic things that for you bring up that question I mean is
this really why do things like that happen?
C: Yeah.
J: Tell me about your mom's role in your religious life.
C: Well she was raised Baptist and she -- okay, I think my dad -- I don't know think he --
he might have questioned. But if he questioned he was probably punished and so he was
pretty much forced to believe. My mom she was raised Baptist so a little bit more on the
hoity-toity side and happier side, and I think she still questioned the stories. I know that
she knew like every verse as a kid of the Bible. She went to Sunday school with her
family and I think she enjoyed it and as she got older she kind of lost her sense, her
religious sense. I think even still now she believes in God and her own -- in her own
world I guess.
J: It's not a world that seems very -- well tell me about how you see her own world of
religious belief and God and all that.
C: I think she believes in that there is a higher being and that there is an after-life and that
there is a reason for all of us. However her bubble is just demented or twisted. I don't, I
can't really put the two together but my mom's crazy to say the least.
J: So I mean her religious world looks demented and crazy.
C: Well, her religious world?
J: Well I guess her world generally or something.
C: Her world in generally, yes, but her religious is, I wish, I almost wish she would
believe in it more and be more straight edged and be more abiding to that, as opposed to
all her self-induced whatever choices she makes, so --
J: Well it seems like maybe the experience that you were talking about earlier though has
been a pretty strong one for you and that is that seeing the experience of your parents
going through this sexual trauma, your dad especially going through that at the hands of
this priest, I don't know if there's anything else on your mind or anything you could tell
me about how that has affected you.
C: Well, okay, when I was 17 you know I still tried to participate in a Sunday program.
So I would go to the Baptist Church there in my town and every Sunday, if there was a
newborn, he would announce it, and everybody would say a prayer and bless him, bless
the child, the newborn child, and whatever. So when I had my son, the Pastor came up.
Was he a Pastor? They're Pastors, right? Baptists?
J: Yeah, I think they have Pastors, yeah.
C: Yeah, he came up to me and he said, "Oh is this your little brother?" And I'm like, "No this is my son." Because I looked like I was 12 having an infant. And he's just kind of like, "Oh." And that was it. There was no blessing. There were no congratulations and I think that was the last time I went to the Baptist Church. So that kind of, that made me less like going to church, even more so than I already did, cause I kind of didn't make myself as like I always told myself this is the good thing to do is to go to church and be a part of something positive. So after that it was kind of like alright now you know that's really when my life really started downward spiral with my son and growing up, getting divorced, moving on with my life. It's not that I got kicked out of my house, but I couldn't live there. So living an adult life from being told what to do every day to living on your own with a child is just night and day, and it was very, very hard. It was really hard. But I do, I do believe that I mean I can still remember almost 14 years ago that the Pastor just dismissed me for being, I was looked down upon. I was almost like people were ashamed I was a teenage parent, and it was kind of embarrassing. I mean what -- is that love? Is that how we're supposed to treat each other really? You know just because I'm not an adult still it's a human being and you can't bless my child? So I just, that was it for me.
J: And it sounds like you felt the way you're talking about now felt the same way for you back than at that moment you were kind of like this is it. Is that love? This is hypocritical. This is not-
C: It wasn't accepting at all and it just took all those questions, all those you know wonders and queries about the whole religious experience itself, the Bible, the stories. It really just closed the, it sealed the book. It was like --
J: That was it
C: That was it.
J: Why don't we, I know we can keep reading there. I think we're at the Baptist Church.
C: Against my dad's wishes the Baptist Church is when I began to question God. And the thought church, oh yeah, it was a whole marketing scheme to make people believe or reassure them that if you believe you will be taken care of financially, emotionally and physically and be blessed with a good life. That's a huge -- coming from no money to Texas, to my town especially, yeah lots of money and it is a very socially-driven monetary world, cause every Sunday they pass the basket around, pass the basket around, and it's like coming from -- I mean my parents always stressed that we were poor, that we were broke, always having financial troubles. And then coming to see all these really wealthy families, it was like, oh this isn't fair. Being jealous as a kid and it, yeah; it sucked as a kid seeing that. All these people that have the good life and here we are just struggling along and I say kind of like “okay why aren't we like everybody else.”
J: I guess the implication there is that there's something about belief and if you believe things are good and if you don't then things are bad?
C: Well, yeah, that's how was, if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior he will take care of you. I can just remember these words come from his mouth and I'm like wow, its crazy; just all the false hopes, promises.
J: It felt like false hopes and promises to you then?
C: Yeah. Well because I questioned it, yeah. Cause yeah even as I saw it you know I was like wow this is – I even could tell that it was marketing at that age. At 10, 12, 13 years old I'm like this is a whole money-making thing going on here. This is a business as I saw
it. I saw it as you give money and God gives you back and yeah, it didn't, well, one: we had no money so how could it give anything back. So that was difficult.

J: Now how did you feel about the fact that you were a person questioning back then? I think you've already kind of talked about this but maybe you can tell me more or just tell me again what was it like being the person there questioning?

C: You just keep it to yourself. That's all I could really do. And if I were to question -- one: most likely whoever I was questioning if I was my mom or my dad they wouldn't have the answer and they would just dismiss it or tell me not to ask questions like that, yell at me, or discipline me or something and get mad at me for not believing, and so it wasn't, I mean a big issue but you just kind of know not to question it.

J: So that was with your parents, did you ever have the inclination to share that with someone else; a peer or anyone else in the church? And if so what did you anticipate would happen if you did?

C: I don't know.

J: That's alright. It sounds like it was a long time ago. Maybe you can continue the: although I questioned...

C: Although I questioned the church and their practices I would continue to believe that there of is a higher power until I was in therapy. You know I did try in searching other avenues as in from Catholic and Baptist it's one God or the Virgin Mary. And outside of that you know as I, into my 20's I did question well what if there's multiple Gods? What if there's different kinds of Gods, you know, the Hindu Gods? And so I did learn not so much research but just kind of open. I was open to the possibilities that there was others. There is other higher beings, or maybe none at all, and I just kind of gave up.

J: Well you mention here that you believed in a higher power until you were in therapy. Did you feel like psychotherapy played a role in that, in that change?

C: Yeah. Like there was a higher power as in there is a reasoning, there is something that governs our existence in our life, but then in therapy it is, it comes down to me, and it's, I know it's a kind of, it sounds selfish but it's, I can't rely on anybody else or anything else.

J: Well what can you tell me about how you came to that point in how you saw your life?

C: I think --

J: In therapy, particularly.

C: In therapy, you know, we really took everything apart. Took every microbe bit and separated everything and looked at everything, and as I rebuilt myself I did it, I rebuilt myself without religion. I built it up on who I am and not who I was and kind of rebuilt my beliefs on my self and my future and where I'm going and I didn't include any religious avenues.

J: Why do you think it happened that way so that you didn't include those?

C: Maybe because of all the chaos, all the previous chaos. I didn't want to deal with it and I didn't want to continue questioning.

J: Did the subject of religion or what you believed ever come up in your discussions?

C: Not really. More or less just my upbringing in the religion up to that point.

J: So more in terms of your upbringing and things with your family and things like that?

C: Uh-huh (affirmative).

J: Did you remember any conversations with your therapist about that subject, about your family and your upbringing, your religious upbringing? Do you remember how those went or generally I mean what was said or how that played out in therapy?
C: It wasn't so much like a religious subject as more of my experience of my past, of my like things that we've talked about with my dad being Catholic my mom being Baptist and doing the whole upbringing but not so much as in do you believe now. You know? Cause they can only do so much. They can't --
J: They are?
C: The therapist. They can only do so much for you in guidance as in what you want to believe in. I'm sure if I said I want to believe in this, if I were, I want to believe in Judaism, I'm sure that he would have maybe given me the ropes but not necessarily taught me. Do you know what I'm saying? And like -- but I didn't. I didn't want to continue being categorized as a religious person in the sense of Catholicism or Christianity or anything.
J: That's not what you wanted.
C: Uh-uh (negative).
J: And I guess as, I'm just wondering if you can give me any sense for how what it was like when you would talk about your religious upbringing? I mean what was your therapist role? How did he respond to what you bring to him?
C: How did he respond? Well I think he responded to how I responded as in you know if I found something hilarious as in the whole chaotic situation, I think he would laugh at it too. But if I found the situation as in, does that make sense? Does it?
J: Yeah, it does.
C: He went along with it. He didn't necessarily -- if I wanted to -- I forgot what I was gonna say.
J: He went along with it, if you wanted to something -- in some way that he was meeting your feelings that you were bringing in and going with you where you took it.
C: Yeah, if I saw something was ridiculous he would agree or understand. He did a lot of understanding. He's like, "I understand what you're saying." And that was the cool part, just to actually have somebody understand what my thoughts are.
J: Tell me what that was like.
C: Because to have so many, it was just a roller coaster. It was really a roller coaster of emotions and questions and he was there for it all. He was there with me. He never did say, well I don't get it. I don't understand what you're saying. He always tried. He was always listening and understanding of -- and then even on top of that he would give me questions that I would ask myself that I could answer to help better understand me.
J: Did you remember a question like that that he once gave you?
C: Just well of course I did, "Well how does that make you feel?" No, not in particular.
J: That's okay.
C: Not in particular when it comes to religion or any -- it could have been a scope of things.
J: But there was this feeling of being understood, that the questions weren't incompressible? That he was --
C: Or ridiculous.
J: Or ridiculous.
C: I wasn't crazy, and really did make me feel okay to question, to have feelings of erratic behavior.
J: And it sounds like what you've been saying is there is some part of you that really wanted and needed, or really needed to go in the direction you went and his role was to
kind of affirm you, understand, follow you and kind of help you through that process.
C: Absolutely. He was a third party. He was somebody completely outside of my realm as most therapists I would think are. They have nothing to do with your family, nothing to do -- my brother did go to him, but we would never talk -- my brother talked about, of course, but he was always somebody there that I could always go to. He wasn't a friend. He wasn't a family member. He was this person that anything in my life I felt completely free to ask him, to talk to him, so that was great. That was a great -- because I've always had those coaches, and I've always had my parents that are higher above me, but he helped me. He was there with me by my side. So I mean it was great. If I didn't go to him, I'm sure I just, I would have continued drinking, doing drugs and just not caring and would not be where I'm today, because I did, this was before I went -- decide to go to school, before I decided to go to college. At that point I was like questioning what in the world am I doing with my life, it was going nowhere and he really did say, "Well if you want to go to college, you can go to college. There's nobody that says you can't go to college." And I was under the impression that, well I'm 24 years old. By the time I get my degree and go to dental school I'm gonna be 32 which is way old, so it's like I'm already past my prime, so everything is negative. Everything, my life just sucked and he really kind of made it okay, and I did realize that age is age, yeah, but if I want to do it I can still do it, it's up to me. So he helped me out a thousand percent. I'm really grateful and thankful for my brother paid for me to go, so I'm pretty thankful for my brother. But yeah, I'm not sad about losing the whole religion. When I was younger I was kind of not so much embarrassed, well yeah embarrassed, yes. I felt like I would disappoint people that I didn't have any sort of religious background or believe anything but I'm okay with it now. I'm in a much better place; okay with life now then --
J: And it sounds like you felt that therapy part of what helped is it helped you get to that point where you felt okay with your own questions or doubt or just not believing it. How else would you think it or any other ways? We've kind of talked about just having that understanding, having someone that any thoughts feelings were okay, where allowed. There was also this part where you felt like you could put those questions aside and that was okay, that you were able to rebuild yourself without the religious part of things or God or any of that as a way to explain things.
C: Yeah, it's not a prerequisite that you have to have religion in you, for you, for your life. And I felt that it was for a long time, that in order for you to be a good person you need to have some sort of belief, and now I'm okay with putting it all behind me and just continuing with life and going forward. You only live once.
J: Maybe we can continue with; psychotherapy analyzed...
C: Psychotherapy analyzed my life experiences and I was able to cope with the past. As for the future, it lies in my own hands, my decisions and choices. I cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are but I choose my future. I control my destiny. I choose to categorize myself as an agonistic, which, okay, I find out, I might find out there is a God or gods after I die, or I might not.
J: What was it like to be in the process of change? From what I'm hearing it's not as if your religious change was the focal point of what was going on. There's a lots of change going on, but particularly with that religious change that you went through, what was it like for you to be in that process?
C: I think the worst part is letting my dad down is cause my dad had high expectations
and expected us to be Catholic, raise our kids as Catholic, get married in a Catholic Church, and he expected that, and even, we don't talk about it now but even if we were to I know that he would still be disappointed that I don't believe. That's the only part that I, so --

J: Do you remember letting him know that for the first time? Do you remember?
C: No, he really doesn't, we just don't talk about it.
J: So it just kind of happened and there was never a time that you talked about it? What do you think going on so that you don't talk about it? Not that you have to but I'm wondering what do you think keeps you from talking about it?
C: Because it would probably stir the pot. It would create conflict or discussion that doesn't necessarily need to be brought up.
J: How did you imagine that discussion would go?
C: I know he would start crying and he would, cause he's already said before that he wishes that we never moved to Texas, and he wishes that -- that was when him and my mom got married that was the point was to have kids and raise them in the Catholic Church and he -- we all failed at that. Not just him, but we all failed. We didn't -- as kids we didn't continue. Because we were kids, we didn't want to go to church. We wanted to go to video games or watch cartoons. And my mom, she didn't enforce it. She was just kind of, whatever. So my dad is just, he would start crying because he was so completely devastated that it didn't turn out the way --
J: As you were going through this, as you were in therapy and you saw yourself changing in some way with regard to your religious beliefs, was that an anxiety for you how your dad would see it?
C: A lot was an anxiety for my dad. The religious aspect of it, yeah, but not so much because I think we had prepped for quite some time with the whole change and everything. So I knew that he would be disappointed but I can't make things better.
J: You're already heading in that direction and so it wasn't as bad as it would have been if it was kind of a sudden thing. What else can you say about what it was like to be in that process where you were changing?
C: Well it didn't happen just over those 8 months. And even now I still take a step back and analyze a little bit. So I can't say it was just at the 8 months, 9 months that I was in therapy that completely changed my life, because you know even 25, 27 years old I'm still making bad decisions but realizing decisions and changing them and moving forward and making the right decisions is a good gist of a good part of it. Was that the question?
J: I'm not sure; I think I was just kind of saying what else you could tell me about what that process was like for you? It sounds like you're saying it wasn't just that, it wasn't the only place where things changed. I'm still changing, I was changing before. But in that part of the change, that little chunk of time where you were changing, what else can you tell me about what it was like, what your responses were, how you were feeling, what you were thinking about those changes?
C: You know, whenever I would go, I would always have something to talk about. And during the hour and a half, two hours that we would talk I would cry and let it out and we would talk and I would leave feeling better, and there was always something small, no matter how small it was always made me feel better like okay, just, I never left thinking, I never left there worse than how I had entered that place. So I think little by little by little it just gradually, things just started making more sense. It was okay. I was okay with life.
J: Good. There's a passage here: "That as for the future, it lies in my own hands, my decisions and my choices. Cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are, but a choose my future, I control my destiny." I don't know if there's anything you can say about what -- it seems like that is an important theme in your story I guess, is something that comes up. What can you tell me about why that's important, and how you came to that view? And --

C: Well, how I came to the view is just the whole rebuilding and experience from therapy is just moving forward, and I have some friends there in a band and they always think that someday they're gonna make it big. Someday they're going to make it big. Well they're not gonna make it big until they make it big. They got to apply themselves. They can't just play music and let it happen to them, so that's kind of the same way I feel about my life. I can't just let life happen to me. I got to make it happen. I can't say, well God's gonna take care of me so I'm just gonna be here and rely on him or her, but it's me, I'm the one that makes, that goes forward, and nobody else.

J: Anything else you can tell me about your current kind of stance in terms of your beliefs about religious things or God or higher powers?

