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Tyndale University

Desire, Imagination, Story, and *Imago Dei*:

A Multi-Method Exploration

of Selected Elements of

Spiritual Formation

A Research Portfolio

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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by

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Abstract

Desire, imagination, story and the *imago Dei* are critical elements of Christian Spiritual formation. Throughout recent years, scholarship on spiritual formation has acknowledged these elements; however, a more extensive reflection on the potential of each, as well as their interconnection has been needed. Through the methods of composing a spiritual autobiography, interacting with biographies, engaging in autoethnographic research and building theoretical model, this portfolio highlights each element and its dynamic interconnection in the process of spiritual formation. Awareness of the critical nature of each element arose from reflection on the author's life bolstered by a review of relevant literature. As each factor came to light, the profound interconnection of all four became apparent and became the impetus for intentional choice of research methods and the design of this document. Key findings include the importance of desire as motivation, imagination as means, story as context and the *imago Dei* as the goal or telos in both human and spiritual development, as well as the potential for the use and study of autobiographical writing, biographical reflection and autoethnography as transformational exercises.

Dedication Page

To Dr. Paul Bramer

Thank you for your hours and hours of dedication to help me reach the finish line.
More importantly, thank you for holding my feet to the fire and being my “Doctor
Father” long before this project began.

Acknowledgments

Mom and Dad – For your unconditional love and support. I'm so glad God gave me you.

Paul and Solomon – For your patience and reminding me to always persevere like Sollie.

Jon and Shauna – For your incredible support and generosity. I will never be able to thank you enough.

The rest of my village – Thank you to my friends, family and colleagues who love me so well, support me so consistently and believe in me often more than I believe in myself.

You stir in us the desire to praise you.
Our delight is to praise you.
For you have so made us that we long for you,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
Confessions 1:1
(2013)

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Glossary

Autobiography; Spiritual Autobiography: An autobiography is a personal narrative of one's life, usually in chronological order from birth to present. A spiritual autobiography is an account of one's faith journey, including one's experiences with the divine and spiritual traditions and how those experiences informed and shaped the author's life.

Autoethnography: Autoethnography uses ethnographic methods and motives to study one's self. In this methodology, the researcher studies his/her own life for the purpose of connecting beliefs and behaviours with the social context in order to suggest implications and applications for the greater good.

Desire: Desire is an internal pull, draw or want. Desires arise from fundamental need built into our humanity. They are instinctual. They were present in original creation, present before the Genesis fall: humans had needs and desires of food, companionship, constructive work, knowledge, and relationship with God from the beginning. God has desires and desire is part of the *imago Dei*. However, desires can be easily distorted due to sin and become complicated, contradictory, and corrupted.

Imagination: Imagination is a human faculty as is reason, intuition and memory and is part of the *imago Dei*. Humans imagine because God, too, imagines. The imagination provides the human person with the ability to come up with new possibilities for life and living beyond the lived experience one has actually had. The imagination can take on a formative or malformative role; it can be inspired by God for good, or be without or against God for evil.

Imago Dei: *Imago Dei* is "image of God," but frequently retains its Latin form when used, as in this paper, in its theological sense. It is derived from the biblical concept of the distinctive creation of humans (Gen. 1:27; Gen. 9:6), the incarnate Christ, Son of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), and the *telos* of the children of God (Heb. 1:3; 1 John 3:2). There are theological, moral, psychological, and spiritual implications to this concept, including the innate desire in humans to reunite with the one in whose image they are made.

Spiritual Formation (Christian): The journey of becoming more aligned and faithful to God, more guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, more characterized by the virtues of Jesus Christ, and more engaged in the work God is doing in our world. It is an interactive process among the individual, the Holy Spirit, and agents which God uses to transform us by his grace into the people he always intended us to be. It addresses the

biggest and deepest felt desire in the human heart, which is to reconnect with God and experience God's love, redemption and freedom. Although the term spiritual formation is used in many traditions in ways consonant with the contexts, in this work we are meaning spiritual formation in a Christian sense.

Story: Story comes from the shortening of the Latin *historia* which hints at its original meaning. It is a framing, connecting, and narrating of events, issues, people and things of the past, present, and anticipated future and as such, even if a story is imagined or used for entertainment purposes, it holds meaning and communicates a world view. Histories, biographies, and myths are all examples of stories. A narrative is a story told from a particular point of view; the terms are used synonymously in this discussion.

CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION:
THEMES, METHODS, AND CONTEXT

This portfolio contains a life described, a life analyzed, and a path to a life fulfilled. It is an exploration of the selected spiritual formation elements of desire, imagination, story, and *imago Dei* through the methods of autobiography, autoethnography, biography, and conceptual modeling.

Each element was found individually over the course of my time in this program. The elements of imagination and story were first to be recognized as especially important. Towards the beginning of the program, I came across a lecture given by Wheaton College professor of evangelism and Christian formation, Jerry Root (Root 2021), on Scottish author, poet and minister George MacDonald's *The Golden Key* (MacDonald 1906), which will be elaborated on throughout the portfolio. I will always remember my reaction of excitement to this lecture. It was the first time imagination and story had been presented in a way that spoke directly to me. I loved story and spent a lot of time in my imagination as a child. However, Root portrayed these constructs in a way that connected their existence in my childhood to their significance and continued import to my life as an adult, as well as their impact on my relationship with God.

The impact of this quote was so great that I began a directed reading and research project to further understand the breadth implication and impact of story and imagination. It was here that the element of the *imago Dei* was revealed. In this research project, I analyzed the role of archetypes in story. What followed was the revelation of the *imago Dei* as the most complete archetype in the Christian's story, and the beginning and end, or *telos* of our lives as children of God and heirs to His Kingdom

Desire, the final element, was found to be consequential and critical through my autoethnographic study. Even though it was the last of this quartet to be noticed and by far the most unexpected, it was the element that tied all four together. It became clear that we are invited into God's story with the *imago Dei* being the foundation of who we are. The God-given faculty of imagination allows us to connect with the *imago Dei* in our personal stories. Without imagination, it would be impossible to access the possibilities that exist beyond the brokenness of our daily lives. Desire is the motivation; it is what drives us towards the God and is the lived experience of knowing there is more. Desire is often experienced as restlessness, until it is anchored in the *imago Dei* and God's ultimate story of love.