C: Well the whole Middle East is just crazy. But no, I'm sure that once I leave later today I'll be like oh I should have said that. I should have said that, I should have said this.

J: Anything else you can say about how you feel about where things stand for you in terms of what you believe? Or I should say how do you feel? Maybe you're repeating yourself but just humor me. How do you feel about where things stand in terms of what you believe?

C: How do I feel? Maybe not 100% completely okay with it, but I'm in the 90's% okay, believing that it’s okay that there is no other, cause sure, there's always gonna be that little bell in the back of my head like, hey it's me over here, and like questioning, well there's a God, or not, but I'm okay with it.

J: So the 90% and you're okay with what's left over, can you tell me a little bit more about that 10%?

C: The 10%? Well, what if I'm wrong? What if I'm wrong and there is a God and you know get up there and he's like: what were you thinking? Why didn't you trust in me? And I'll say: Look how crappy it's been. It's a joke. What I've had is a joke. Why would you do that to somebody, all the crap that I've been through? You know that's not very nice. So he's, I mean, if they say he is what he is when I get up there if there is a heaven, then okay. He should be accepting of me, because I'm one of his kids or whatever, but he's given me the shaft, and I've needed, without that therapy, oh man I'd be horrible. I'd be really bad off, and even now it's hard. I've been sober for two weeks. Not a single cigarette, no alcohol. Prior to that I drink once a week but it's like a binge, and that's not even right, you know? Like I -- it's frustrating because why can't I -- if I'm in his hands, why can't I just have one or two drinks and that would be it? The same with any alcoholic, and that's mean.

J: Tell me more. Whatever comes to mind, tell me more.

C: That's a mean thing to do. Why can't I have the control? If there is a God, why didn't he give me the control to have just two dinks and quit and that's it. No, not me. It's me that says, no more Camie. You can't have any more. It's not God. It's me that says you can't drink. And I'm the one that chooses not to drink anymore. I can't drink because I'm the person that once I have two I might as well have ten, and so
it's me that controls that. If God loved me he -- no, no, no. Maybe -- I don't think that
that's the way I would have -- it's just not normal.
J: Not normal?
C: Drinking like that. I mean I know people do, but why can't -- I mean, I want to be a
good person, and but drinking like that, I can't be a good person. It screws up so much of
my life. It screws up my relationships, my money, my time, my day, my health. You
know drinking is bad, but it's fun, you know?
J: Part of the way it sounds or part of what I hear you saying is: so there's that part, that
10% or whatever it is in the back of your head that says, well what if there is a God, and
what then? And part of your response to that is to say that things -- I've been given the
shaft. Things have been so bad, if you were real, and you were there and you want me to
believe in you then there should have been some kind of way of intervening in some
helpful way in my life. And the fact that that hasn't happened stands as some kind of
indication to you that things really are up to you?
C: Yeah absolutely. You know I made the choice at 17 to have sex, and I had a child. So
maybe that is his way of intervening and saying, okay, well now you're a mother, you
need to be responsible, and have this beautiful child now, which is cool and great and
groovy and everything, but then back to this, the whole Baptist thing, looking down, not
blessing my child? That's just like, that's a joke you know, it really is. I can't win for
loosing or whatever that saying is.
J: Say more about what you mean.
C: I can't no matter how hard I try I can't, I couldn't get ahead. No matter how hard I tried
to believe that there is a higher power that's there for us. It never was. It was never there.
It comes down to me making the decisions. There is nothing else. I can't -- there's nothing
else that helps but me.
J: Well is there anything else as we've talked and as we talked about this story for you,
anything else that comes up as being important or something that I should know about so
that I understand this story?
C: No, but like I said, I'm sure there will be something.
J: Well, I'm sure there will be, too. Well, thank you.
C: Thank you.
Appendix B

Edited Syntheses with Meaning Units

Edited Synthesis—Angela

I just have always been very, very spiritual person. Even as a kid I think I was preoccupied with these existential issues. I think I accepted really early. I got baptized at 10. It’s just always been there.

I grew up in a very religious family and my Dad is a minister.

I just I thought that adds background in terms of how the level of involvement my family is in. So I mean growing up there were times where we were at church, like every single day of the week. It was ridiculous. I actually think you can overdo it.

There was a time when I was 17 and I can remember we got to church at 7 a.m., because my Dad was an Elder. So we were the ones that put the lotion in the bathroom, put the hymnals out, turn the AC on and got everything ready. So then there’s the study part in the morning, then divine hour, then the whole service, potluck. Then there’s like some kind of prayer thing going on. We’re there all day and then there is Vespers to close out at the end of the day. Then there was like an Elders meeting, of course my Dad was in that. Then we’re renting the church from another church of another denomination, so we have to clean up. I remember us helping clean and clean out the trash and clean out the bathroom and vacuum out the sanctuary, and leaving like at 12:30 Midnight. And I was a teenager; I told my Dad I really hope somebody somewhere is writing down brownie points because this is like ridiculous.

A lot of people I knew growing up like that, that their parents were like that; they’re not even in the church. Like they’re very, it was just too much for them. I just felt like that was important. My Dad can also be very critical and kind of overbearing about beliefs and things. So I felt like it took me going to college to finally feel like I owned my own spirituality, it really did.

Well I know of people. When I just think of families that were ultraly conservative with their kids and overly involved in church that their kids kind of had this point where they just went buck wild. It’s like over, especially in the adolescent years if you’re living that kind of lifestyle in a small, religious community it can be the same impact as overcorrecting a car. Like when the slightest amount of freedom…like for a prime example, I knew a girl that I grew up, somewhat around the time-- once again my Dad was an Elder at that time. Her parents were very strict, some of it might have been cultural, but they were very involved. In her first semester of college she got pregnant. So just stuff like that where…

It means a couple of things. It definitely set very clear picture in my mind of what I don’t want my life to be like. In terms of especially when I do parent and have a family, how I expose my children to spirituality. I’m also very sensitive to like certain types of people
like within my own religious community. Like people that are-- like I think every religion has a continuum with it so there are people that are more liberal or conservative. I can like sense those types of people a mile away. Like I become extremely reactive and just angry if they try to approach me. I don’t know if in your church that you have people that are like self-proclaimed, ultra devoted and they always have some freakin’ book that they’re giving people or want people over to study, people like that just make me want to just go off. Like I can’t deal with them, just like no.

I think I always was that way about that part.

I grew up in a very religious family and I was a very spiritual person. My religious upbringing was too demanding and it led me to develop a different personal spirituality than my family and to develop sensitivities to certain people in my religious community. Part of what I developed was anger toward individuals who are overbearing in their spirituality, like my father. I have felt this way separate from the influence of therapy.

I had three years of therapy slash counseling at my undergraduate university.

During my fourth year of graduate work I entered individual Psychodynamic focused psychotherapy with a master’s level therapist.

I guess I tried not to make a big deal about it at first (Masters Level) and I felt okay with it. But I guess as therapy progressed on through the year, I kind of wondered about her competence or if I would get better therapy with a doctoral level therapist.

Well I think it was related to that in a way that um this person, this woman was much older and I just felt like that competence would be related to how issues of difference are dealt with, especially in terms of um…yeah just being sensitive around issues of difference, which I think spirituality is one of those.

I mean I just wondered, I mean that she was probably at least in her 60s and I wondered what cultural or multicultural competence training looked like at that time

for her and if she had much experience working with people with issues of difference.

Well I guess when I would talk about just church or my church family, the way she would emphasize about, so you found that to be supportive to you? It was like in this cliché kind of way and umm… It’s hard to explain…

I mean it was, I know she didn’t really, well I can’t say “know“ because I didn’t know her like that; but I just felt like it’s like that kind of neutralizing statement that people make, but not really knowing what it really means to the person.

I felt that my psychotherapy experience called into question several issues related to religion spirituality and my practice of faith.
Two major issues I will take a leap of sharing, the first involves sexual purity, as Biblically defined as abstaining from sex until marriage. At the time of this psychotherapy I was in a close two-year relationship with a young man of my own faith. We were having challenges because of our sustained long-distance -I being in Chicago and he in North Carolina- status. My therapist inadvertently communicated to me that she thought our decision not to live together prior to marriage and to work hard at abstaining from sex was rooted in some psychopathology. More specifically her line of questioning was directed at assumptions related to my being repressed or over controlled.

Just kind of her trying to emphasize that sexual feelings or sexual intimacy is important or a normal part of a relationship. Almost I felt like she was trying to make me more well rounded into this area or domain in my life that wasn’t really…I don’t know I guess she didn’t think I was functioning in that area.

Or maybe I need to rethink about it, especially, you know, my being upset about finding out about my boyfriend’s habit. She kind of, it really took from me kind of the right to feel upset about it. So I kind of stopped talking to her because she was almost kind of “Well maybe that’s his way of like dealing with the fact that you guys aren’t being intimate and maybe that’s you know functional- or not functional but an adaptive way for him to…”

It kind of just made it seemed like it just took the steam out of my, not my- because I wasn’t trying to make an argument, but just it just undermined it.

She never said that, no, she never said those words (repressed & overcontrolled). But I definitely feel like that was a…I guess I worried if she was going to think that and the way she responded, the things that she said kind of made me to believe that okay she is probably is seeing it this way.

It probably kept me from being as genuine in therapy. Then I feel like sometimes I’d think about it after the session was over and feel mulling over…

Well you know am I being too repressed or this really that being of a deal as I am making of it to make a decision based on something that I believe?

How much of deal I would make out of the whole porn thing with my ex or, you know should I let it go and just not really make an issue of it?

…I just kind of made a decision to just not to talk about certain things that much.

Well not a lot of things, but I just kind of stopped going into that whole area.

I just didn’t want to be judged by her or invalidated what I was thinking.

Ultimately this led to her not expressing any concern at my distress in discovering my boyfriend’s frequent use of Internet porn.
Well I said any concern, maybe that’s too strong of a statement, but it just wasn’t, it was very brushed over. I think she rushed passed my feelings about it to get to this thing about, well maybe this was his way of having that release since you guys are not doing whatever umm...

(What were you feeling about his porn habit?) At first I really didn’t have, I kind of just didn’t say anything I just kept it all to myself because I really didn’t want to shame him or anything. Then I just, I guess later on as we started having other issues, you know in the back of my mind I was wondering about when he was doing that or how it was impacting us, or different ways that I felt like it was. So um… I think I felt disgusted and I just was really, I guess kind of hurt about it. And then, you know, from her, I don’t know if I wrote in here, but his therapist also said some undermining things that he would bring into the discussions we had and you um… yeah.

Well no, I really didn’t tell him how upset I was about it and I didn’t really say anything about it for at least five months or longer. Then I don’t remember what brought it out… well what brought it out is he very critical of me in terms of some of my where I am in my walk, kind of thing and not very patient. Sometimes I use profanity and that was like this big issue to him. I felt like there was this other secret thing that was way more of a problem in terms of, like a compromise on the quality of our relationship. So I really just didn’t have any reactions. I didn’t share any. I didn’t know how to react actually.

(Your faith’s stance on porn) Well I mean it is both, it’s not supported. It does, it’s kind of… it’s not condoned, not supported and so, its a violation of our trust, of our relationship. There’s that and in terms of our relationship it undermined trust and then I would worry about things, about, you know, is it going to be a problem after, like if we were to get married is this going to be a problem, is this an addiction? I just didn’t know how big of an issue it was for him.

His therapist actually told him that we should reconsider our decision not to become sexually active until after marriage and normalized his use of porn- And also that we should, I didn’t write this in here but, the whole reconsider if we should live together too. Although this behavior was distressing to us individually and as a couple, so the whole part about what he’s doing.

I don’t even know. When my boyfriend told me this part that his therapist was telling him, it was almost like he just said in this way, like “well my therapist said we should reconsider blah, blah, blah” and then like left a question mark. Then I thought that, okay now he’s starting to think this. I was just scratching my head about so many different things. The part about him normalizing his use of porn, he never explicitly told me that he was doing that, but I just knew because of the way he would talk. I just felt like he was getting justified on the other end in terms of what he was doing… Because he’s basically telling me you guys should live together. Basically told him you need to really think twice and really reconsider about ya’lls decision not to be sexually active. I’m like, if he
thinks that’s okay then he obviously…I felt like I was probably being demonized and your girlfriend is trying to keep you from expressing yourself sexually and she has an issue and all of this other kind of stuff.

Yeah, he would never tell me that, but just the longer he was in that therapy the more excuses he came up with for what he was doing. His therapy was not leading him trying to act in a way that was more congruent with his belief or our belief as a couple.

Just really upset, it became such an issue that I was like I’m not willing to get engaged, and we had talked about that, because like I said I didn’t know what the implications this could be on marriage and I really didn’t know…I mean I don’t really think magically about marriage, like people just drastically change and I’m not going to try to change a man. We had watched this seminar thing called “Fire Proof” and it’s about like infidelity. Talking about, kind of like marriage and even we watched the video, this man was married and part of what he did was he got rid of his computer until he got control of it and he thought that was like overboard what the guy did. So it was different ways that it popped up that he would agree with me that it was a problem, but the way we qualified the problem or the seriousness of it was way different. I guess he thought it was like a $2.00 offense and I thought it was like a $150,000 kind of thing.

Yeah I was very un-in touch with how angry I was about it and it would only be in the context of an argument when I really got provoked that I would blow up about it. I would feel more guilty about bringing it up because I felt the way of the context and the way I brought it up wasn’t fighting fair, but it was an underlying thing for me. I was feeling really sad about it and you know it made me wonder intimate things about what we did do, like what was on his mind and that kind of stuff.

It’s hard to say which part if it I was more angry about…Maybe like this, well I guess for it to be more of an issue I felt like I wasn’t worth it to him. He didn’t think highly enough of me to stop doing it. I’m having a hard time describing it, but the thing that bothered me was; it was this private thing, secret thing that was wrong was okay, but as long as other things that other people saw, those things needed to be kind of in order for him…

I don’t know, I guess I just felt kind of hopeless and kind of a shrugged shoulder kind of reaction, like “oh well” it didn’t- you know just whatever. The whole reason why I was keeping it to myself in the first place probably. In terms of telling him how upset I was about it, because his reaction would be a lot of remorse of shame and it would make me feel guilty, like I’m making him feel this way.

Just not heard, like just unheard and in this bubble where, just like the weight of what I was dealing with didn’t really click for her.

The second issue has been most painful for me and is ongoing. During my work I disclosed a substantial history of neglect and physical/verbal abuse that I and my three siblings experienced growing up. My therapist pushed me to explore what anger I might have toward God for allowing these things to happen.
…She kept trying to, she would ask questions about or just parallel like, well your parents failed you like God did, or something like that. She would draw these; I guess her interpretive statements would kind of include some of this. Like her elaborations on what I was saying.

Yeah, just like I said the things that I remember most were just comments like, “well God failed you too,” “God didn’t protect you, just like your parents didn’t protect you” that she would say. I didn’t want to be resistant to them so I would just kind of either nod, kind of passively agree, but not really. I just tried to stay away from that.

because if I was being resistant then I’m not doing the work that I was suppose to be doing in the therapy.

J: So there is something about what therapy, where the expectations there, where you had to kind of comply with what she thought or not fight against it.

A: Yeah or at least being open to exploring that’s a possibility.

I mean to me I just wanted to feel like I am doing a worthwhile therapy, just not paying for doing nothing. I don’t know what it really meant to her, she probably would have just said it again or found a way to come back to it, but she was not very confrontive. She wasn’t very pushy, some therapist are very pushy, she wasn’t very pushy or confrontive. So it’s not like she interpreted every single thing. Another therapist might have went even farther with that.

my therapist pushed me to explore what anger I might have toward God for allowing these things to happen.I really don’t know how to articulate how this impacted me, my faith and my relationship with God.

It’s just a lot and I just feel like I went through a lot with that, I just get overwhelmed when I think about it.

First, I don’t blame my therapist, I was already angry at God and I knew it.

Yeah, I mean the thing I have to say I always remember growing up that older people, like old people and my parents would always say you don’t question God, you don’t be angry with God, you know “God is Just” and all this stuff. It wasn’t until I got older in college and had my own- started coming into my own with my own experience that I kind of learned that it was okay in my book to have those negative feelings about God especially. So yeah I was and I just tried to ignore it or not. I mean there are a lot of questions that would pop up, but you just kind of ignore them because either it’s irreverent to go there or it just doesn’t feel helpful.

Irreverent and I think very scary in the sense that, well like desperate. Like if what I believe isn’t true or there is some flaw with this, you know what do I believe or what’s
going to happen? Like falling out of a skyscraper, like there’s just nothing stable anymore…

I mean just stuff like if somebody has a guardian angel, what was the angel doing while this person was being abused? Because that was another thing as a kid, as always God is watching you, there is a recording angel noting everything you are doing. Or you know, where was God? And everything happens in God’s divine will, but he didn’t will these things to happen. Um there was something else I was going to say…

I used to ask my parents too, “Why did God create Satan?” In my faith, before, he was a good angel before everything went bad, so why would somebody all-knowing look down in time and know this is going to have a bad outcome and then make this person or make this being? Stuff like that.

Yeah, I wouldn’t really think about it or try not to think about it. It’s just something you can’t integrate, it doesn’t make sense basically.

But she called in to question the justice of God and compared his failure to protect me as a child to that of my human parents.

I don’t think she knew that all of that was there, but…

It wasn’t like being confronted, like walking and realizing, oh there is a wall in front of me. It was more like you know you plant a seed and even if you don’t think that you think very highly of your therapist, like those things are inside of your head kind of going around. I guess I just felt like well I’m being confronted with or I guess I’m running from and been ignoring, I can’t run from and ignore these questions anymore, like they’re in my face now, or my anger about this.

I don’t know I just got really in touch with how angry I was about God and was just really enraged and… That’s pretty much it.

This experience in therapy was a huge part of what I can only explain as an existential crisis.

Because it’s not really resolved. I don’t know. It’s not resolved and it’s not like something that can be fixed, I just felt really in turmoil and just confused, I think.

Well I mean that’s how it is in your heart and in your mind, you are still a part of this community of people and so you just kind of go through the motions. I would just find myself just sitting in church getting really angry because of things that I would hear and just feeling like want to shout that this is a “bunch of bull shit.” The only reason why I kept going is because of people, like my church family and I knew they really cared about me and they were a tremendous support because I was not, I didn’t have family there. But you don’t talk to other people about it because they won’t either relate, and I just couldn’t go through having someone else give me some stupid, over simplified thing
like John 3:16, well you know “God never gives you more than you can bear” something really…People that haven’t been through this don’t understand it. I think that is the only way I can explain it.

J: So it feels like the people at church really can’t understand it, at the same time there’s something about feeling like also they are this family, this source of support and love. That’s part of what kept you going back, or you said I guess the only thing that kept you going to church.
A: Yeah, it was just like the familyfellowship and friendship….

Yeah, just wondering how it was going to resolve, how it was going to impact me being afraid of, “oh no, does this mean I’m becoming an atheist or something?” Which I’m not, but just like I said somewhere towards the end about feeling like a doubt of my own loyalty to what I believe in.

What would it mean to be disloyal?
A: Um, I don’t know why I keep thinking about the word “ungrateful” that is just what comes to mind.

The ungrateful part was more about something that you were asking me, something about, I guess just what it means in this process of having the questioning going on. Especially the anger towards God.

To God

I don’t have any proof to back up the justice of an all knowing, all powerful God who can’t protect three and four-year-olds. I don’t ignore the questions I have, I just live with them being unanswered. I believe a text in the Bible that says something to effect of: “each person is given a measure of faith.”

It’s just like each person is born with, given like…when they come into the world each person has a portion of faith that they have.

J: So umm, placing of faith, what do you mean?
A: Just deciding to believe in something, even though the only proof of it is your experience of that. Like there is no empirical evidence of some things.

And say you decide to believe that.

Because then it’s like if you don’t choose to use it appropriately, it’s your fault. You were given faith, but you just chose not to use it or place it in the right thing. I guess other people, you could call it optimism or hope.

I believe some people decide to have…invest or place their faith in science and evolutionary theory, Buddhism or the worship of ancient ancestors. I don’t think that
placing my faith in a man immaculately conceived 2000 years ago, crucified and now risen is any more absurd than the belief systems that I just referred to.

Um, yeah being throughout just my whole process of being in grad school I came to realize as a process of socialization, you are being socialized into a field or a practice. It’s like the pendulum is swung to the other end of the extreme. You know if you are a person of faith and you say that in a class people will assume that you are going to be biased in how you are, like at your practicum or have concerns about how you are.

I have heard negative and things that are probably, I consider blasphemous things said by peers and professors and it wasn’t until my fourth year that I disclosed that I was a religious person in my school. That’s kind of like a personal background… Then my own questioning that came up, I do just sit and kind of just said some of these things to myself, “ok, do you actually believe this?” Just think about how it sounds like a fairytale, this person born doesn’t have any earthly…that’s pretty farfetched. I just really kind of thought about just concrete factual, non-facts that are apart of my belief system, but this time as a distant, like as an outside person looking at those things. It’s like, that does sound kind of out there.

J: Is there some experience you’ve had where you’ve been lead to feel that maybe that was the case, that maybe that was an absurd belief?
Well the personal part about it, the part about God and the anger. Then what I didn’t write about in there too is that…she brought up -- one of the examples you were asking for was that God expected me to forgive. There’s something about forgiveness because my Dad asked forgiveness for something in a very insincere way. So just these opposing views or ideas that just don’t go together. I guess she would highlight those, I don’t know why, just highlighting the conflict, or I don’t know. But that’s what happened.

J: The opposing views? What were the opposing views again?
A: Ok that God could be just and caring, but still allow those things to happen. But then still expect you to forgive somebody that did something to you that is not even sorry. It’s kind of...

My whole experience in psychotherapy and process of questioning my faith has left me with this question, “What’s the better alternative?” “What other God, deity or power or system of symbols or rituals better answers the question of why?”

Just why did I have the experiences that I had growing up, why there is there evil in the world, why is there injustice?

I have studied other religions and there are no better alternatives. Regardless of whom I pray to tonight a child will starve to death tomorrow, an innocent man will go to prison, a woman will be raped. But I can sleep with a peace of mind that I believe in something that God’s word promises to be eternal.
Well what I understand about what I’ve been taught about faith is that, that’s just how it works. You just believe that it’s God’s word and because it is God’s word it is true.

That he is a loving God, that there is a better life, that evil won’t prevail in the world…

If at the end of life I find that I believed a lie, at least I would have lived believing in something. This is where I am and I admit it is extremely over simplified, but I don’t know any other way to reconcile this or make sense of it.

J: So you feel like that’s oversimplified?...
A: Kind of? I don’t know.

Because it’s like that thing about loyalty again. You know I remember when I was like 13, I went through a period of questioning. And I actually told my parents that I didn’t want to go to church anymore. Probably a lot of teenagers say that to their parents and of course parents that are really religiously convicted, it’s like well as long as you are under my roof we all go to church. But my mind of reasoning that I told them was that, I said that I feel like religion is like painkillers. Like Advil is better than Tylenol according to Advil commercials and Tylenol is better than Aleve and Aleve is better than Motrin. It’s just like, I told them…I said I feel like I don’t know what’s true and I feel like the only reason why I believe what I believe is because it’s all I’ve been exposed to. I want to take a break from this so I can see what… like find out what, try to think about it some other ways. I was just trying to figure something out basically. I think my Mom’s response was, well the best way to do that…well you still have to go do church and ask the pastor questions and talk to us. But they wanted it to be this guided process, not--which didn’t happen.

My question and my loyalty about this being at this point where it’s oversimplified is, am I just here because I don’t know something else? Am I ascribing to this just because I don’t know something else or am I ascribing to this until I feel like a better option walks by? Which means I’m not really committed to it.

my motivation for remaining true to it. What is my motivation?

Um… I don’t know. I guess this whole process probably isn’t good because people--your worldview needs to be stable. And if you undo this big a part of your worldview then how do you fix that? So, I don’t know.

Well where I am is the best that I could do with it, I guess for right now.

In an attempt I contacted an old religion professor from college. This experience caused serious doubt in the mind of my ex about my commitment to God slash our faith and also lead me to question my own loyalty to God and my own faith.

The questioning because I told him about it and I didn’t want to pray for a long time and or it was just very distant, and he knew because we would have devotion together.
Well it undermined, I guess or lead a lot of questionings like I said of him of my commitment. It is a big deal because, you know it’s supposed to be a lifestyle of how you live and so you want a mate that is going to live in accordance with these certain ways and beliefs. If this person is now telling you that I don’t know what I think of because I said, I don’t know what I think about God anymore or I don’t want to pray, or he would ask to pray and I wouldn’t pray. I would just say well you can pray, but I wouldn’t say a prayer…things like that.

Well he didn’t move here because of that when came to internship. Well not only because of that, but this in addition to was just a huge part of everything that added up in terms of us being like, well we don’t know if we need to be moving towards getting engaged and umm…so yeah.

It’s been difficult and because we still talk and we’re still in this thing of not together officially, but still a lot dependent on each other. Now I am blaming myself, well now I should have just…it was like 1,000-miles away and I didn’t want him to move here and make this move because it would have been primarily about my career and not his and things not work out. I mean I don’t take all responsibility either because I had a huge issue with things he was doing, as well as I was aware of my issues. And I was trying to work on it, but part of the problem is I feel like he’s had a tendency to be judgmental about my spiritual decisions or whatever. So it’s been a challenge. It’s been pretty challenging.

I have also experienced anger, sadness and confusion.

About the feelings…probably more sadness and confusion. I feel like the confusion is going away somewhat, I mean it’s there, but more not as close to the surface.

I mean I just wonder is it like just a phase that people go through or am I going to be lost? Like am I just like not a person who can be a Christian, like I just don’t have what it takes or umm... Is it really resolved? Is it going to come up again like later when I’m like 40 or 50? You know is something going to happen that’s going to bring it up again?

Sometimes maybe I feel like my ex wants me like to give him a guarantee that this is resolved that is never going to come up again.

J: So it’s just not about your own questioning, but it’s about how this is going to affect this relationship:
A: Yeah, how’s it impacting other relationships. Because two, how would I ever explain it to my church family?

J: How do you feel that would go if you had to explain that?
A: Not good.

J: Can you tell me more?
A: Um, they just wouldn’t get it. They would just probably say a lot of things that are very cliché, well not cliché, and I feel irreverent for just saying that. Quote different things or different scriptures or say different things that support. Also that you are allowing or entering a bad state of mind, like entertaining doubt that’s somewhat going on the Devil’s ground.

I mean I would be very invalidated, so I would probably wouldn’t share it. I just wouldn’t. I’d just kind of say something neutral like, “I’m kind of struggling” or something, but not really. Maybe one on one, but I just think about my church family that they took me in when I was in Chicago and they’re all a little older and married, have kids. They are very loving and they kind of took me under their wing. So um…I just feel like it just wouldn’t be taken seriously, like they would just think that I was just having a bad week or a bad month and I would be okay. They’ll say that they’ll pray for me. Then maybe some of them would be very real and would say a personal story of how something happened and that eventually they came around.

Because I just feel like alone, so…

**Edited Synthesis—Bob**

My experience with spirituality and psychotherapy cannot be told without some background information. I was born to a mother what was an alcoholic. She was drunk almost all my life, only sobering up after I threatened to keep her then four year old granddaughter away from her, and then only 7 years before her death, long after I had left the house and started my own family. My father's role in my childhood was that of someone very detached and self-absorbed in his job. He was also, I believe, very codependent on my mom for his albeit sick emotional needs as a devout maybe better loyal -- maybe loyal is a better word -- Catholic. He stayed married to her through many years of alcoholism and never allowed the subject of her alcoholism to be raised to the surface. This I learned much later was the role model I was to attempt to follow. He coped by locking himself in the room and leaving me under the care of a drunk mom, who's alcohol abuse then fanned the flames of insanity and fueled the rants and raves of a very angry and scared woman. You see my dad had been involved with another woman years before I was born. But every time my mom got drunk, resentment and anger of his affair boiled up, as if the unfaithfulness was still going on. And while I was being raised - - and I was being raised living with a ghost of a woman I had never met haunting my existence.

J: Did you feel at all that some of those experiences were related to this later experience of questioning in therapy? B: Absolutely. Yeah. You know I think that the analogy I kind of like to use with what I ended up with later was kind of someone sacrificing themselves in the name of "love", and that somehow that was going to change someone, heal someone with deep emotional scars, that while love can do many great things, I don't believe that it can do all things. And so my dad was kind of a martyr in a way and so that was kind of what I grew up with, was that you stayed with whoever you ended up with, no matter what. And then I think his failure to ever address it and to ever really protect me then left me with this feeling that -- and you know what came out later in
psychotherapy was that I was really trying to do two things to heal my inner child and to try to heal my mom through healing Carol. And so I saw my mom as kind of as a child, kind of, with two views. You know I saw her very much as a victim, because when she would get drunk and sad and crying and stuff as a small child, I wanted to fix it, very much so. And then the other end of it was that when she became raging and stuff like that and my dad wouldn't do anything about it, I thought I guess this is the way it's supposed to be for "a man and a Christian" because my father prayed every night, but it was like the gigantic elephant in the room, the whole alcoholism and the whole -- And I was the last of 7 kids, so all my brothers and sisters had grown up. And the sister closest to me is 10 year older than I am, so she was pretty much out of the house. So I had older parents. In fact when I talk to my brothers and sisters about it, they don't even recognize, except for my ones that are closer to me, because my mom drank while they were around. But like I have a sister who's 75. It's a different mom to her, because it wasn't the same dynamic at the time. But that's where the whole root of this, you know, you sacrifice yourself in the name of love. This is where that inner almost obsession that I had that love is gonna fix this. Love is gonna heal this person and me. You know that if I could somehow do the right things, say the right thing, act the right way, show this woman God, that all of her torment and all of her pain and misery would be healed as well. It's a real mobile thing, and I don't want to get ahead of myself but a lot of what came later in my life, AA and my own spiritual beliefs, there's a real fine line there. Yeah, love is a wonderful beautiful thing, but I don't think that God or anybody else intends for us to -- and I, you know I almost lost my life over this woman to give so much that you lose yourself.

As soon as I turned 18 I joined the Navy where I too learned to drink. My navy career lasted just four years. I returned to my town and the mom and dad that I had left only four years sicker. I married within a few years and got busy with my own life. Alcohol was still a problem with me and a little after four years of marriage my then wife, sick of the empty promises and stupid behavior, threatened to leave me if I did not get help. Functionally I had been 12 stepped by a man who had been in treatment at a local recovery center a few months later. And that night, afraid of the loss of my wife, I checked myself into treatment. 42 days later I emerged and knock on wood thank God so far I never had another drink. Over the next 24 years I enrolled in school, became an RN, and helped raise 3 beautiful children.

I also had a depressive episode somewhere around the year 2001, required a brief inpatient hospitalization, but this time in 2005 I had seemed to stabilize. I had been sober for almost 20 years and very active in AA both as a member and as a sponsor for newly recovered alcoholics.

I was then going to a mainstream Baptist church at the time and was very active in the church band playing drums. That involved Wednesday night practice and Sunday morning service, and then there was Sunday school and home-groups.

J: Maybe I can stop you there. Can you tell me about what your feeling was about that church congregation that you were going to over those years?

B: You know at that time I was very accepted. We went to the church groups, we went to the, you know, I love playing music. I had a real good relationship with -- I thought -- a
music minister of the church. We wanted to raise our kids in the church so it was a pretty, I would say traditional religious -- it was Baptist -- Baptist belief system, you know, I didn't really have any bizarre beliefs or anything like that. We were busy raising the kids and everything.