The more these four elements were explored, the more I became aware that they are deeply intertwined. Both the lived experiences and model presented in this portfolio demonstrate this. While there are many more elements in spiritual formation, the ones presented here are both analyzed independently as well as their profound interconnection.

The spiritual autobiography contained in this portfolio (Chapter Two) is an example of an individual's story and describes inadequate paths of perfectionism and willpower leading to the dead ends of frustrations and low self-esteem, while in the pursuit of satisfying deep desire. The biographical portion (Chapter Three) highlights the role of imagination in the work and relationship of two Christian authors and its impact upon the author. The autoethnography (Chapter Four) analyzes personal journals and their themes of imagination, narrative, self, and God, but particularly that of desire. The model of spiritual formation (Chapter Five) explores and generalizes these themes, showing their potency and inter-relatedness.

They were originally written in the order of autobiography, model, biography, and autoethnography. In this portfolio, the personal experience and reflection on that are presented first (the autobiography, personal implications of the biographies, and the autoethnography) culminating in a conceptual and general model of aspects of Christian spiritual formation. The introduction and conclusion emphasize the framing and integration of the different themes and methodology.

Christian Spiritual Formation

Growing into Christlikeness is a core priority in the Christian faith. The Apostle John writes, "When he [Jesus Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves,

just as he is pure (I John 3:2-3 NRSVue^{*}). Nurturing people into Christlikeness is part of the mission and ministry of the church, as the Apostle Paul says, “He [Jesus Christ] gave gifts...for the building up of the body of Christ...until all of us come...to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Although the terms spirituality, spiritual formation, and theology are used more broadly, in this portfolio they are used in the context of the Christian faith. Theology is concerned with correct beliefs and descriptions about God and God’s relationship to creation, humanity, groups, and the individual. Sandra Schneiders, Jesuit biblical scholar and theologian, points out in her seminal article on the relationship between theology and spirituality that spirituality, as a field, while recognizing the important contributions of theology, differs in that it studies the experiences and practices of people as they relate to God and God’s interests (Schneiders 1986, 274). Christian spiritual formation has to do with the journey of becoming more aligned and faithful to God, guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, characterized by the virtues of Jesus Christ, and engaged in the work God is doing in our world. It is interactive process among the individual, the Holy Spirit, and agents whom God uses to transform by his grace into the people he always intended us to be. It addresses the biggest and deepest felt desire in the human heart, which is to reconnect with God and experience God’s love, redemption and freedom.

^{*} All scripture references are to the New Revised Standard Version updated edition (National Council of Churches 2021) unless otherwise noted.

The elements and dynamics of this experience have been the subject of study throughout the history of the church. This process has been known by various names, such as sanctification, *theosis*, discipleship, Christian nurture, faith development, spiritual growth, and apprenticeship to Jesus. Another term that provides a sufficient and robust platform from which to explore the vast topic of becoming Christ-like is Christian spiritual formation.

Many scholars have offered definitions, descriptions, and explanations of Christian spiritual formation from the Apostle Paul (c.5– c. 64/65 AD) (e.g., Galatians 5) to the early theologian, philosopher, and autobiographer Augustine of Hippo (354-430) (Augustine 2013; Smith 2019) to the contemporary work of Baptist philosopher and spiritual writer Dallas Willard (Willard 1988; 1998), Quaker and spiritual theologian Richard J. Foster (Foster 1988; 2001), Methodist and New Testament scholar M. Robert Mulholland (Mulholland 1993), Anglican-Vineyard scholar in spirituality Evan B. Howard (Howard 2008; 2018), Calvinist philosopher and cultural critic James K. A. Smith (Smith 2009; 2013; 2016; 2019), evangelical professor of spiritual formation and leadership Diane Chandler (Chandler 2014), and others. In their attempt to develop a theory or model of spiritual formation, there is a consensus on many aspects, including the important roles of the Holy Spirit, scripture, grace, and community. However, there are some critical elements and dynamics in the transformational process that are often not given due consideration. This paper draws attention to a few of these, namely desire, imagination, story, and the *imago Dei*. Although these are only some of the

elements and dynamics in spiritual formation, they have been often underemphasized or misunderstood or not included at all.

Four Elements of Formation

Wrestling with the meaning of Christian spiritual formation is not only theoretical, but also personal. From being brought up in a devout Christian home and participating in Sunday school, church, and Bible camps to attending undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate schools of Christian education, to engaging vocationally as a psychotherapist and Christian university instructor, questions about spiritual formation continually arose. It was not until my work in a Doctor of Ministry program that I was able to take the time to critically and prayerfully analyze how various factors had shaped my formation. As a result of this reflection and study, it became apparent that desire, story, imagination and the *imago Dei* were critical components in my life and pivotal in understanding the human experience yet were sometimes not noticed.

Jesus' first recorded question to his soon-to-be disciples is, "What do you want?" (John 1:38). It seems Jesus knows, acknowledges and is not surprised at, nor put off by, the reality that desire and longing are at the core of our being. Being human is about desire. It is also about imagination and story. During a time and cultural context where vying to stir and direct desire is a driving force of the entire economy and much of society's interactions, it is prudent for apprentices of Jesus to understand how desire fits their own formation. Catholic priest and theologian, Ronald Rolheiser (Rolheiser 1999; 2004), Franciscan friar and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr (Rohr 2011;

2013), Christian apologist, writer, and literary scholar, C. S. Lewis (1967; 1995; 2001) and the aforementioned James K. A. Smith (Smith 2009; 2013; 2016) have all informed the discussion on the role of desire, story, imagination, and *imago Dei* in contemporary spiritual formation. The theories of developmentalists, such as Erik Erikson (Erikson 1963) and Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (Hagberg and Guelich 2004), are helpful in understanding these elements over various stages of human life and growth.

In addition to these and other resources, my own life experiences are a primary source for thinking about these elements. Through writing, reflecting, and rewriting my spiritual autobiography (Chapter Two) and engaging in an autoethnography, in which content analysis was done on a series of my journals (Chapter Four), certain critical components for a model of spiritual formation emerged: the role of desire, especially for God and the true self, the stories we are told and tell ourselves, and the function of imagination. While there are additional factors active in spiritual formation, these emerged as worthy of attention and critical to a healthy and wholistic approach to Christian spiritual formation

A study of literature and observation of clients and students has reinforced the insight that their presence and influence are intrinsic to our culture, Christian tradition, and human experience. The prompting of desire, the faculty of imagination, and the structuring of meaning by way of story are common to all people and are used by God to draw humanity towards becoming what God intended, the *imago Dei* (see Figure 1). These four factors are introduced here but all are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five and throughout.



Figure 1. Selected Major Components of the Model

Imago Dei

Imago Dei is Latin for the image of God; it is a rich theological term, still in currency, and used in at least three contexts. First, the Biblical creation story specifies that God created man and woman “in his image” (Gen. 1:27). While there was a subsequent departure of humanity from the initial innocent and open relationship with God, with the consequence of defacement and alienation from both God and that intrinsic original, true self, the *imago Dei* nonetheless persists, giving the grounds for the dignity of all humans and the reclamation project by God. Secondly, later in Scripture, Paul portrays Jesus as the “image of the

invisible God” (Col. 1:15) without corruption and the one through whom God recalls us to that original image and to Himself. Thirdly, the Bible declares being conformed to the image of God is our *telos* or ultimate purpose and plan (Rom. 8:29, I John 3:2). The *imago Dei* then is not only our beginning but our end. It instigates our desire for our Creator and to be our true God-intended selves, which is our destiny in God’s story.

This deep desire is usually channeled toward substitutes for God. Paul says people “exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). But by the work of the Holy Spirit and grace, through the faculties of imagination, reason, emotions, choice, and faith, our desire can lead us back to God as the parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates (Luke 15:11-13).

Desire

Desires are derived from fundamental needs built into our humanity, yet uniquely experienced and expressed in each of us. Some are physical necessities; others are emotional or spiritual yearnings. Jesus points out, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The ways in which we desire God may differ, but the restlessness that accompanies desire is common to everyone. This restlessness is what drives the journey toward God and all that God provides. As Augustine of Hippo writes at the outset of his spiritual autobiography, “You stir in us the desire to praise you. Our delight is to praise you. For you have so made us that we long for you, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine 2013, 1:1).

At the heart of spiritual formation is acknowledging that our deepest desire is to experience the reality of connection with God and our being in the image of God. Christian psychiatrist Curt Thompson states, “desire begins and ends with God – God’s desire for us to desire unity with him. The idea is not to be dissolved into God (losing ourselves) but to be unified with him so the more connected we are to him, the more we become distinctly ourselves” (Thompson 2021, 10).

Many of the challenges faced in North America at least are directly related to a lack of understanding of the power of desires, not acknowledging we have them and not knowing what to do with them. Desire is a profound motivator that draws every human into the narrative of God’s love and redemption. Desires are innately human; story is how our desire uniquely and creatively plays out. Thus, honouring our own personal story, recognizing the ambivalent story of our culture, and knowing God’s meta-narrative is how we come to understand, and cooperate, with God’s work in our lives together.

Story

Stories have been told in communities throughout history and across cultures of both individual and collective experiences of the search for satisfying the restlessness that comes with feeling deep-set desires. Through myths and music, fairy tales and art, dramas and storytelling, narratives of the universal quest to understand and fulfill our deep longings – for better or for worse – reveal and capture the hearts and minds of humanity. The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre concluded, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can

answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (MacIntyre 1984, 216). The narratives that affect us can be told from a variety of perspectives, including God’s story, humanity’s story, culture’s story, and our individual story. Ultimately, “we live and move and have our being in God” (Acts 17:28) but we live and move in the other stories also.

Imagination

While other human faculties, such as reason, emotion, and memory play a role, imagination may be the connective tissue between desire and story. Imagination is needed to transform the desires in our hearts and direct them towards God’s ultimate story. It has been described as “echo to replicate” something which recognizes the creative God and our original creation. Imagination is related to the pull back to our original form, a generative movement toward who we were and will be, says James Hollis, Jungian psychoanalyst and author (Hollis 2003, 6). It offers the potential for new, re-storied experiences of desire in our lives – where desire is directly, powerfully and courageously drawing us towards the *imago Dei*.

The components of this model are meant to contribute to the still-developing field of Christian spiritual formation. The specific aspects of spiritual formation which are explored in this project – desire, story, imagination, and the *imago Dei* – are important, culturally relevant and timely. An attempt is made to ground them in the Christian scriptures, historical and contemporary scholarship, and a systematic study of personal experience. Personal, corporate and vocational applications flow from these considerations.

Four Methods of Research

The use of a variety of methodologies is characteristic of the interdisciplinary field of spirituality and spiritual formation. Certain approaches have been used here to provide first-person knowledge supplemented with a more general and theoretical perspective. The four main components of this portfolio are a spiritual autobiography, a biographical reflection, an autoethnography and a model of spiritual formation, each of which is a different approach to the study of spiritual formation.

In *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Waaijman 2002), Kees Waaijman, Dutch Carmelite spiritual theologian and philosopher (1942-2023), outlines four major methods of research in spirituality: *form-descriptive research*, which is an inductive approach; *hermeneutic research*, which involves reading and interpreting key literature in the tradition; *systematic research*, which uses the methods of relevant scholarly fields; and *mystagogic research*, a term more common in antiquity and the middle ages, in which “an attempt [is made] to clarify the journey of the spiritual way: how people relate personally to the way they are going in the divine-human relational process” (Waaijman 2002, part 3, 869).

Each of these types of research identified by Waaijman are used in the exploration of selected elements of spiritual formation in this portfolio. Mystagogic research, understanding authentic Christian experience, “entails a deep immersion in the lived experience of faith” (Buttigieg 2025, 407), which inevitably leads to studying the spiritual autobiographies of others and writing

one's own spiritual autobiography (Chapter Two). Form-descriptive research outlines the major traditions or embodiments of living out the gospel and, for that, reviewing spiritual biographies is a major method of establishing facts and patterns and is illustrated in Chapter Three. The autoethnographic research contained in Chapter Four is an example of systematic research, which requires the use of an established methodology to guide the investigation. Finally, building a model of spiritual formation clarifies the spiritual transformation process in conceptual terms. Although this treatment goes beyond hermeneutics, substantial word studies are included; a model or theory is broadly a product of any and all methods of spirituality research.