J: Did you feel as if you fit with those beliefs? That those beliefs made sense to you and were good for you?

B: Most of them, yeah. I think most of them, you know. I've always had a problem with people that are kind of phony baloney that live their lives one way six days on week and then on the seventh day on Sunday they dress up and come to church and God is great, God is good, everything's okay for the next six days kind of deal.

And I think that was, part of that might have been what then later attracted me to this course of miracles, because it was so anti that. And I've always had -- and I still do to this day -- I don't like people that -- I have a sister-in-law who's a very fundamentalist Christian, married, you know, and everything is Jesus is gonna get you, God is gonna get you for that. Be careful of this. Be careful of that.

One thing I'm proud of -- my 17 year old lives with me. The one thing I'm proud of is I've always taught my kids to be free thinkers and whatever they believe is to me what they believe in. I'm going to try to give them a role model and try to teach them, but if they don't accept that -- I think that God is God and I am not, and that's the lesson I learned through this whole recovery thing. I don't know need to do God's job. He does that well enough without me, you know.

But yeah, I do think that looking back on it, those were very pretentious -- not all of them. There was some very genuine loving kind people there, but there were the pretentious holy roller kind of people that later -- after Carol and the way that I was treated by the church -- really drove me far away from that, you know, okay.

In 2005 I was working as a quality manager at a local hospital and, like my dad, had become somewhat self-absorbed in my work. Our oldest daughter had just moved off to college. My then wife suffering from the aftermath of the death of her father began to become more and more detached. She would lose herself in romance novels and any intimacy between us dwindled to a trickle. I seemed to counter this with work and with more AA.

One thing I probably want to say here is that AA also played a very big part in my life. There's a kind of two -- if you talk to people that have been in AA a long time -- there's kind of two off shoots of AA; there's the AA that is kind of the hard-core people that are AAer's, and they're like: "You're gonna make it, or you're not." But then there's this kind of codependent AA that's -- one of their beliefs is that: we're gonna love you till you can love yourself. And so AA is a very altruistic, very -- it's a very selfish program, too, because you stay sober by helping other people. It's very easy to get your boundaries blurred. I never worked with women when I was in AA. I kept that rule pretty intact. I
always worked with men, but there's a lot of sick people, and not everybody in AA is healthy. There's a lot of them that are in AA for to promote their own stuff. But that too was part of this, the pieces that were all coming together that were going to create this turmoil later in my life, because you know I felt this, hey I'm helping somebody else, I'm giving them myself, and I watch people, not because of me, but I watch people that I work with recover, and you begin to get this sense of hey it is possible kind of almost.

So, anyway, Carol was 16 years younger than I and when I hired her I thought she was a little hyper but otherwise fairly normal. She was a fairly good worker for the first six months or so I maintained a strict boss/worker relationship. That changed the day she came to work after she had been beat up by her husband. She had bruises on her face and a black eye. And after closing the office door proceeded to tell me horror stories of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her then husband, and of early childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father.

Looking back now I think it was at that moment that something switched on inside of me. I began to pray in earnest for Carol, even suggesting to my then ex-wife that she too pray for her.

But prayer was not enough. Several weeks later she came back to work again beat up. She's afraid for herself and her then four-year old daughter, and expressed a desire for "a fresh start." So being the altruistic Christian, and in hindsight, the extremely stupid and arrogant man that I was, I offered to pay to move Carol from her town where she was living with her husband, to my town. I even offered to pay the first months rent in an apartment. So one Saturday while her husband was working Carol and I packed up her and her child's belongings and moved her to my town. For the next month the attachment between Carol and I grew, though I pretended not to notice.

A little less than a month later Carol asked me to talk to me alone in my office. She confessed that she had a strong emotional attachment to me, and when I asked her to clarify, told me that she was "in love with me." She smothered me with comments; I never met such a kind wonderful man as you, et cetera, et cetera.

I was taken aback but to be honest somewhat excited by the fact that this woman, heck any woman for that matter, actually had such deep feelings for me.

The first thing I did was tell my boss what had happened and asked to have Carol moved out of my department and out from underneath my supervision. I then went home and tried to explain to my then wife what had happened and explained my mixed emotions. I told her that I wanted our marriage to work, but that I was empty inside and would like to go to marriage counseling. My wife's reaction was to tell me that if I had mixed feelings that I needed to move out.

Having no place to go I moved in with Carol. And that is what happened.
Part of the deal is -- I didn't put in this letter -- is that my ex-wife is very introverted. She keeps her feelings very, very, very close to her chest. And I'm what I like to describe as a blader. Whatever I am, people know instantly. Bob's pissed off, Bob's not, Bob's happy, Bob's sad, something's on my mind, you know it comes out. She's not. She's a very, very tight-lipped, even with her dad she suffered in silence over his loss. I mean, I saw her cry, but it wasn't anything like that at all. We had tried therapy when, that first depressive episode I talked about. We thought maybe some group therapy would help both of us, because we were both feelings that pulling away as early as 2001. And June went to therapy and she sat there. (Laughter.) I mean it's like group therapy for one or family therapy for one. I did all the talking. So when it came to Carol and I said, "Judy I want to go to therapy with you. I want to find out." I mean I was like, there was a part of me, and to be honest with you, that was surreal. This was a fairly attractive woman who was -- now I know, but then I didn't -- was in the midst of an enmeshment in her borderline phase, and just smothered me with the greatests. I mean, that should be a warning, but you're the greatest this, you're the greatest guy I ever met, you know, you're wonderful, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

So I had those mixed feelings, and I went to Judy and I said, "I don't know, there's a part of me that feels alive for the first time in almost 5 or 6 years, that feels wanted, and feels excited, and feels desired." I said, "But you know we have three kids, and I made a vow with you, and I want to stay married to you." And her immediate reaction was if that's how you feel then you need to get out of this house. And so it was like I went to Carol. I did look for other places to go with other guys that I had known, but I really could not find another place. And I'm paying for a house and everything else, so I moved in with Carol in the little apartment that we had set her up in. Well, to cut to the chase, over the next four years Carol --

It should be noted that while I was an RN working at a psych hospital, I really did not have a clear understanding what borderline personality was, certainly did not have the slightest inclination that Carol suffered from it, and an equally disruptive affliction of substance abuse. Over the next four years I would come to earn my Ph.D. and living with a borderline. And what's suffered on account of this torment that comes from trying to love someone and being better. Sound familiar? That was my father all over again. To cut to the chase, over the next four years Carol and I went through at least four separations and reunions. I learned that she had an addiction to cocaine, and when I confronted her and told her I would not stay that way, is when she began to cut herself. Understand that I've never experienced anything like this before, and these were not superficial scratches, but deep incisions into her flesh. The implication was always that I had caused her to do this. The first time I moved only to have her show up at my door, clothes in the car with the her daughter in tow, telling me she loved me and she and her daughter couldn't stay any longer with her ex-husband, whom she'd return to every time we'd separate, so it was just kind of bouncing back and forth between him and I.

As far as my spiritual life, what can I say? The church that I was a member in shunned me when I went to the assistant pastor, who was a music minister, asking for counseling. He told me simply to return home.
J: I can stop you there. So this experience of being shunned when you go back, did you feel like that played a role later on in the questioning and all this stuff that you had?

B: Absolutely. I'll never go back to those kind of churches again.

B: You know? And that's going to come out later on when Father James who helped me a whole bunch, because he was like this gift from God. He was an Englishman who was an unusual Greek Orthodox, he was a Greek Orthodox.

Again it goes with the people that are -- how can I explain that? Let me try to find the right words for -- Well, number one, I was offered no help. I mean I was offered no counseling, no, "Why do you feel this way?" It was straight out of the Bible. Here's what it says. Don't do it. Go back home. And at that point I became almost like a leper because I even acknowledged the fact that I had these feelings. And this might not be for your study, but I'll make a good comparison to that. I don't know if you know, but the pastor at Trinity Baptist Church -- the other Baptist Church, the big fancy Baptist Church here in my town -- recently killed himself. That has been kept as close-knit a secret as they can possibly keep. I mean, he suffered from depression. I was friends with the old minister, and I saw him that he was devastated. They closed their circles around that so tightly, it's as if being a Christian you can't have human experience. You're not allowed to be imperfect. You're supposed to live this life of mentally stable, just praying it will go away. If you live a good life, God will punish you, I mean reward you. If you live a bad life, God's gonna punish you. Bad things only happen to bad people, and that whole thing. And so when I came out and said hey I have these feelings for this woman, I'm married; I don't know what to do. My wife's telling me to move out, and they're like, you need to move home. That's it. There was no acknowledgment, no validation that, gee, this guy is struggling with this, maybe we can help him come to some -- something. It was just a flat no. Don't be human. Don't be imperfect.

J: Where do you think that left you in terms of your faith and also just otherwise? Where do you this that experience left you?

B: I don't know if I've ever had a doubt about "God", but it definitely left me with a bad taste for religion, especially traditional religion, you know? Traditional religion, it left me with a horrible, nasty taste, because it was like, what are you a bunch of -- what's the Bible verse? White washed tombs with dead man's bones. It's kind of how I felt.

So Carol and I began in, I believe my quest to heal her somehow, to attend Unity Church. Unity is a fairly liberal church. And one of its core beliefs is that people are not born into sin, and that sin is a result of a poor choice. Essentially that they're born good. While I was never really clear on all their precepts, they accepted any and all into their members, membership. Sermons were a mixture of New Age, and eastern philosophy, and positive thinking. Attending this church was a door that opened up a more bizarre belief system a few months later.

It's also really important that you understand that I've always been a little attracted to eastern religion, while maintaining my warped Christian beliefs, and that's said with sarcasm. I've read Taoism (phonetic) and Buddhism. And while I knew Jesus to be the
Son of God, I'm still uncertain he's the only son. I was even a member of an occult, believe it or not -- an offshoot of the Children of God -- for a short time in the Navy. While it really doesn't fit in the story, it was a weird time.

Carol and I's relationship continued the borderline cycle; her fear of abandonment and its associated professions of never ending love and passionate pleading to never leave her. And then, just as passionate, her attempts to destroy the relationship with her fear of enmeshment. This phase was always accompanied by drug abuse and self-degradation. I mean while it was determined to love this woman into health, she became addicted to prescription pain meds, hydrocodone, and then methadone, and anything that would numb her. Yet as insane as it sounds now, I believed through statements that we were "spiritually connected," and came to believe that it was God's will that I stay with this woman and love her until she changed, and saw herself as I saw her, a perfect creation of God.

This is straight from my dad. I think some of this, part of the, you know, I wanted to heal her, again was this -- it's almost like a delusion. I look back on it now, it's almost like it was and it wasn't a delusion, it was just that this is the desire to heal her so intensely, that somehow if I would heal her -- and this is gonna add on later on why we even end up getting married was like if I sacrificed for her, if I showed her that I'm gonna love her in spite of all this horrendous stuff that she did, in cutting herself in front of me, was horrendous, I mean terrible.

But that if I would continue to love her, that that's what God wanted me to be, that that was somehow what Christ's life was, the living example of they sacrificed through love for people, in that my old religious beliefs, it said be like Christ. Well what more can you be like Christ than to sacrifice your life and your everything for another person. I can't quote it anymore, but I don't know if you remember Saint Francis Assisi's prayer about pray that I seek not to be understood, but to understand, not to be loved but to love, for it is in giving that we receive. It's an old Catholic prayer, but it's a great prayer, because along with this, it's like give everything that you have and through that you'll receive. And that's -- for a non-dysfunctional relationship, that may work. And that may be the core beliefs of religion is that you love someone with that kind of passion that you're willing to give.

But I had grown up in this dysfunctional family and probably had a dependent personality disorder anyway, and then you tie me up with a borderline who's got me on a yo-yo string, is like, "I love you so much." And those were her words. We were “spiritually connected.”
Every time we'd break apart and she'd come back together again she'd say: "You know, we can never break apart. We're spiritually connected. God has put us together and we're spiritually connected. We're soul mates." That was her term. “We're soul mates.”

And then turn right around and then do this horrendous stuff, with the manipulation, and the cutting where she would take a knife. And the first time she tried to cut herself I tried to fight her, which was a mistake because I realize later she could have killed me.
But take a knife in front of me and just (makes cutting sound). And it was normally after a drug, I would find out that she had stole drugs, or got drugs, or got loaded, or -- I'm on an anti-seizure medicine. I have a temporal lobe epilepsy, and so I have a medication that she liked, and she would steal my medicine. Bizarre stuff, I mean I had to hide it from her and lock it in my trunk, and she would take it take it out of my trunk. I bought these containers that had 1 through 30 on them so we would all know how many pills were in there, and she took a knife and carved Tylenol to make it look like my medicine, like I wouldn't notice. I mean it's how drug addicted she is. It's just a strange thing. But I forgot what the question was.

This is when it gets really strange. It was during one of our separations that I met Jim, a fellow member of Unity. Jim was a little older than I and had also been through many relationships in his life. And I was attracted to Jim. I liked -- he was cool and he began to counsel me, to sit with me as he liked to call it. And through Jim that I was introduced to a book that almost killed me, called The Course of Miracles. Jim was an avid follower of the course, and soon I had a copy.

Essentially one of the most basic precepts of the Course in Miracles is there is no evil, only the belief in evil. And to become peaceful one needs only on to forgive. Work in the course consisted of daily readings and work on the more complex text.

Jim became my mentor.

He would call me every day or come over. He would encourage me, especially during the off times with Carol. We was on and off all the time. The borderline, then she would leave, and come over, and would always say- And some of the stuff was pretty profound. I mean, he would say I really don't have any answers for you, but I'll sit with you. He said I'll be willing to sit with you.

Which was exactly -- here's the paradox for you -- which was exactly what the church would not do. You know? Jim would sit with you, and I forgot the guy's name, but the music minister would send me away. They wanted me far away. And Jim would sit,

And we would read the course, and as some of its pretty hard to take. Everything you see in this room is not real. The only meaning it has is what you give it. How do you take that?

And he would give me lessons. And when it came to Carol and her bizarre behavior and the more I began to hurt, the more he would reassure me this is really not real. Nothing, none of this is real. What you experience, your fear is just fear based, and it's all ego based. And the course really teaches you to try to eliminate ego,

And so you know he was a friend, a mentor, he was there if I called him at 2 o'clock in the morning he would come and sit with me.

So he was what the church was not, I guess is the only way I can describe that.
He was involved in a relationship with a woman, had a child with her, you know, was never ruffled, then never seemed like anything ever bothered him, and just kind of helped me.

When I would have questions about the course he would give me his opinion and help me go through it.

But you know I liked him. He was hip, and he was everything that was not holy roller sanctimonious phony baloney. I felt, I came to learn later on that's not what it was, but at that time he was like the guy. So working the Course consisted of daily readings and work on the more complex text. Jim became my mentor, Carol my lesson. I was to forgive everything that she was doing to realize that she was confused, but not evil. I was told that my love would indeed heal her and me.

This only made matters worse, obviously. I stuffed all my feelings and distaste at the horrific deeds Carol was involved in, deep within myself.

Then one day after opening up an envelope that was mailed to me, only to discover nude pictures of Carol taken her in a sexual threesome she had with a man and his girlfriend in exchange for drugs, I blew up. I confronted Carol and told her she had to leave, and that her love was, excuse the word, shit. The word she claims she had been called by her parents all her life and I knew it hurt.

She countered by swallowing three hydrocodone pills as I watched in horror.

After calling the MS and watching her depart for the hospital, and convinced I just killed a woman God had sent to me as a lesson. I called Jim.

At that point he scolded me for what I had done. Just remember forgive, there is no evil. I then called my AA sponsor who called me a cunt for ever becoming involved with Carol in the first place. So I really didn't have any support at that time at all, and it all just bottomed out.

Alone, feeling totally separated from God, I attempted to end my life. I did not die, but at the time that's all I wanted to do.