Spiritual Autobiography

In a spiritual autobiography a person writes of how he or she has attempted to approach, understand, and live out the divine. While it includes experiences, events and influences, it also interprets these so that implicitly or explicitly, there is a framework for understanding them. Writing a spiritual autobiography was one of the first research tasks in the Doctor of Ministry program and is an integral part of the portfolio. The course in which this project was carried out began with reading and critiquing the spiritual autobiographies of others, such as Augustine of Hippo (Augustine 2013), monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) (Merton 1978), and Puritan preacher and author, John Bunyan (1628-1688) (Bunyan 1959), a transformational experience in itself.

Thoroughly learning about and experiencing the process of writing my own spiritual autobiography was both challenging and formational. Louis J.

Cameli, Catholic theologian and spiritual formation specialist, commends the reading and writing of spiritual autobiography stating,

Let us study the spiritual stories of people, listen deeply to their experience, and so search out and perhaps find threads that link them to each other, and them to us. Let us consider ways of pastoral formation that are attentive to the emerging and unfolding stories in the lives of our people and so search out and perhaps find the loving power that works transformation” (Cameli 1978, 8).

In this portfolio, it not only provides a context for the data that was found and analyzed in Chapter Four, but it also provides important information about spiritual formation itself. While my autoethnographic research did not include analyzing my autobiography, the themes and events that emerged from it were profound confirmation of what was revealed in my research.

Spiritual Biographies

Spiritual biographies are an important resource for understanding spiritual formation. They portray a particular way the spiritual life has been lived, with the subjects often taken as exemplars for the Christian life. For examples, the four Gospels in the Bible are spiritual biographies of Jesus and Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Anthony* (Athanasius 2024) became an inspiration and model for the desert Abbas and Ammas. In this portfolio, I look at the lives of the 20th century authors Dorothy L. Sayers and Clive Staples Lewis: their experience of community, shared imagination and their impact on me.

Autoethnography

In autoethnography, sociologist and leading writer on autoethnography, Carolyn Ellis explains, the researcher analyzes his or her own life with the goal of

understanding and describing personal experience as a way to understand cultural experiences (Ellis 2011, 273). Upon conducting this research, it became apparent that autoethnography is particularly relevant to the study of spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation has a subjective experiential dimension, a functional ministry dimension, and an academic theoretical dimension (Bramer 2021). Autoethnography is able to address each of these aspects, which thus allowed a co-relation of experiences of my life and formational influences. While these findings were from my own life, they are applicable to others in so far as they are examples of human motivation and capacity.

Engaging both spiritual autobiography and autoethnography proved to be personally formative and generally informative. While both exercises were personal in nature, the themes that arose provided ideas that would benefit a variety of individuals in many different contexts. Likewise, the formative experience of both writing a spiritual autobiography and conducting an autoethnography expanded beyond being simply individualistic to embracing cultural, human, and divine dimensions.

Conceptual Model

Developing a conceptual model, framework, or theory is a helpful way to organize and clarify the elements and relationships of some aspect of reality. A model identifies factors and indicates the interaction between the various components at play in the concept being analyzed. Drawing on past and present scholars in spiritual formation as well as other fields of study, such as psychology, the author's own experience, and scripture, the model developed in this portfolio

describes four main elements (story, desire, imagination, *imago Dei*), four main levels of story (God's, humanity's, culture's, and the individual's), and their overlap and interaction (see Figure 13, Chapter Five).

Personal Context

Our perception and approach are always conditioned by who we are and where we are located. I am a participant in, and sometimes live between, many contexts.

I am a white, Canadian female, raised in the evangelical church, with many passionate pastimes, including long-distance running, mountain biking, golfing, and fly fishing.

The professional contexts in which I am most involved are as founder and director, registered psychotherapist, and clinical supervisor at LCT Counselling in York Region, Ontario, lecturer in clinical counselling and thanatology at Tyndale University, Toronto, and researcher and writer in spiritual formation, narrative, imagination, grief, burnout and child and adolescent development as part of my doctoral studies and professional interests.

Christian faith and spiritual issues have been an important dimension of my life and work. There is a particularly deep interconnection between spirituality and psychology. My counselling, supervision, research, and teaching prioritize the integration of Christian spiritual formation and psychology.

This portfolio will demonstrate the intentional integration of specific elements of spiritual formation that arose organically while reflecting the author's experience of life. In the chapters to come, the elements of imagination, story,

desire and *imago Dei* will be developed. Each element will be explored through a different means of research and genre of writing. However, each will be continually connected intentionally in ways that show the dynamic possibilities of their interconnectedness – not only in the spiritual formation of the author, but also for the potential they hold for the spiritual formation of others and the field of spiritual formation. To give context to the discovery and development of these elements, an exploration of the author’s life will introduce the journey.

**CHAPTER TWO:
NARRATIVE:
THE CONTAINER,
THE CONTAINED,
A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Spiritual autobiography traces the experienced presence and absence of God in the personality development and events of a person's life. The exercise involves describing the context and immediate factors that shape a character and uncovers the human faults and failures, as well as divine mercies and graces. This is the spiritual autobiography of a modern western woman who discovers the depths of her desires and the only one who can fully satisfy them.

Introduction

James K.A. Smith opens his book *You Are What You Love*, with a story about Jesus from John 1:28. Jesus turns around and explicitly asks his disciple John, "What do you want?" The purpose of Smith beginning with Jesus asking this curious question was to highlight the fact that we, as humans, want. We desire. We long. Whether we know it or not, desire is at the heart of being human and is an integral part of the story of our lives (Smith 2016, 1).

As part of my doctoral work, I chose to do an autoethnography, reviewing and analyzing parts of my life as recorded in my journals (Chapter Four). I was

shocked by the findings that desire was and continues to be one of the most prominent themes in my life. My research clearly pointed to the fact that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he asked John what he wanted, what he desired. It seems this was a question I felt the draw to answer very early in my life.