I ended up spending 7 days in the inpatient psych hospital. It was pretty hard. I was released and the first call I received was from Carol. She too had not died, thanks to what I now know was her exceptionally high tolerance to the drug. She expressed a deep sense of remorse and expressed once again her undying love and the nightmare began once again. For the next two years we played the on and off again game over and over. At that time Carol did finally get seen by MHMR, and had been put on antipsychotic medication, and was taking massive doses, and this is not a misprint, was 2400 milligrams of seroquel, along with any hydrocodone that she could get. So pretty much at that time she
was numb. I mean 2400 milligrams is a massive dose of seroquel, and she would normally try to sneak one or two extra ones, until they begin to just give her just the amount that she needed. I don't know if I put in here about the cogentin, but they put her on cogentin because she was having some effects of the seroquel, and she took 30 cogentin in a day and a half, which is like anticholinergic. It will kill you dead as shit. Yeah. After brief a separation and yet another reunion, Carol and I were able to hold it together with a semblance of peace. This was -- she said she got her stuff together, she was on the medication, she had a caseworker. She had promised to take only the meds prescribed to her, and even went to one AA meeting with me.

It was then that she began her campaign to marry me. I began to think that all the suffering I had endured was worth it. God had been right. Thanks to my love she was healing. Delusional, huh?

So then in April 19th, 2008, after several months of living together and much pleading by Carol and the constant encouragement of Jim, we married. Ironically enough the song played at our small wedding at Unity Church was sung by Sean Mullin called Love Heals Everything.

J: Maybe you can stop. So on the one hand there's this growing belief or this idea that God had been right, that she was beginning to heal. And then and also there's this part where sounds like there was still a lot of pleading that had to be done on her part, and Jim was encouraging you. Was there some part of you that was holding back from that?
B: Yeah, I was scared shitless. (Laughter.)

But you know there was a part of me that believed that, you know, and this is the part where I'm gonna go off this page that I don't write about. I had to marry her. I had to marry her. I had to marry her because if I wouldn't have married her, I think all my life I would have wondered if I would have done that, maybe that would have made the difference.

And I think I would have been incomplete. I don't think that I would have been answered.

That's a hard concept to understand, but it was like if -- and I've known guys that have been like that, that are like, jeez, you know I wonder if I would have married the woman, maybe if things would have changed out. You know, changed. That was the ultimate for me. Apart from the killing myself, which I already tried to do, or literally hanging myself upon this cross of love for her, the ultimate to Carol was to marry her. And so it was like, what the hell.

Plus I felt like there was this other part of me that felt like I lost this 24 years of marriage, which is a long investment. This has got to work out. This has got to work. I didn't lose all that for this drug infested crazy borderline woman for nothing. I was gonna make it work.

And she was like, yeah, you know let's get married. I want to marry you. I'll love you
forever. She got my name tattooed on her, okay? I mean, she had 14 tattoos. She only had one tattoo with her sister's name who was killed in an automobile accident, and she got a heart with my name tattooed on her. You know, for God sakes. But that was her, to Carol that's like the deal,

and so, yeah, there was some fear, and there probably was in the back of my mind this realization that the chances of this working out are probably very slim, but I have to do this. I have to follow through this act to show her that I'm willing to do what I said I was going to do, so I did.

One thing had changed. As a result of my action on my license because of my RN due to my suicide attempt, I had to attend counseling on my own. They required that I go to psychotherapy for six months, seven months, I don't know, a year.

Then my first therapist fired me when I told him that Carol and I were together again.

So I was forced to find another therapist, the man I believe who finally returned me and restored me to sanity.

J: So this first therapy, did you see anyway where that played a role in the experience of questioning, did that affect anything in terms of your beliefs at the time? None. I mean I understood. I mean he wrote me a letter. He's still my friend. I respect him greatly. He doesn't live in the area anymore, but I respect him greatly, and I'd seen him a couple of sessions. And then I told him I am going back to Carol, we were going to get married. He said, well, I can't be your therapist anymore. He wrote me, he said, I think this is very dangerous for you, all the wise things that a therapist has to say. But I was like, he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand the big picture. The big –

Yeah you know that this was gonna be the healing. This was going to be the healing for her, the healing for me, the fulfillment of almost my life's purpose at that point, up to that point.

I mean between AA, and Unity, and Course in Miracles, and Jim, and then my dad with what he did with my mom for all those years, you know -- here's this man who thinks that God wants you to give your life because this is what love is. Love is this. Love is this giving up of yourself. This is what I called you to do. And I could open the Bible and show you versus that can be misconstrued to make you very much believe that. No greater love has a man that he gives his life for his brother. I'm not quite sure that's what he intended in that context, but, yeah. I believed that this was the deal. And maybe some of my old Catholic -- I went to Catholic school for 8 years, and some of my old Catholics beliefs, Catholics are very strongly in believe in that. And maybe some of that played into it, too. I'm not for sure what it was all about.

Anyway, Father James, which I didn't know, I need to make that point here. When I first went to therapy it was just a community at that time called New Hope. I think it's a new
name, but it was a therapy clinic. So when I first met him, he was Paul and not Father James. I didn't even know he was a priest. He was just dressed in civilian clothes and he was my therapist. I later found out that he was a Greek Orthodox priest, but at the time, you know, from England. And for a while he saw Carol and I together, to try and help us. Later he told me he had to restrain himself from slapping me upside the head when I -- but he was there to support whatever if wanted. And if I wanted marriage therapy with this woman, he was gonna try and provide that, but that he thought that I was totally insane.

So, anyway, the marriage of course was doomed from the start. It was about a month before Carol began her old antics, more hydrocodone, increasing her doses of Seroquel. One night only four months after being married, Carol was loaded. She offered the excuse of being very sleepy and went to bed about 6:30 pm. An hour later when I went in to check on her I found her cold and barely breathing and already blue around the lips and eyes. I attempted to arouse her but to no avail.

I then thought of using ice to wake her up, began rubbing ice around her body, under her arms, everywhere. And then she woke in a full blown borderline rage. She began cussing me and packing her stuff and her daughter's clothes. When I asked her -- her daughter happened to be visiting at that time. Her ex-husband had custody of her, but Zoe was over, unfortunately. When I asked her where she was going, she stated that she was leaving. When I pointed out that she was too loaded to drive, especially with a daughter, and then I would not let her drive, she asked me who's going to stop her? When I stood in front of the door, she proceeded to punch me as hard as she could -- and she's not a small woman -- in the face. It was then I made the first smart decision I had in four years, I called the police. They arrived; field tested her, and told her she could not drive. She called her friend and was gone. The next day I filed for divorce. Apart from the signature I needed to keep from having her served papers, I've not seen or spoke with her since. And the divorce was final in a record 61 days.

After the divorce the real healing began. It was probably the only part of the story that you need to hear,

but I felt it necessarily to paint a picture of the spiritual condition at the time. I was almost literally hanging on a lover's cross for Carol. Thanks to the sick teachings in the Course of Miracles, the belief that evil is only in your mind, the liberal allowances of the Unity Church, and the mentoring of a man who taught peace and love but really wanted me to sacrifice my life for an insane woman, that becomes so brainwashed I really thought it was God's intension that I would remain by this woman's side.

J: What can you tell me about the experience of being brainwashed?
I don't know if you want to see this thing. It starts with -- I mean if you look at it and you look at how you brainwash people, that's exactly what it does. I mean it starts with, the first lesson is everything that you see, you look around the room and everything you see, tell yourself it's not real. And that is the cornerstone of brainwashing.
It strips away your core beliefs and over a period of time through repetition and through countless repetition

and with just the right amount of truth in it, I mean there's some truth interwoven in it, sounds great, peace and love and stuff like that.

It incorporates this bizarre belief system into a person who's really devoted into studying it. But it starts with the core thing of everything you see is unreal. In fact I think it's kind slogan of is: nothing real can be threatened. Only love is real therefore you cannot be threatened, or some bizarre thing like that. So it teaches essentially that this reality that you see is nothing but a projection of what you made. Nothing but a facade of what your ego is manifesting. And so it starts by stripping away all the core beliefs that you believe.

And it does it in such a -- this is why it's such a devious thing. It does it in such a peaceful almost attractive kind of way that you think that: what can be wrong with this? What can be wrong with this? Forgiveness is the answer. There is no evil.

Systematic, I mean, and it's like a daily reading, you read every day,

and then there's this text that's bizarre. I mean, the text is very esoteric and very difficult to understand, and then so you know you struggle at try and understand that.

And then there's the beautiful way they did it at the back of the book is a manual for teachers, with the idea that if you do this well enough, then you become a teacher of the Course in Miracles. Then you become a guru in the Course of Miracles, and that you can heal other people through your experience.

By the way, Jim crashed and burned a few months later, lost in a sea of alcoholism. He lost his woman and his child and became very arrogant and very, you know, there is no evil and you just need to get past this.

The first thing Father James told me when I told him that Carol was gone and I was having second thoughts about the whole course thing and my belief that there was no evil, for I had experienced it's fruits first hand, was to jump up and shout halleluiah.

I think… again I think life conspired to heal me in this way. At that time Jim was crashing. Here's a guy that's been mentoring me, that's been helping me, who's an alcoholic, who decided that he's gonna drink again, and been married to a very beautiful sweet woman, and had a child that she had never put him down on the birth certificate as the father, because she was married at that time that she got involved with Jim and wasn't for sure who the father was.

And I'd gone out to try to counsel him a couple of times. Now the role reversed, and my mentor was no longer my mentor. I was now trying to mentor him with AA. And I never
drank with Carol, thank God. I don't know how I never did, but I never did. I'm trying to
mentor Jim into seeing that alcohol is destroying his relationship with Janet, which it was.

I mean he was drunk and he was quoting the Course at me like this is all. You know, I
said, "Jim, come to AA with me." And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "You know
those people are not going to like me." I'm like, "Why Jim?" He said, "Because I'm so
much above them."
And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" And he's like, "Well, I've got the Course, and
they're not going to understand me and they're not gonna -- I know God so much better
than they do." I'm like, "Wait a minute, you're drunk, you know? You're drunk, and
you're an ass, and you're losing your wife and your child that you love passionately, but
your arrogance and your denial and your substance abuse wouldn't let you say I need
help? You know?"

And so my mentor crashed. I mean he was like all this stuff that he told me I realize was
just -- you know, I mean, if there's no evil, everything he was doing was just as evil as
everything that Carol was doing.

I mean, my concept of evil is when somebody takes advantage of somebody's
compassion that love that's given freely, the innocence, that love is given out of
innocence. And it might be given in a twisted kind of way, but they take that, and they
abuse it, and they use it for whatever reason they want to use it for, and they manipulate it
and twist it -- that's the epitome of evil. I mean, that's the snake in the garden, take a bite
of the apple is somebody who will take the innocence of a child, a pedophile who will
take the innocence of a child with the trusting of a child and use it for their gratification.
Somebody will take the altruistic -- albeit this pretty screwed up love that you have for
somebody, and twist it, and use it, and manipulate it. Even though she was sick, and I
know she was sick, and I know she still is, that's got to be evil.

So those are the things that are starting to pop up in my mind is: wait a minute, how can
there not be evil? There's things happening on television every day. You can't tell me that
those are not just confused people. Innocent people are suffering. Innocent people are
being subjected.

And when she hit me, and I knew I never was gonna hit her back, and I had told her,
cause she had gotten involved with me before, and I had warned her. I said, "You know
you can never hit me again, Carol." She had head butted me twice before.
She was into martial arts like I am and my son. He's probably best of all of us, but we all
did martial arts. So she was pretty good at martial arts, and I told her she can't hit me. I
said, "You know, this time you hit me, you've head butted me twice when you got angry
with me, and you punched me one time before." I said, "You can never hit me again." I
said, "Because I'm never gonna hit you." I said, "You have to understand that. It's against
my nature to ever raise my hand to a woman." I said, "But I'm not gonna live my life as
an abused man." I said, "I'm not. I'm not gonna allow you to do that to me. I'm not gonna
be -- " Almost said: I'm not gonna be your ex-husband who is pretty much antisocial who
did beat her.
Now that I know her, I can understand. I mean, I can't understand that, because I don't advocate beating women, but I can understand how she would bring somebody to the point where they would beat her. And then I said, "I'm not that person and I never will be that person." I said, "But you can't do it to me." I said, "You can't hit me." I said, "You cannot." I set the line.

And that was before we got married. I said, "Here's the deal, you can never get to that point." I said, "I would hope that you would stop cutting yourself. But you can't hit me." And when she did, she popped me in the head, she ruptured the left part of my eye, and it was just in that instant it was like the light flashed, and I said, "You know I'm going to call the police." I said, and I did. And her therapist came. This is how manipulative borderlines can be. She had a caseworker from MHMR who let her stay at her house that night.

Yeah. I realize it was all a bunch of shit. You know I've realized that, I realize that yeah, you know?

I realize that: number one, I had attempted to kill myself and that I made a promise to myself through that experience that I was never gonna get that low again. I had at that point at the suicide attempt I had stuffed my feelings so deeply that I had actually, you know, I wanted to die.

I vowed that that was never happen again,

and then I saw Jim crash, and I saw the guy that I believed that was the Course the walking talking Course of Miracles just arrogant and uncaring and quoting the Course in the process of doing it.

And then I saw this woman that I was here to love, no matter what she did. And I said you can't hit me, and she was almost dead in my bed literally. I mean her aspirations are probably 4, you know, she had taken so much medicine that she was cyanotic. And that I woke her up, and that she just you know was gonna take her own daughter as loaded as she was and get in a car in a vehicle and leave and I thought, you know, this is not, you know, what would the Course tell me? That, let her go, there's no fear. Let her go. There's no evil, let her go.

And so when I stopped, when I went to stop her and she hit me. Was like, you know, this is done, this is the end. And there was no second -- there was no really second-guessing after that.

It was like I went into therapy with Father James the next day, and said, "Father James, I'm really doubting about the Course in Miracles."

Cause I had been talking to him about it, and he said, "Well what do you mean?" And I said, "Well, I'm really messed up spiritually." I said, "I really, I'm, you know here's all this stuff." And he began to interweave his therapy, and that's when he revealed he said, "Did you know I was a Greek Orthodox priest?"

Because I had been saying the F word around him and everything else, and some horrible -- (Laughter.) "I thought you were Paul." you know? And he's like, "No, I'm Father
James."

And I'm like -- I actually even went to one of these; they were meeting at a church in my town. He's since moved on to Hawai. But actually went to one of his -- He said, "Let me know if you're interested." I'm not. "You don't have to come, obviously, but if you want to come to see what Greek Orthodox is about -- " I said, "I'm not gonna be one, but I've never heard of it. What is it?" So one time after therapy I went to watch their little deal, which is very much like Catholic Church.

J: Well what else can you tell me about how therapy and your relationship with Paul and then Father James affected this whole process?
B: Well the deal was, Father James, and this is why he was perfect; number one, he's from England. He disdains western religion, and he'll be the first one to tell you that. He says, you know, I can't do an English accent, but in his beautiful crisp English accent he said, "You know you westerners, that you and your rah, rah feel good churches, they make me sick." He said, "You know, you're going to church, you're living your life for 6 days and then on the 7th day you go to church and it's halleluiah, God loves you, amen brother, you're forgiven all is well."

And that resonated with me. That is what I had seen when they shunned me, and that resonated inside of me.

The second important thing was -- and probably a lot of therapists where they would do a lot of supportive therapy and say, you know, like I done the empty chair before trying to talk about getting to get in touch with your inner child. I've read, you know, I read a lot. I read all the inner child books, and all that stuff of children of alcoholics and everything. Instead of trying to make me feel better, he made me feel worse for awhile. He made me go into what I liked to refer to the forest of my life.

And a lot of therapists I think would probably keep you away from that, especially with my history of suicide attempts. But he forced me in there. He forced me to get in there and to look at the stuff, and what you're hearing now is really joy, because he forced me into places where a lot of people never go.