Building the Container

Richard Rohr, building on the insights of Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung, founder of analytic psychology (Jung 1969), outlines a simple developmental theory on the assumption that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task, comprising the first “half” is to build a strong container or identity, it is a “doing” task. The second is discovering “the task within the task,” what we are *really* doing when we are doing what we are doing; it is a “meaning” task (Rohr 2011, 1). This perspective correlates with my lived experience. In *The Soul of Desire*, Thompson suggests that right from *in utero*, we know what it is to want. Thompson states that in fact “desire is something no child has to be taught” (Thompson 2021, 18). Children, without being told, know they want food, safety, connection and love. They communicate these wants, first through tears, and behaviours, then through words. The accessibility of a caregiver, or “attachment figure,” informs how the child understands his or her wants and how they can be fulfilled. John Bowlby (Bowlby 1997) was the pioneer of research on the bonds between child and primary caregiver. His ground-breaking work is known as Attachment Theory and has become foundational for a robust understanding of human development.

Thompson observes that a child does not just stop at desiring simply what it takes to survive. Desire matures as the child matures. If the child has had a secure attachment figure, they proceed to exploring the world and move from desiring simple things to more advanced things like toys, relationships, hobbies and vocations throughout the developmental stages of life (Thompson 2021, 19).

Mary Ainsworth, who expanded on Bowlby's attachment theory, would likely label my attachment history as "secure" (Ainsworth 1978, xxxix). My parents were both loving, dedicated, and both attended to and met my needs. As an only child, I was naturally the recipient of most of their time and attention. My dad worked a lot and my mom often suffered from migraines; however, when they could be with me, they were. I also had a number of good friends and a few close cousins, resulting in social confidence and healthy companionship.

Even with these connections, I was always happy on my own. To this day, I have never been bored and rarely feel lonely. My imagination was and continues to be vibrant and being alone with myself remains natural and comfortable.

I grew up in the 1990's in a white, middle class, evangelical Christian home. I went to church every Sunday morning and evening, mid-week youth group, attended a private Christian school, said grace at meals, and always had access to multiple copies of the Bible and then-evangelical pastor Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Good-Bye* (Harris 1997). While there are naturally pros and cons to the cultural and faith tradition anyone is raised in, I am very grateful for mine. Despite the iterative process of unlearning and relearning what Christian faith means to me as I age, the foundation built in these years was critical.

I was gifted with the love and consistency from my community that allowed me to know my primary needs could be met, so I could move on to wanting bigger and better. This was the formation of my “container.” Rohr says that during the first half of life you create this “container.” It is constructed through “impulse controls, traditions; group symbols; family loyalties; basic respect for authority; civil and church laws; and a sense of the goodness, value, and special importance of your country, ethnicity and religion” (Rohr 2011, 1, 27). This container is meant to hold all the major questions of our lives: What makes me significant? Who will support me? and What do I want? (Rohr 2011, 1). My container allowed me to explore loves like imaginative creativity, playing outside in nature, sports and, even from a very early age, scripture study and memorization.

Thompson says that Jesus knew that the desires of children would not just stay primitive – he knew they would develop and deepen, which is why he said that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Thompson 2021, 19; Matthew 18:3). My desires indeed deepened with age, and I was not afraid to pay attention to them. I surprised people by my drive and determination, and love of almost everything. However, a significant factor for my future struggles was that not only was I unsure how to handle my desires, but I was also not sure if they were ok to have at all.

Thompson explains that we learn all about our desires through our family stating that “It is here, then, in the attachment laboratories of our families that we learn to tell our story of desire. Not only that we desire but that we are delighted because

we do” (Thompson 2021, 23). Explaining and helping manage this is a tall task for any parent, mine included. It seems that while my container held space to consider desires, it wasn’t going to be strong enough to hold them all and the tensions and confusions that would come with them

Both of my parents were brought up in Christian homes and neither had a lot of money. As a result of the nature of their faith tradition, financial situations and their parents’ personalities, neither my mom nor dad had much of a chance to explore interests beyond what was necessary for survival until their adult years. Whether it was career choice or leisure interests, I gathered a distinct understanding, especially from my dad’s side of the family, that the purpose of life was to work hard and serve God. Everything else was frivolous. While I can look back and see the harm in this black-and-white, workaholic thinking and behaviour, I know my family was simply doing what they knew how to do. It is suggested that we all have a “narrative inheritance,” or places, people or situations that inform the stories we tell ourselves and live by (Bochner and Herman 2020, 286); our lives are not blank slates (Comer 2024, 99). My container was informed by the way my parents’ containers were formed, which were informed by their parents,’ and so on. This meant generational inheritance of deep commitment and loyalty to family and faith. It also meant learned survival patterns that often left limited ability to handle ambiguities in life.

I remember the first time the familiar generational patterns clashed with my unique developing desires. I was 12. I had come to love golf through neighbours who took me to the local private club to try the game. Not only was I

hooked immediately, I also showed talent. However, my 12-year-old mind had already learned that this would be problematic. Not only would my parents likely not pay for the sport, I also wasn't sure if I was *allowed* to like it. I knew faith and work were ok. But this kind of fun and experience was uncharted territory. My desire and curiosity to pursue it were strong, but not worth the risk of upsetting my parents by asking for more than I deserved. As a result, I took matters into my own hands. I asked the head professional if I could clean clubs to pay for my golf. He agreed. The next decade of my life was dedicated to paying my way as I played the sport competitively. Thompson's experience learning about his own introduction to understanding desire is eerily similar to mine as he states "It turns out my desire was frequently viewed through a lens helping me ensure that whatever it was I was asking for was permissible to request. Consequently, if I was not certain in advance that my desire was valid, I simply didn't ask" (Thompson 2021, 31). I was terrified to ask.