Well the first thing when we finally got to the meat of issue that men are screwed up spiritually, and here's what I believed, and we had worked through the father deal, and he kept copious notes, inner workings, relationships, and all that stuff.

He said, "What do you want?" And I said, "Well, anything will help, Father James. I need to find my way back to God." And the first thing he did was have me read Psalm 51. He said, "Your homework is to go and learn about David." He said- You know, he made me -- and it was a hard time. And it was hard. Psalm 51 is all about “Oh God have mercy on me.” And he said -- there is, regardless of what the Course says, he didn't force his belief on me, but he said, "If you want to read about sin, let's read about David. And read about David and read about what he did with Bathsheba, and the consequence of his sin. You know, he lost his first child, never got to see his first child."
And so we did that for a while, for maybe a month, you know, every day, said I want you to read this every day. He said, "I don't want you to pray." He said, "The only thing I want you to pray for Carol is God have mercy on Carol's soul." He said, "That's it, and I don't want you to go any further than that, and I want you to pray God have mercy on Carol's soul." So I got out Psalm 51 and I read Psalm 51 every night, every morning. And I read more than, I got interested in about David and his life. And then we did that for a while, and then he said, "Okay, now let's read more about David and what happened to David after that."

So anyway, so then he forced me into this forest, into this place that, it was scary, but when I was there, I began to look around, and you come to terms with really I think what everybody has to sooner or later in their life. Some people just they never do. Like a Carol will never go into the forest of her life, because it's just too damn scary. You know, she's going to get to the edge of the forest and she's gonna kick back and say, I can't do this, and go back to drugs and alcohol.

And some people maybe they're fortunate enough that they live a life that they never have to do that, but that wasn't my case, I had to get in there, and I write a lot. I wrote some poetry about it, about the greens and the browns and the smell of the forest, the beauty of the forest that you know is pretty scary.

So I stayed there for a while and became comfortable with it. He recommended a couple books. I read those and the non-spiritual book is one which is a beautiful book about being broken open and lessons, Learning to Fall which is another great book.

Then through weekly sessions the therapist, while he maintained strictly professional boundaries, led me through a lesson about David. My homework was to read psalm 51, pray for God's mercy. He did want allow me to slither away with my tail between my legs, insisted that I take responsibility for my actions, yet he also never shamed me.

Through the weeks and then months of psalms readings he then had me read other psalms. In discussions about what I had allowed myself to be -- why I had allowed myself to become so enmeshed with Carol psychopathology,

I began to feel reconnected with God, real God, one who loves us, allows us to suffer the consequences of a sin, of our sin,

which is a bad word in the world of The Course and of Unity. Perhaps because Paul was a holy man and not a run-of-the-mill America minister, preaching American religion, and that's what we talked about (indiscernible), something about him reached me.

I began to understand what evil is and how it works into the hearts of people. I learned about the devil in the details,

also earned the mercy of God who still called David after a sordid affair a man after his own heart.
I learned how David in spite of his mistakes was reborn. He lived with the consequences of his mistakes, but because of them was a better man, a better leader.

Father James forced me into the forest of myself to grieve my loss, to find forgiveness.

I quit Unity and though I'm not ready for a mainstream church at this time, I have rediscovered that God had never left me, laughed maybe, and cried for sure, but never ever left me.

I think he represented a lot of different things to me. One thing I think that he represented to me was a father figure. The other therapist that I had was more like a peer. He was more like a—I’m a fairly intelligent guy, and it was more of a peer to peer kind of relationship. Father James was older and so he kind of represented this father figure that I never had.

And he was not stern, but he would not, he would not let me I mean if things got uncomfortable he wouldn't say, well let's not talk about that right now, we'll talk about that later. He -- without being a butt -- he challenged me on things, on my beliefs and this whole distorted picture.

Yeah, through, I think through, telling me, hey you need to read chapter 51 in psalms first. Which you would think he might say you need to read psalms 23, something that's pretty, pretty, makes you feel good, you know? Psalm 51 doesn't make you feel real good. I don't know if you read it if you haven't read it. It doesn't make you feel real good about yourself when you read. It's like God have mercy on me, I've sinned, I've done this thing, and so that was the first thing you know was like wow, this is different. And you know his talking to me about how a church -- some religions and stuff like that, they have the rah, rah feel good, let's just live our lives normal in the course of the day and not really see God throughout the week, but then on Sunday go to church and wave your flags and do all your stuff and feel better about yourself.

But that this is spiritual walk of God through the good and the bad and the ugly and the nasty and through the forest and everything else that that's where God really exists in all of that.

J: Can you tell me about what the forest means to you? What was the forest or what did you find revealed in the forest?
Beauty. That's hard for people to understand, a great confidence in myself. A great acknowledgment that a lot of people don't do that, that it's not for everybody, that by doing that I actualized myself, I achieved this, I became the man that I wanted to be. To sit with my grief for a while and to examine it.

About what I had done. About my childhood. About everything. Not just the grief, but the imperfection in my life. A lot of different things that happen at the same time I mean it wasn't just that, but Broken Open was beautiful about you know if you do this thing, do
it all the way, so that at the end of it there's a lesson for you. If you make a mistake, don't hide from it. Learn from it.

See what it is that the teacher, what's the teacher in all of that? What's the lesson in all of that? And I realize I think that that's kind of what God tells us throughout the Bible. I realize that I'm not a big Bible scholar, but his lessons that he's taught us about the people, they were all imperfect, and yet he still used them, and it was only those that were willing to learn from their mistakes that he really, really used.

And I think that the whole thing with evil that came back to me, that I'm not an evil man, though I made a mistake, there was nothing about it that repulsed God, that God wasn't repulsed from me, that it certainly would be nice to not have caused harm to anybody, but that God is using me now with Him and my son. To be real.
I think that's probably biggest lesson that I learned through all of that; to be genuine, to be -- it's okay to cry, it's okay to feel, and it's okay to be what you are and not be a phony baloney.

I can have real empathy with people. Now that will tell you my boundaries there for a long time where extremely high, which I think is natural, and slowly but surely I've let my boundaries down a little bit more. I'm still real, I can get real triggered by women who exhibit borderline tendencies, cause they scare me. But just learning math. The forest thing man was great for me, I mean I wrote some great stuff about the journey into the forest and the depths.

I don't know if you ever listen to Joseph Campbell. Joseph Campbell has a great analogy. He's the guy who did all the stuff about mythology. And he said you know the great myth that most of us live is -- he uses the analogy of Star Wars. He says when man encounters the darkness in himself, and what he does with that, you know, like Luke Skywalker when he discovers that Darth Vader's his father and how he has to -- that's the defining point in a person's life, is when you encounter the darkness within yourself and where do you go with it. Which direction does it point you?

Does it point you into a -- you know there's people who live their lives who are bitter and angry. And my mom, you know, she never could get over the affair that my dad had. Years later it warped her life. She could never get past that. But what happens when you encountered that dark spot? When you hit that darkness in you, and you see the imperfection in you, what do you do with it? Where do you go with it? How do you, that's the defining point,
especially for a man. I don't think I ever felt like a man before than I have the last two and a half, three years since Carol's left.

J: You know you mentioned here something about where you began to feel reconnected with God, the real God. What can you tell me about God as you understand him now? That I don't. That I write since Carol's left, every year I write lessons learned from the
previous year, and they're like 10 or 12 lessons. They're just for me, you know. I put them on my Facebook, just for my friends, and I keep my Facebook locked down so nobody can see it but the people that I let in. But one of the lessons that I learned about God was that I'm really careful when somebody tells me they know the will of God, and I'm really, really, really careful when I think I know the will of God. I think that God is beyond me. I think that God is God, and how dare I even pretend to understand the mind of somebody so much majestic and mighty.

Now I can seek his face, which I do in prayer. And I can seek communion with him, but to understand him? Not a clue, not a clue. I don't even know, you know, and it's funny, because I've heard people say you know it's the will of God oh halleluiah, I was out of money and my income tax came in and I can pay my bills now, and that's the will of God, and I'm like, and if you had a car wreck tomorrow, what's that? Is that the will of God?

I don't know. I've come to understand great peace in saying I don't know, I don't know. And you know, I don't know. I think that it's the book of Job when he tells Job how dare you, how dare you question me and what I'm doing. Job endured all that suffering and so this was over a bet with the devil? And God says, you know what? I'm God and you're not.

And that's what I've learned about God is that I don't know. I have, I do have some beliefs about Him, but I don't know his mind. I believe that he's forgiving and loving and wants what's best for us, and that he's with us through whatever we encounter. Now whether not he calls us it, or he allows it, or if it's the consequence of this or that or anything else, I think we can create a lot of turmoil ourselves thinking that this was the will of God, that this whole story of Carol was the will of God, and that this was the purpose of God, and maybe it was. I don't know.

J: This is a related question, but as you think of your spiritual life now as opposed to before this experience of questioning, what jumps out at you as the differences that the real meaningful differences?

Peace. Peace. Knowing that I don't have to fix everything that -- the fact that my son came to live with me was a great healing opportunity, he's been with me for two years. All the guilt that I experienced I probably have the greatest towards him, because he was the most affected by it, because he went from Carol to, you know he lived with me for the weekends. He had to live through the crap.

And just the peace of not having to do that stuff anymore. Just, I don't, you know? And then I don't have to figure it all out. That the weight of the world is not on my shoulders, that I don't have to hang on a cross for anybody, that I've become a man that I'm pretty proud of, forgiveness I think to get past the shame, cause there is an incredible amount of shame involved with somebody like that. I mean the shame that she manipulated on me by cutting herself and that stuff was horrendous.

The shame of being involved with somebody that was so screwed up, and then going back and forth and back and forth. The shame that the church imposed upon me, the shame that some of my own family members imposed upon me, that I still could not
reconcile with. Don't know if I ever will. But to know that God still has me there somewhere. I heard a great analogy. It's like a thread in a tapestry, I don't know if you've heard that, that we're just a single thread in the tapestry, and it's not that we're not important because without that thread that tapestry's incomplete, but we're not the whole rug, either. But we forget that we're a part of this great design.

And then I begin to see other men, and this was really ironic. I began to see other men that were, that had gotten involved with woman quite similar to Carol, and realized that I wasn't such a fool after all, that it was tragic, there was no doubt about, that but western I think western men are almost, some men are bred to take on that role of I'm gonna die for you in the name of love.

Music is full of it, and movies are full of it. Everything you know everything you know Jenny and her romantic novels that's what it's full of, you know? And I understand that's not really what love it that love is, that love is a –

I have come up with a new thought for that. That I'm looking for a woman that I can go walking in hand in hand with through life, and that occasionally I may have to carry her, and occasionally she may have to carry me, but if I ever have to drag somebody, that's not a relationship anymore.

And so I've become just a man that I've wanted to be for a long time. I'm better at my job. I've changed jobs. I got away from the hospital over there and reinvented myself in that way, and I'm more confident, and I'm more -- And the fears that I used to have, which are ironic -- I used to have some fears of my own; fear of abandonment, fear of growing old alone and stuff like that, they have pretty much vanished, and I've been -- I've learned to cook, I've learned to -- God I hate it, but I learned to iron. I've learned to maintain my own household, and I've developed great friendships now.

You know I have a great friend in very deep intellectual ways, and there's no rush. And so it's just been a –

you know, I am so thankful for him. He could have taken that so many different directions. He could have done the empty chair thing. He could have given me some supportive psychotherapy. He could have gone over the inner child thing with me. But he didn't. He hit right at the core where I needed to be, which was you need to go and you need to deal with the dark side inside of yourself and to acknowledge it and not to run from it, and then to heal from it, to realize that you don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to die for somebody to heal, and Carol and I had almost an addiction. Somebody told me, and they probably were hit, I didn't like it at the time, but they were probably right on. They said you've traded one addiction of alcohol for another, Carol. It was like that. It was like an addiction, and I've been able, I don't, occasionally I'll talk to people about her, but I don't -- I mean, I wish her well, God bless her. I don't have any hard feelings against her. I know she's a very sick woman. She's going to have a hard time no matter what she does but I hope that she can somehow find healing. I know that she's not the person I want to be with. But I have no -- nothing really about her. I
wouldn't want to have a conversation with her, but other than that. That's my story.

J: I notice as you were reading that you had some response to what you were reading. Is that something you'd like to share?

B: Yeah, you know, I mean, I'll be honest with you, I'm probably 97, 98, 99% over the guilt, but there's still some. It's a little, you know, a little smidgen. Looking back on it in hindsight I'm like, look what I've done to prepare, you know. And looking back on it in hindsight, it completely destroyed my family. There was no doubt about that, my immediate family. Not destroyed, but broke up my family. But the lessons that I learned through this whole thing were invaluable. I mean I don't think if there would have been a Carol, who knows what would have happened with Judy and I. It was not a good relationship at the time. What I was extremely hungry for -- I was already depressed a little bit, and then she went into a gigantic depression when her dad died. He was like John Wayne to her. I would come home and there was like we didn't talk. She was engrossed in romance novels, and I wanted to talk to her, but yeah, there's still a little bit of guilt. I came home and told Judy, we need to pray for Carol; there's this woman I work with that's beat up and getting beat up, and at the time I didn't know what she was. I didn't, I had not a clue. But when you put it all together, yeah, I feel real guilty, because now I do know. But I wish I would have maintained my boundaries a little bit better. I wish I would have known the things I know, but I didn't, so, you know. It's just the way it goes. It was a tough time.

**Edited Synthesis—Camie**

Okay. So in 2004 I struggled with severe clinical depression, that's what I was diagnosed as by a licensed psychotherapist.

Psychotherapy helped me tremendously deal with my life and move forward from a time in my life when I questioned life as it is.

I think about 8 months.

It was with one therapist. My brother and I both went independently to the same person. So we both went to him, and we both had issues with our family and upbringing and such. So, yeah.

Questions like: what is my purpose? Why am I here? And is there a point to life? For a while I would question if there is a God? And, if so, what the heck is the point of my existence for him or her or whoever that higher being of some sort may be, or what we were taught is there's a God.

For a while sometimes I felt that I was a joke and just a player in the scheme of things, as if life was just a game.

I had no vision, I had no guideline, I had no future. I could not see what I was doing in
life and what my purpose was as that.

J: No direction. Do you have, as you look back now do you have some understanding of what was going on for you then so that you felt that way?

Clinically, yeah, with PMDD and just being chemically off balance

I think through medication I do feel steadier even more able to deal with everyday life, instead of being so the stressed out, and just stressing myself out about life in general and daily things just

-- I mean, it was real bad where I would drive and I just -- I would get so frustrated and so mad just from the simple task of driving. And when I was riding the bus, I was crying in public, and that's when I knew, okay, I need to do something about this.

So that's -- and just questioning why I was feeling that way and what in the world is going on.

Okay, so with psychotherapy I was able to reach far into my past and take a look as to why I am the way I am and give more explanations for things around me. The therapy dealt with my childhood, adolescence, my early adulthood, and the dynamics of my family that in the end left me very confused, helpless and hopeless.

My childhood was set in Iowa, and we went to the Catholic Church.

Both my parents worked full time and my older brother kind of took care of us, me and my younger brother. So that's what I knew for a long time,

And then I started getting into athletics, doing Taekwondo and gymnastics, and I got really good at gymnastics. So it was expected of me to do well. So I was on National Team for gymnastics, and people really thought, had high hopes for me and, I had to fulfill their hopes, basically. So I had a lot to live up to and a lot of pressure from my family and just the people around me.

So when I didn't accomplish that, you know, I let everybody down, and it was -- so that kind of sucked.

J: Tell me how did that go? What did you guys talk about [in therapy]? What did you say?
C: Well, it's just, I don't even know. So much was expected of me and my whole life was people telling me what to do and how to do it and when to do it. So after adolescence and into adulthood I no longer had that, I no longer had that guidance, that structure. It was a free-for-all for me. I could do whatever I want, go wherever I want, when all I was used to having that structure and having that the repetition in my life. So I think that just, that pretty much broke the camel's back kind of over-the-hill kind of thing that really tore me.
Just it's like night and day, you know? You have no time for a social life. You have no time for anything that I want, that I wanted personally, cause I always did everything as I was told. And this is the way my life is gonna be, and this is what's expected of me.