It was just over a year after I started working at the golf course that my uncertainty about desire turned into fear. The container I had built was revealing its holes. Until I was about 14, our family would fish on Sunday afternoons. To this day fishing is one of my favorite past times. Those summer afternoons were spent at our favorite fishing and picnic spot with two of my cousins, who were my heroes. I was typically able to keep the same work schedule at the golf course, which allowed me to have Sundays off for church and fishing. One week, midsummer around age 13, my typical work schedule changed. For some reason I had been booked for Sunday instead of Saturday. I don't remember how, but I

managed to get the shift switched back to my normal Saturday afternoon. I remember being so proud of myself for taking care of this. That evening my dad picked me up from work. I remember exactly where it was on the country road when I announced proudly that I was able to switch shifts so we could keep our fishing plans, but I wouldn't lose the hours at work. The moment that changed my life was when he turned to me at the intersection of Bethesda Sideroad and 9th line and said "You should never do anything like that. Work always comes first." My 13-year-old heart was broken. I concluded that desires were indeed bad, and I needed to learn how to handle them better. When we got home, I vividly recall sitting on the wrought iron patio set on our front porch crying. I vowed to never let my dad down again and that work would always be first.

Thompson suggests, "...early exchanges in the development of secure attachment form us into people who will eventually know that desire in and of itself is to be honoured and named" (Thompson 2021, 20). Thompson goes on to say that beyond naming and honouring desires, a child needs to know that desire itself is welcome, "even if the object of his desire is outside the boundary of what his good for him at the time" (Thompson 2021, 20).

The combination of my family's implicit and explicit rules around work and pleasure and this experience of being reprimanded told me all I needed to know: desires were there but acting on them was very problematic. The pain you feel in the meantime must be managed. You must prove you are ok to everyone in the ways *they* want you to be ok: a hard worker for my dad; perfect for my mom. Don't cause anyone stress, don't cost anyone money, don't give anyone

migraines. I deeply resonate with Thompson, who says, “I was not aware...how much energy I was burning making sure I didn’t make my father angry or my mother anxious” (Thompson 2021 31). It wasn’t too long after this that I passed out from exhaustion on the driving range after a lesson. I was completely emotionally, mentally, physically and almost spiritually burnt out by 14 years old.

Functionally Dysfunctional Container

I vividly recall the pain continuing into my early teen years. By high school, the pressure of competitive sport and working almost full time on top of schooling increased. Most of my time was still spent on the golf course. Between practicing, playing and working, I found a way of living life that seemed to manage the frustration of desires. Practicing meant I was always improving, playing would keep me fit and demonstrate my accomplishments, and working would ensure I could provide for myself, thus not being frivolous or costing my parents anything. In addition to golf, I had taken up running and mountain biking. A love for activity and sport made these interests natural. However, they soon morphed into the same purposes golf served – managing loves in ways that mitigated laziness and proved myself. My long hours of extreme work and activity were, naturally, followed by a physical crash, likely due to exhaustion. Symptoms began to present of what would eventually be diagnosed as bipolar disorder, later changed more accurately to treatment resistant depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

With the bubbling symptoms of depression and a deep fear of letting people down, my life became a perfect storm for cycles that looked like bipolar.

The highs and lows were a result of desperately feeling the longings inside me to move and create in meaningful ways that drew me closer to God; however, I was so scared that these desires weren't ok. I was scared that paying attention to them would mean I was lazy or wasting time and resources. I was terrified to let my family or God down but also couldn't resist the pull of my desires.

Another pivotal moment, much like the vow I made on the front porch, occurred a few years later at the local gym during my final year of high school. At this stage of my life, I was still genuinely enjoying exercise. I was very careful about fitting it in around work and school, but I truly had a love of movement. One day a trainer at the gym commented on how good I looked because I had lost some weight. The wheels started to turn. Until this point, weight had never crossed my mind. While I did not like myself and was managing my longings through intense workaholism, I hadn't given much consideration to my body. But the trainers' comments stuck. Over the next few weeks, I started to consider what "weight" meant. In less than a month I was counting calories and weighing myself. I figured this had to be a win-win. First of all, she said I looked good; I was happy to be seen. Secondly, this would again justify a desire. If working out and being athletic proved to keep me fit and competitive and not lazy, it would be okay.

My early twenties were just continued patterns of my teenage years. I would feel a desire, respond to it out of longing, manage it out of fear, and in a way that caused me to ultimately crash. Cycles of extreme work or leisure activities followed by a season of depression and suicide ideation. The visceral

pain of the tension of managing all I felt was too much to bear. I recall crying out to God many nights from the darkness of my room. I wondered where he was and what He wanted me to do. I was desperate to hear him, know him and please him. I will never forget the pain even my search for God caused.

My first year of post-secondary education was spent at a small Bible college in Manitoba. I made friends quickly and jumped into everything with both feet. Moving away felt like a great opportunity to have a fresh start and take managing my desires and goals to the next level. I ran every morning, joined the soccer and hockey teams, found a part-time job on campus, and joined the theology club. I also began to challenge myself to eat less than 1000 calories a day. Then 800. Then 600. I would “go to the prayer room” at lunch. I was only half-heartedly praying and wholeheartedly finding a reason to skip a meal.

My year at Providence College remains a blur. I came home for my first summer break weighing not much more than 100 pounds. My parents decided I wouldn't be going back. I thought I would be disappointed by this, but I was secretly relieved. I hated myself. I hated how I looked. I hated that I was “fat” and “lazy.” I was exhausted.

I spent that summer working a few part-time jobs and enrolled in Culinary Management at George Brown College in Toronto for the fall. I think unconsciously I believed that If I couldn't eat food, I would control it by making it. My parents thought it was a slightly odd choice as I never really showed a passion for cooking. However, they were simply happy I would be around food. A few months in, it was no surprise that this career was not well-suited for me. But,

likely an answer to my parents' prayers, I began to eat. Food has become less of a threat, although my relationship with it remains strained to this day.

I finished my culinary education and work experience after two years and turned my attention back to sports. I took a job at the local bike shop selling and fixing bikes in the summer and fitting hockey gear and sharpening skates in the winter. On my off time, I was running and mountain biking at a more competitive level. By now I had run at least three full marathons (42.2 km) and started doing eight- and twenty-four-hour solo mountain bike races. The owner of the shop admired my enthusiasm. He asked if I would be interested in opening and managing a running department in his store. I knew I needed to go back to school, but this seemed like something I could manage at the same time. The owner taught me how to start a small business and even funded the endeavor. The department was ready to open for the following spring when I decided I needed to fulfill a bucket list item. I booked a flight to Africa.