And so after that, when I decided that I couldn't take it anymore I was 17, and went back to school, had to catch up a year. And people looked at me different, cause I was a super athlete, but I lacked social skills big time because I was home-schooled for a couple years to train, and I just, I wasn't very likable I guess as in a social atmosphere. I didn't have many friends and such.

So at 17 pretty much -- well at 16 is when I pretty much finished doing all of my athletics, doing gymnastics, and cheerleading, and platform diving. And went back into public school and just did like a complete 180 and started smoking marijuana. I got pregnant at 17. Got married, got divorced, and then graduated high school, in that order.

17. Yeah. I got divorced when I was 18, but everything happened when I was 17. So it was just a big ball of hello here's the left curve ball. So it was completely from every day somebody telling me what to do into adult parenthood. There was no time for me to be a kid and have a life basically for myself as a kid should experience things. So that's what a lot of the therapy had to deal with, was being okay with my past and what has happened and moving forward from all the struggles.

J: What can you tell me about your therapist?  
C: He was good. He was -- well, it's been like, what? 7 years? I liked him. He helped a lot. Tremendously, he helped.

I wish I could have written down a lot more.

He did -- there was a couple things that he taught me. One of the big ones was: it was okay to say no, and because I was always the one to say, "Okay let's do this." I mean, peer pressure, and besides the fact that I was always being told what to do. It was okay to say no. So that was like one of the biggest things that I learned from him was how to say no.

J: How did he teach you that? What did you see him doing that brought you to that point?  
C: Probably just after a couple months, a couple sessions. I went at least once a week. If I couldn't make it that week I would go every other week. But it was -- I don't know if you just said it and it just made sense, or if I gave him hypothetical situations, he would say, "Okay, well you don't have to do that. It's okay. You don't have to fulfill or do this or need to do that because somebody says or that's what's expected of you."

So that kind of opened a door for myself and it allowed me to make a decision, decisions for myself. So I thought that was pretty cool.

J: Yeah. There's also this part you talked about where you kind of went into your past and looked at things. Can you tell me about that? What role he played in you going back
there, and how he worked with you in that process?

C: It's kind of my family. I have a lot of problems with my mom and my dad.

They were married the majority of my life until I got divorced, they pretty much got divorced too. It's the same year.

They're two different personalities. My dad's a funeral director and deals with the dead, and my mom's a labor and delivery nurse that deals with newborns. So it was beginning and end.

My mom is a drug addict and she's just crazy.

She's a functioning kind of Munchausen kind of person. She's always in the hospital, but you can't tell her, quit, stop doing it, because she really thinks something's wrong with her.

And then my dad, my dad is just kind of there, kind of not there, in his own world. He's a very selfish person, and yeah. So yeah just between those two and dealing with my parents it was just a chaotic situation being raised.

Well I think he guided a lot of it.

I think kind of he made the point that just because my mom is the way she is, and the way that my dad, because the way that my dad is doesn't mean that makes me-- a person-- it doesn't define me.

But I still go to counseling now. I still talk about these issues.

As for the therapy that he -- he really put things in perspective as in just how the past made its way all the way up, how I made it through all that until now.

Yeah. And how I dealt with it and how no matter if it was a good experience or bad experience, it still happened regardless, and there's nothing really I can change.

J: Did you feel like that process somehow had something to do with the change that you had in your religious beliefs?

C: It kind of put things to the side, religious beliefs to the side.

Okay. Well background, you know, being raised Catholic is kind of like: sit down, stand up, kneel, sit down, stand up, kneel, and you just kind of repetitively go through that.

And then when I was 10, came here, went to Baptist Church and that was, it was very I guess hoity toity. I'm kind of like: why are all these people so happy all the time. And it was fake to me even at that age. I was like: why are these people acting so fake?
So that was an early bell in my head. I'm like, okay, this is weird. This whole idea of the book and the Bible and these stories is when I started questioning.

Yeah, and you know asking why do these things happen to me, and why is my life, why am I here now? Cause it was a really, really bad time. I had bad relationships, and just money issues, and living issues, just one issue after another after another.

And it's just kind of like, okay, well, why is -- that you always have those why questions. Why is this happening? Or what's the reason?

And because of the background, because of the Catholic and Baptist, they say all these things and I still question the back of my head is like, okay, well how do I know that that's true? Or, I don't see it. I don't see, I don't under -- it's like a great idea and everything, but it's not applying to my life at all.

J: So when you were finding yourself in those questions about why am I here and what is this all about, those answers that they gave were kind of in your head, but they weren't satisfying you, they weren't working the way you wanted?

C: No, because the things in my life are my choices and it's my decisions and it's all, it's me that makes decisions. This is how I see it of course. But I'm the one that chooses where to go and what to do. I can't rely on some other existence, some other person. I can't blame a God. I can't ask a God. It's me that I have to ask. It's I that I have to blame when I do wrong or I do right or such.

So it really -- the therapy put my life in my perspective as in I'm the one that has control and not anybody else. So that's kind of where it's like I can't rely on something that I don't know is factual,

Cause I was thinking about this the other day, the whole -- God to me is like karma and coincidences and the afterlife, you don't know any of that for sure. It's not hard factual evidence.

So I choose not to question, because there is no hard evidence. And that science, you know, science has the hard factual evidence for the vast majority of research and such, so but there's no found answers for me in religion.

J: Did it feel like therapy helped you in coming to this new stance or this stance that you have now? C: Yeah, and I'm okay with it.

You know what? When I was younger I felt really guilty for questioning it when I see -- cause I had family friends that I would go to church with. And I would feel bad for questioning the whole baptism -- when you choose to be it baptized -- in just a lot of the stories, just question the whole factual like how can that really happen?

And I would feel guilty about not believing it and just seeing all the people around me
believing it and happy and then here I am kind of like, well I'm not really happy, and I don't really believe it.

So that could have been one of the rubber bands to the rubber band ball that just developed into the whole depression questioning life, cause it sucked, you know? It was, had suicidal thoughts, and just to end the pain, the pain of being so stuck, so, I mean life really sucked, but it was me that...

J: And those religious answers became put to the side. And by that you mean? What would you say you mean by put to the side?
C: That they can't be answered. They won't be answered. I think that once I'm dead either A I can know or B I won't know. So I'm not gonna worry about it now. I'm not gonna think –

I was baptized Catholic, went to Sunday mass until I was 9. At the age of 10 our family moved to Texas and began going to the Baptist Church as my, against my father's wishes.

He hated it...He hated it. He was just -- well first he hated Texas, and then second, he just, he thought that my mom was just -- you know, "What in the world are you doing to our kids." And it was bad. He maybe went once or twice, but he had high expectations for all three of us that we would all go to catechism and we would all abide by Catholic rules and we were gonna be raised that way. So it was very disappointing to him when we went to the Baptist Church.

Well, yeah, it's just, it was funny, is going to the Catholic Church as a kid you always got to shut up, be quite, and the monotone da la la Latin or whatever they, the Bible verses, speaking in the monotone voice, and I would always be so bored.

But the funny thing is once I got older, when I was in my 20's, I would go to the Catholic Church on Easter and stuff, just for my dad, just to appease him. And the funny thing is, when I would go I would be so relaxed in the church. I was like, wow this is really nice. Even though, I mean, I would sit there in the church and I would think, oh this architecture's pretty. But these stories and these -- you know, they have stained glass windows that tell stories and you know verses from the Bible and such that depicts lambs or what-not -- and just thinking, well it's pretty stained glass, but the story's crazy.

Yeah. It just didn't seem humanly possible. Well, that's not a good choice of words, but logical; it didn't seem logical at all. But –

I had to keep it to myself, definitely.

My dad when he was a kid he did the whole Catholic up-bringing and that was what was expected of him. He was molested by the priest and he was molested by his Boy Scout troop leader in the '60's. So even with knowing that, my dad would always tell us kids that “no matter what nobody ever touches you.” So from his experience we learned
through him that people just don't mess with you. People don't touch you, you don't talk to strangers, stuff like that. So even I mean that in some sort of weird way affects me too.

I mean how I mean my father was molested by a priest is just -- how does that work? How is that right? In any -- so why should we continue to, I mean, to me that should have been it.

You know what I'm saying? Like if you see a troubled bridge and you cross it and you cross it and you cross it and then one day you fall through it, okay, did you learn your lesson? Or are you gonna keep going over that bridge, or are you gonna -- you know what I'm saying?

J: And so to you there's something that seemed troubled or unsteady or unreliable about the Catholic beliefs and part of it has had to do with your dad and part of it has had to do with just the way these stories felt and played out for you?
C: What happened to him being molested.

So yeah, that was crazy. And then my mom, okay well my mom's just, she's just crazy. I love her to death, but, you know she's -- she was raped when my older brother was a toddler and so many things have happened to my mom that a lot of it's questionable. Like, obviously I wasn't there when it happened. I wasn't born and I don't know what happened, and in 1985 or so we had a house fire, and supposedly it was started one way, but who knows, and then after that she got into an accident at the apartment complex where she got a piece of like a half foot piece of rusty metal into the back of her leg, had to have surgery and surgery and surgery and nobody was there when that happened, so -- All these things, nobody was ever there, but all these things happened to my mom. We had another house fire in '90, and one time she was driving to work, she worked the night shift, and her cat had died, and she was pulled over by a cop that had one of those lights that go on top that you put on top. And she pulled over. Well, she got out of the car. She didn't know why he was pulling her over, and he pushed her and stole the cat and the trash that was in the back seat and took off. And you know she was bruised up, and I mean, that's just to name a few. That's the gist of my mom is things happen to her, and, so I don't want ever be anything like her.

I don't know. She's just -- man, I don't know. How can I -- it's like I have to love her. I do. But I don't ever want to have -- I'm so tired of her. She lives in Germany now, and I'm just so tired of: oh this is wrong with me, or this is wrong with me. I swear to God when she dies and they do an autopsy she's already gonna look like a Cabbage Patch. She's just nothing I ever want to be. I don't know why she is the way she is, either. But, going back to where I think it stemmed from was the whole rape issue.

So both my parents come from kind of a messed up sexual background, so that's just, it's not cool. It's like, why do things like that happen? I don't know.

J: So you have these kind of tragic things that for you bring up that question I mean is this really why do things like that happen?
C: Yeah.

J: Tell me about your mom's role in your religious life.
C: Well she was raised Baptist and she

-- okay, I think my dad -- I don't know think he -- he might have questioned. But if he questioned he was probably punished and so he was pretty much forced to believe.

My mom she was raised Baptist so a little bit more on the hoity-toity side and happier side, and I think she still questioned the stories. I know that she knew like every verse as a kid of the Bible. She went to Sunday school with her family and I think she enjoyed it and

As she got older she kind of lost her sense, her religious sense. I think even still now she believes in God and her own -- in her own world I guess. I think she believes in that there is a higher being and that there is an after-life and that there is a reason for all of us. However her bubble is just demented or twisted. I don't, I can't really put the two together but my mom's crazy to say the least.

J: So I mean her religious world looks demented and crazy.

Her world in generally, yes, but her religious is, I wish, I almost wish she would believe in it more and be more straight edged and be more abiding to that, as opposed to all her self-induced whatever choices she makes, so –

Well, okay, when I was 17 you know I still tried to participate in a Sunday program. So I would go to the Baptist Church there in my town and every Sunday,

If there was a newborn, he would announce it, and everybody would say a prayer and bless him, bless the child, the newborn child, and whatever. So when I had my son, the Pastor came up. Was he a Pastor? They're Pastors, right? Baptists? Yeah, he came up to me and he said, "Oh is this your little brother?" And I'm like, "No this is my son." Because I looked like I was 12 having an infant. And he's just kind of like, "Oh."

And that was it. There was no blessing. There were no congratulations and I think that was the last time I went to the Baptist Church. So that kind of, that made me less like going to church, even more so than I already did, cause I kind of didn't make myself as like I always told myself this is the good thing to do is to go to church and be a part of something positive.

So after that it was kind of like alright now you know that's really when my life really started downward spiral with my son and growing up, getting divorced, moving on with my life. It's not that I got kicked out of my house, but I couldn't live there. So living an adult life from being told what to do every day to living on your own with a child is just night and day, and it was very, very hard. It was really hard.
But I do, I do believe that I mean I can still remember almost 14 years ago that the Pastor just dismissed me for being, I was looked down upon. I was almost like people were ashamed I was a teenage parent, and it was kind of embarrassing. I mean what -- is that love? Is that how we're supposed to treat each other really? You know just because I'm not an adult still it's a human being and you can't bless my child? So I just, that was it for me.

It wasn't accepting at all and it just took all those questions, all those you know wonders and queries about the whole religious experience itself, the Bible, the stories. It really just closed the, it sealed the book. It was like -- That was it.

Against my dad's wishes the Baptist Church is when I began to question God. And I thought church, oh yeah, it was a whole Bobeting scheme to make people believe or reassure them that if you believe you will be taken care of financially, emotionally and physically and be blessed with a good life.

That's a huge -- coming from no money to Texas, to my town especially, yeah lots of money and it is a very socially-driven monetary world, cause every Sunday they pass the basket around, pass the basket around, and it's like coming from -- I mean my parents always stressed that we were poor, that we were broke, always having financial troubles. And then coming to see all these really wealthy families, it was like, oh this isn't fair. Being jealous as a kid and it, yeah; it sucked as a kid seeing that. All these people that have the good life and here we are just struggling along and I say kind of like “okay why aren't we like everybody else.”

Well, yeah, that's how was, if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior he will take care of you. I can just remember these words come from his mouth and I'm like wow, its crazy; just all the false hopes, promises.

J: It felt like false hopes and promises to you then?
C: Yeah. Well because I questioned it, yeah. Cause yeah even as I saw it you know I was like wow this is -- I even could tell that it was Bobeting at that age. At 10, 12, 13 years old I'm like this is a whole money-making thing going on here. This is a business as I saw it. I saw it as you give money and God gives you back and yeah,

It didn't, well, one: we had no money so how could it give anything back. So that was difficult.

J: Now how did you feel about the fact that you were a person questioning back then? I think you've already kind of talked about this but maybe you can tell me more or just tell me again what was it like being the person there questioning?
C: You just keep it to yourself. That's all I could really do. And if I were to question -- one; most likely whoever I was questioning if I was my mom or my dad they wouldn't have the answer and they would just dismiss it or tell me not to ask questions like that, yell at me, or discipline me or something and get mad at me for not believing, and so it wasn't, I mean a big issue but you just kind of know not to question it.
J: So that was with your parents, did you ever have the inclination to share that with someone else; a peer or anyone else in the church? And if so what did you anticipate would happen if you did? C: I don't know.

Although I questioned the church and their practices I would continue to believe that there is a higher power until I was in therapy.

You know I did try in searching other avenues as in from Catholic and Baptist it’s one God or the Virgin Mary. And outside of that you know as I, into my 20's I did question well what if there's multiple Gods? What if there's different kinds of Gods, you know, the Hindu Gods? And so I did learn not so much research but just kind of open, I was open to the possibilities that there was others. There is other higher beings, or maybe none at all,

And I just kind of gave up.

J: Well you mention here that you believed in a higher power until you were in therapy. Did you feel like psychotherapy played a role in that, in that change?

C: Yeah. Like there was a higher power as in there is a reasoning, there is something that governs our existence in our life, but then in therapy it is, it comes down to me, and it's, I know it's a kind of, it sounds selfish but it's, I can't rely on anybody else or anything else.

In therapy, you know, we really took everything apart. Took every microbe bit and separated everything and looked at everything, and as I rebuilt myself I did it, I rebuilt myself without religion. I built it up on who I am and not who I was and kind of rebuilt my beliefs on my self and my future and where I'm going and I didn't include any religious avenues.