The moment I landed in Zambia I immediately regretted booking a return ticket. I spent two months exploring southern Africa. For the first time in a long time, I felt good. I certainly didn't love myself, but I somehow felt free. It was the first time since I had started working at the golf course that I had no agenda, no responsibilities and felt I could totally be myself. I volunteered at farms and bike shops, hiked and bungee jumped. For a fleeting moment, desire felt ok and my connection with it was not painful but robust and fulfilling.

Upon returning home, I quickly fell back into the rhythms and pressures of life. I started running my business and began a Bachelor of Arts in International

Development. Much like chef school, this didn't entirely make sense for me. However, perhaps unconsciously, I was yet again looking for a way to feel my desires safely and responsibly.

My business at the bike shop thrived. I started "run clubs" as a way of promoting the business. These clubs drew runners in by coaching them to run a variety of distances safely and effectively. Even though I had wonderful volunteers who managed everything for me, I physically ran with all the clubs. Many days I would run over 20 kilometers between my own training and training others. I was chronically worried about staying out of debt during my undergraduate education, so I took on another job of baking bread at the local bakery at 4:00am before I went off to school, the shop and my run clubs. During this time, I continued to run marathons and completed my first Ironman triathlon. I was convinced I was unworthy of anything unless I earned it. Throughout these years I was still attending and serving in a church and actively seeking a relationship with God through study and prayer. Even though these were means of proving myself to God, I truly desired him and was desperate to feel his love and presence.

At some point during my time at the bike shop and completing my undergrad, I was officially diagnosed with depression. I started on a mild antidepressant, but I remember that had no effect. After a particularly severe low period, I ended up seeing a psychiatrist who suggested that what I was experiencing was not just depression, but bipolar disorder. The patterns that had emerged years earlier were simply becoming more severe. I would go weeks with

little to no sleep while managing jobs, school and training. When my body couldn't take any more, I would crash into self-harm and suicide ideation for a few weeks and then the cycle would begin again. This was a time of intense self-hatred. I felt as though no matter how hard I tried, I would never be good enough or make everyone happy. My "manic" episodes were attempts at fixing this. It was all I knew how to do. I eventually ended up being admitted into the hospital. I had cut and taken pills, thinking that dying would do everyone a favor.

Attempting to Repair the Container

When I was 27, I enrolled in a Master of Clinical Counselling program at Tyndale University in Toronto. Even though I had been a part of the mental health care system for the last decade, I didn't understand the complexity of counselling or what a career as a psychotherapist would entail. While my vocational calling was still unclear, unlike culinary management and international development, a career in a helping profession did suit my personality and strengths. The six years it took to complete my masters weren't easy. I had ongoing health concerns beyond my diagnosis of bipolar. I continued to struggle to break free from the ingrained self-hate and workaholic lifestyle I knew so well, and which served as a comfortable container to function in and manage desire. However, learning about the integration of faith and psychology was slowly but surely tilling the ground of my heart and mind for what was to come.

After graduation, it was clear my interest lay beyond the practice of psychotherapy. I fell in love with Christian graduate-level education. My time at Tyndale was formative because of the structure of the classroom and the

professors who were brilliant not only in their field, but also in their understanding of theology. This awoke an excitement in me I had rarely felt. I spent hours being a teaching assistant and grader during the last few years of my degree, eager to expose myself to all the academy had to offer. After graduation I was given the opportunity to teach, which I accepted wholeheartedly. It was the first time a job felt like pure joy; it still does. My role expanded to my current position as a lecturer in clinical counselling and thanatology. Being a part of both the professional and spiritual growth in the lives of students remains one of the biggest privileges I have ever had.

Finding my niche in vocation offered a sense of relief to life. However, as my desires and dreams continued to change and grow, so did my pain. My mental health had improved dramatically. Exposure to a variety of resources throughout my education resulted in immense healing. In addition to this, my diagnosis was once again changed to treatment resistant depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Despite the challenges this presented, the categorization fit my increasing self-awareness about all I had been through and why, in a more complete way than the label “bipolar” ever did. However, in some ways, I felt as if nothing had changed since I was twelve years old, working at the golf course. I continued to feel deep internal pain and confusion. I masked the pain on the outside, but internally I was coming to the end of myself in a new way. Years and years of journal entries report endless exhaustion, depression and frustration with myself for having desires and ambitions. I hated myself for having them. Even at 35 years old, I felt guilty for embarking on an exciting new

career and participating in hobbies I was good at and truly enjoyed. I was convinced that I still wasn't working hard and any joy I experienced was a sign I was overindulgent, lazy and not working hard enough for God or for those around me.

From the Container to the Contained

In the fall of 2023, all the pain mentioned above began to catch up with me. I was entrenched in fear that if I admitted I was struggling, I would be labelled as weak or lazy. As usual, to address this fear, I relied on willpower to get me through. I hoped that if I tried a little harder, something would change. My next act of determination, which I was convinced would finally be what proved myself and brought some relief, was submitting my first academic paper to a C.S. Lewis conference in Romania. This paper discussed my discovery of the friendship of authors and apologists Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis and how each informed each other's imagination. My work on this (Chapter Three), truly ended up being a formative experience for me, and something I continue to draw on. However, the push to finish the paper and present in Romania, all while fulfilling my responsibilities as a lecturer and psychotherapist would catch up with me. It would not be the act of willpower that would change my life once and for all as I had hoped.

When I got home from the conference in late November of 2023, I tried to keep up an outward appearance of being ok. I also started my autoethnographic project which caused more strain. However, at the end of the academic year in May of 2024, about six months after, those closest to me were no longer fooled by

my attempt to keep a calm and collected demeanor. Even some of the professors I worked with saw that things were starting to fall apart. I was missing deadlines constantly; my administration was a disaster, and I was having a hard time giving appropriate support to the people who work with and for me.

At a colleague's suggestion, I contacted a life coach for help. Being in the caring profession for so long, I felt like I had exhausted all resources in terms of therapists, spiritual directors, pastors and mentors. I didn't have high hopes, but I needed something. On the first call with "Coach Jon" I explicitly remember explaining that the reason I called was because "my will power was broken." Despite my best attempts, I had nothing in me to try harder to fix things. Jon smiled and said, "This is the best place to be."