J: Why do you think it happened that way so that you didn't include those?
C: Maybe because of all the chaos, all the previous chaos. I didn't want to deal with it and I didn't want to continue questioning.

J: Did the subject of religion or what you believed ever come up in your discussions?
C: Not really. More or less just my upbringing in the religion up to that point.

It wasn't so much like a religious subject as more of my experience of my past, of my like things that we've talked about with my dad being Catholic my mom being Baptist and doing the whole upbringing but not so much as in do you believe now. You know?

Cause they can only do so much. They can't -- The therapist. They can only do so much for you in guidance as in what you want to believe in.

I'm sure if I said I want to believe in this, if I were, I want to believe in Judaism, I'm sure that he would have maybe given me the ropes but not necessarily taught me. Do you know what I'm saying?
And like -- but I didn't. I didn't want to continue being categorized as a religious person in the sense of Catholicism or Christianity or anything.

J: That's not what you wanted.
C: Uh-uh (negative).

J: How did he respond to what you’d bring to him?
C: How did he respond? Well I think he responded to how I responded as in you know if I found something hilarious as in the whole chaotic situation, I think he would laugh at it too. But if I found the situation as in, does that make sense? Does it? He went along with it. He didn't necessarily -- if I wanted to -- I forgot what I was gonna say.

Yeah, if I saw something was ridiculous he would agree or understand. He did a lot of understanding. He's like, "I understand what you're saying." And that was the cool part, just to actually have somebody understand what my thoughts are.

Because to have so many, it was just a roller coaster. It was really a roller coaster of emotions and questions and he was there for it all. He was there with me. He never did say, well I don't get it. I don't understand what you're saying. He always tried. He was always listening and understanding of -- and then even on top of that he would give me questions that I would ask myself that I could answer to help better understand me.

J: Did you remember a question like that that he once gave you?
C: Just well of course I did, "Well how does that make you feel?" No, not in particular. Not in particular when it comes to religion or any -- it could have been a scope of things.

J: But there was this feeling of being understood, that the questions weren't incompressible? That he was --
C: Or ridiculous. I wasn't crazy, and really did make me feel okay to question, to have feelings of erratic behavior.

J: And it sounds like what you've been saying is there is some part of you that really wanted and needed, or really needed to go in the direction you went and his role was to kind of affirm you, understand, follow you and kind of help you through that process.
C: Absolutely. He was a third party. He was somebody completely outside of my realm as most therapists I would think are. They have nothing to do with your family, nothing to do -- my brother did go to him, but we would never talk -- my brother talked about, of course, but he was always somebody there that I could always go to. He wasn't a friend. He wasn't a family member. He was this person that anything in my life I felt completely free to ask him, to talk to him, so that was great.

That was a great -- because I've always had those coaches, and I've always had my parents that are higher above me, but he helped me. He was there with me by my side. So I mean it was great.
If I didn't go to him, I'm sure I just, I would have continued drinking, doing drugs and just not caring and would not be where I'm today, because I did, this was before I went -- decide to go to school, before I decided to go to college.

At that point I was like questioning what in the world am I doing with my life, it was going nowhere and he really did say, "Well if you want to go to college, you can go to college. There's nobody that says you can't go to college." And I was under the impression that, well I'm 24 years old. By the time I get my degree and go to dental school I'm gonna be 32 which is way old, so it's like I'm already past my prime, so everything is negative.

Everything, my life just sucked and he really kind of made it okay, and I did realize that age is age, yeah, but if I want to do it I can still do it, it's up to me. So he helped me out a thousand percent. I'm really grateful and thankful for my brother paid for me to go, so I'm pretty thankful for my brother. But yeah, I'm not sad about losing the whole religion. When I was younger I was kind of not so much embarrassed, well yeah embarrassed, yes. I felt like I would disappoint people that I didn't have any sort of religious background or believe anything but I'm okay with it now. I'm in a much better place; okay with life now then –

J: And it sounds like you felt that therapy part of what helped is it helped you get to that point where you felt okay with your own questions or doubt or just not believing it. How else would you think it or any other ways? We've kind of talked about just having that understanding, having someone that any thoughts feelings were okay, where allowed. There was also this part where you felt like you could put those questions aside and that was okay, that you were able to rebuild yourself without the religious part of things or God or any of that as a way to explain things.
C: Yeah, it's not a prerequisite that you have to have religion in you, for you, for your life. And I felt that it was for a long time, that in order for you to be a good person you need to have some sort of belief, and now I'm okay with putting it all behind me and just continuing with life and going forward. You only live once.

Psychotherapy analyzed my life experiences and I was able to cope with the past. As for the future, it lies in my own hands, my decisions and choices. I cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are but I choose my future. I control my destiny. I choose to categorize myself as an agonistic, which, okay, I find out, I might find out there is a God or gods after I die, or I might not.

J: What was it like to be in the process of change? From what I'm hearing it's not as if your religious change was the focal point of what was going on. There's a lots of change going on, but particularly with that religious change that you went through, what was it like for you to be in that process?
C: I think the worst part is letting my dad down is cause my dad had high expectations and expected us to be Catholic, raise our kids as Catholic, get married in a Catholic Church, and he expected that, and even, we don't talk about it now but even if we were to I know that he would still be disappointed that I don't believe. That's the only part that I,
so –

J: Do you remember letting him know that for the first time? Do you remember?
C: No, he really doesn't, we just don't talk about it.

Not that you have to but I'm wondering what do you think keeps you from talking about it?

C: Because it would probably stir the pot. It would create conflict or discussion that doesn't necessarily need to be brought up.

I know he would start crying and he would, cause he's already said before that he wishes that we never moved to Texas, and he wishes that -- that was when him and my mom got married that was the point was to have kids and raise them in the Catholic Church and he -- we all failed at that. Not just him, but we all failed. We didn't -- as kids we didn't continue. Because we were kids, we didn't want to go to church. We wanted to go to video games or watch cartoons. And my mom, she didn't enforce it. She was just kind of, whatever. So my dad is just, he would start crying because he was so completely devastated that it didn't turn out the way –

J: As you were going through this, as you were in therapy and you saw yourself changing in some way with regard to your religious beliefs, was that an anxiety for you how your dad would see it?
C: A lot was an anxiety for my dad. The religious aspect of it, yeah, but not so much because I think we had prepped for quite some time with the whole change and everything. So I knew that he would be disappointed but I can't make things better.

J: What else can you say about what it was like to be in that process where you were changing?
C: Well it didn't happen just over those 8 months. And even now I still take a step back and analyze a little bit. So I can't say it was just at the 8 months, 9 months that I was in therapy that completely changed my life, because you know even 25, 27 years old I'm still making bad decisions but realizing decisions and changing them and moving forward and making the right decisions is a good gist of a good part of it. Was that the question?

But in that part of the change, that little chunk of time where you were changing, what else can you tell me about what it was like, what your responses were, how you were feeling, what you were thinking about those changes?

C: You know, whenever I would go, I would always have something to talk about. And during the hour and a half, two hours that we would talk I would cry and let it out and we would talk and I would leave feeling better, and there was always something small, no matter how small it was always made me feel better like okay, just, I never left thinking, I never left there worse than how I had entered that place. So I think little by little by little it just gradually, things just started making more sense. It was okay. I was okay with life.
J: Good. There's a passage here: "That as for the future, it lies in my own hands, my decisions and my choices. Cannot blame anyone or anything for why things are the way they are, but a choose my future, I control my destiny." I don't know if there's anything you can say about what -- it seems like that is an important theme in your story I guess, is something that comes up. What can you tell me about why that's important, and how you came to that view? And --

C: Well, how I came to the view is just the whole rebuilding and experience from therapy is just moving forward, and I have some friends there in a band and they always think that someday they're gonna make it big. Someday they're going to make it big. Well they're not gonna make it big until they make it big. They got to apply themselves. They can't just play music and let it happen to them, so that's kind of the same way I feel about my life. I can't just let life happen to me. I got to make it happen. I can't say, well God's gonna take care of me so I'm just gonna be here and rely on him or her, but it's me, I'm the one that makes, that goes forward, and nobody else.

How do I feel? Maybe not 100% completely okay with it, but I'm in the 90's% okay, believing that it’s okay that there is no other, cause sure, there's always gonna be that little bell in the back of my head like, hey it's me over here, and like questioning, well there's a God, or not, but I'm okay with it.

The 10%? Well, what if I'm wrong? What if I'm wrong and there is a God and you know get up there and he's like: what were you thinking? Why didn't you trust in me? And I'll say: Look how crappy it's been. It's a joke. What I've had is a joke. Why would you do that to somebody, all the crap that I've been through? You know that's not very nice. So he's, I mean, if they say he is what he is when I get up there if there is a heaven, then okay. He should be accepting of me, because I'm one of his kids or whatever, but he's given me the shaft, and I've needed, without that therapy, oh man I'd be horrible. I'd be really bad off, and even now it's hard. I've been sober for two weeks. Not a single cigarette, no alcohol. Prior to that I drink once a week but it's like a binge, and that's not even right, you know? Like I -- it's frustrating because why can't I -- if I'm in his hands, why can't I just have one or two drinks and that would be it? The same with any alcoholic, and that's mean.

That's a mean thing to do. Why can't I have the control? If there is a God, why didn't he give me the control to have just two dinks and quit and that's it. No, not me. It's me that says, no more C. You can't have any more. It's not God.

It's me that says you can't drink. And I'm the one that chooses not to drink anymore. I can't drink because I'm the person that once I have two I might as well have ten, and so it's me that controls that. If God loved me he -- no, no, no. Maybe -- I don't think that that's the way I would have -- it's just not normal.

Drinking like that. I mean I know people do, but why can't -- I mean, I want to be a good person, and but drinking like that, I can't be a good person. It screws up so much of my life. It screws up my relationships, my money, my time, my day, my health. You know drinking is bad, but it's fun, you know?
You know I made the choice at 17 to have sex, and I had a child. So maybe that is his way of intervening and saying, okay, well now you're a mother, you need to be responsible, and have this beautiful child now, which is cool and great and groovy and everything, but then back to this, the whole Baptist thing, looking down, not blessing my child? That's just like, that's a joke you know, it really is. I can't win for loosing or whatever that saying is.

I can't, no matter how hard I try, I can't, I couldn't get ahead. No matter how hard I tried to believe that there is a higher power that's there for us. It never was. It was never there. It comes down to me making the decisions. There is nothing else. I can't -- there's nothing else that helps but me.
Research Study on Religion and Psychotherapy:

Study Description:
I want to learn more about the experience of religious or spiritually committed people who have undergone psychotherapy.

Eligibility Requirements:
- 21 years of age or older
- Participated in psychotherapy as a client
- Described yourself as religious or spiritually committed at the outset of therapy

Compensation will be provided to those who complete the study requirements

If you want to share your experience…
Contact Jon Ahern, M.A. at (412) 427-8638 or jonahern10@hotmail.com
*All inquiries will be kept strictly confidential.
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Appendix D

Informed Consent Form—No Compensation

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Encountering Questions of Religion in Psychotherapy: A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Study of Patients’ Experiences

INVESTIGATOR: Will Adams, Ph.D. (Principal Investigator)
Jonathan Ahern, M.A. (Student Investigator)
11700 Wallstreet #7201
San Antonio, TX 78230
(412) 427-8638; ahernj@duq.edu

ADVISOR: Will Adams, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
(412) 396-6520; adamsrw@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experiences of religious or spiritually devoted psychotherapy patients who experience a questioning of their religious stances through the course of psychotherapy. As a participant in this research you will be asked to provide a detailed written description of your experience. In addition, you will be asked to allow the principal investigator to interview you. The interview process will involve at least an initial interview and an interview to review the results of analysis performed on the
interview protocols. Other interviews may be scheduled as needed. It is anticipated that the initial interview will take between 1 and 1.5 hours and that subsequent interviews will take an hour or less. Research participants can determine, with the investigator, the time and place of the interviews. Audio of the interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:**

As you will only be asked to recall an instance where your religious views were called into question it is anticipated that there are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. Potential benefits include an opportunity to better understand your experience of religious questioning and to aid helping professionals and future psychotherapy clients.

**COMPENSATION:**

No compensation will be provided for your participation in this project. However, participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

All written materials including consent forms, transcribed interviews and written descriptions provided by you will be stored in a locked file in the researcher’s home. Digital audio recordings will be stored on a USB storage device, in a locked box in the researcher’s home. These materials will only be accessible to the two investigators and professional transcriptionists. Verbatim, digital audio recordings of the interview(s) will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The transcriptionist(s) will sign a written agreement pledging to protect confidentiality and to destroy all digital files and transcribed data after turning these over to the researcher. The transcriptionist will not be given any information other than what is contained in the actual interview(s). All transcribed audio recordings will have any and all identifying information pertaining to you or individuals you talk about will be omitted. This includes names, unique positions, addresses or phone numbers mentioned in the audio recording that might be used to identify you or anyone you talk about. All digital
audio files, consent forms and written descriptions provided by the research participant will be destroyed at the completion of the research. De-identified transcriptions of interviews will be shared with others and will be presented in the appendix of the dissertation or excerpts of the dissertation.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Jonathan Ahern, M.A. (412) 427-8638, Dr. Will Adams (412) 396-6520 and Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board 412-396-6326).

_________________________________________  __________________
Participant's Signature  Date

_________________________________________  __________________
Researcher's Signature  Date
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Encountering Questions of Religion in Psychotherapy: A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Study of Patients’ Experiences

INVESTIGATOR: Will Adams, Ph.D. (Principal Investigator) Jonathan Ahern, M.A. (Student Investigator) 11700 Wallstreet #7201 San Antonio, TX 78230 (412) 427-8638; jonahern10@hotmail.com

ADVISOR: Will Adams, Ph.D. Department of Psychology (412) 396-6520; adamsw@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experiences of religious or spiritually devoted psychotherapy patients who experience a questioning of their religious stances through the course of psychotherapy. As a participant in this research you will be asked to provide a detailed written description of your experience. In addition, you will be asked to allow the principal investigator to interview you. The interview process will involve at least an initial interview and an interview to review the results of analysis performed on the interview protocols. Other interviews may be scheduled as needed. It is anticipated that the initial interview will take between 1 and 1.5 hours.
and that subsequent interviews will take an hour or less. Research participants can determine, with the investigator, the time and place of the interviews. Audio of the interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:**

As you will only be asked to recall an instance where your religious views were called into question it is anticipated that there are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. Potential benefits include an opportunity to better understand your experience of religious questioning and to aid helping professionals and future psychotherapy clients.

**COMPENSATION:**

You will be given $50 in cash upon completing the requirements of the study. These requirements include providing a detailed written description of your experience and participating in the required interviews. There is no monetary cost for you to participate in this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

All written materials including consent forms, transcribed interviews and written descriptions provided by you will be stored in a locked file in the researcher’s home. Digital audio recordings will be stored on a USB storage device, in a locked box in the researcher’s home. These materials will only be accessible to the two investigators and professional transcriptionists. Verbatim, digital audio recordings of the interview(s) will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The transcriptionist(s) will sign a written agreement pledging to protect confidentiality and to destroy all digital files and transcribed data after turning these over to the researcher. The transcriptionist will not be given any information other than what is contained in the actual interview(s). All transcribed audio recordings will have any and all identifying information pertaining to you or individuals you talk about omitted. This includes names, unique positions, addresses or phone numbers mentioned in the audio recording that might be used to identify you or anyone you talk about. All digital audio files,
consent forms and written descriptions provided by the research participant will be destroyed at the completion of the research. De-identified transcriptions of interviews will be shared with others and will be presented in the appendix of the dissertation or excerpts of the dissertation.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Jonathan Ahern, M.A. (412) 427-8638, Dr. Will Adams (412) 396-6520 and Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board 412-396-6326).

_________________________________ ________________________________
Participant's Signature Date

_________________________________ ________________________________
Researcher's Signature Date