Walter Brueggemann, Protestant Old Testament exegete and theologian, suggests that throughout our life and faith journey, we move through three stages, "being securely oriented, being painfully disoriented and being surprisingly reoriented" (Brueggemann 2007, 4). The season of disorientation is one where life seems scary and unpredictable. The things that used to make sense no longer do. The coping strategies that used to suffice are no longer effective. It seemed like I was right in the middle of disorientation. Ashamed that it sounded dramatic, I knew this was where I was. In addition to years of self-hate and workaholicism that were compounding, several other significant events had occurred in the months leading up to my first call with Jon that had knocked the wind out of me, contributing to entering this season of disorientation.

Around the third session with Jon, having labelled this season of disorientation, he suggested I take a break. Naturally I listed all the reasons (time, money, work, school) that had been ingrained in me over the years for why this would not be possible. In fact, I had not been away for enjoyment since my time in Africa. Any time I had taken off was for the purpose of school, work or races. Time off was not part of the container that I had constructed. Time off meant that desires would be out of control, and I would be lazy and therefore worthless. Jon listened patiently to the rolodex of reasons I do not rest. After a moment, he asked if he could reach out to a friend who liked helping people find rest and enjoyment in Jesus. I immediately said no. I have never “received” very well and accepting help was declaring weakness. However, after some time, I relented.

The next morning, my pain continued to increase. I made an agonizing decision to withdraw from an academic conference I had been invited to – an opportunity of my dreams. I withdrew in tears and defeat; however, I knew in my heart that if somehow, I did find the energy to go, I would come back in even worse shape than I was. I went about my day in the usual fog, accomplishing only the things that would keep people from getting mad at me or losing my job. I had planned to play golf that evening. By the ninth hole I had nothing left in me. I drove to the grocery store in the pouring rain to get dinner with the intent of being in bed within the hour when my phone rang. It was Jon.

He started the conversation by stating that before he said what he was about to say, he needed to tell me something about himself. He had gone through a season of burn out as well (I was still coming to terms with the word “burn out;”

it seemed like another way of proving I was lazy). He said that when he admitted it, people from all around, some he didn't even know, were eager to help him recover. He said I needed to remember this as he proceeded. He told me he called the friend he had mentioned to me the day before. She was thrilled to help me rest and meet Jesus and offered a place in Fernie, British Columbia to do that.

Just when I thought I had run out of tears, the real crying came. I sat in my car with Jon on the other end of the phone and sobbed. There were, and still are, insufficient words to describe the pain and relief, tenderness and fear, excitement and nerves that flooded me in that moment. However, most of all, there were not words to describe something I had rarely felt before: God's gracious love.

Within a few weeks I was driving from Calgary to Fernie in a 1988 Silverado pick-up. I mountain biked and hiked 200 kilometers and 17,000 feet of elevation in two and a half weeks. I went on a number of fly-fishing trips and spent hours walking and reflecting. The first week was full of anxiety and guilt. Jon assured me I was right on time. He challenged me to consider how I could exert my God-given authority over myself to create space for a new way of being in and with Jesus. Of course this would feel wrong at the start; it is completely opposite to the way I had always lived.

Somehow in the latter half of my time away, my soul found space to breathe. I got in touch with a version of myself that I could possibly like, even though admitting that was terrifying. This self was fun, adventurous and dynamic. Brave and kind. Smart, curious, personable and calm. I later wrote these down as

characteristics of “Ferne Lyndsay” and am now seeing them as characteristics of my future self.

Inside the Container

Rohr says the second half of life involves finding out what the container is meant to hold. He suggests that the container “is not an end in itself but exists for the sake of your deeper and fullest life...” (Rohr 1, 2011). Within moments of returning home from Fernie, it was evident that if I was not proactive, I would be at risk of slipping back into old patterns of repairing my container, forgetting about all the transformative things I had experienced and learning during my time away. Coming home meant entering a sacred time: the road was paved for me to move out of disorientation and into a time of reorientation if I would choose to.

The process of transformation requires us to accept our God-given agency, step out of resignation and old ways, and lean into the possibilities of God’s love and grace. This kind of change is small and incremental. It is intentional, usually involving agonizing choices to believe that even though “what we will be has not yet been made known” (1 Jn. 3:2), we have faith in our telos, “that we shall be like him [Christ]” (1 Jn. 3:2), and that God is informing, teaching and guiding us moment by moment, starting a good work and completing it (Phil 1:6). Several weeks after returning, I wrote in my journal about who “Ferne Lyndsay” was. Many entries that followed that, once again, displayed the tension of desire – who I was and who I wanted to be and the restlessness that comes with navigating that. From a meeting with Jon not long after I made that list, I wrote that re-entering life after a meaningful experience like the one I had just had, is a sacred time

because you are living in the curse of knowledge; I knew of something different, yet felt how easy it was to go back to my old ways and habits. Rohr quotes St. Gregory of Nyssa as saying, “Sin happens whenever we refuse to keep growing” (Rohr 2011, 50-51).

I had experienced the love and grace of God in my life in a way that sparked my imagination, hope and desire in a way that strengthen me to resist the temptation to “refuse to keep growing” (Rohr 2011, 50).

Learning how to live in the creative tension of desire remains difficult for me. I came out of the first half with a container that was built for character development and a commitment search for the love of God; but one that could not hold ambiguity. I am now seeing that my unique experience of the tension of desire is a part of my personhood, and a way I can connect to my future self and the *imago Dei* in me. My container, through faith and imagination, can hold so much more if I am willing to let it. This is a choice.

This chapter of my life seems to conclude with an invitation. I am being invited to take hold of agency and receive God’s grace. I am being invited into the story of a future self that is not simply about managing desire to achieve and avoid letting people down. It is the story of a self that is receptive, accepting, creative, constructive, and contributing; a self who has and delights in desires that ignite her imagination and leads her to the *imago Dei* and into the deep love of Jesus.

The process of examining our own stories often means placing ourselves within or around the stories of others. Finding commonalities or bumping up

against the same difficulties or joys of others is a way we come to realize our lives contain “stuff” that is relevant and felt by others. It is both validating and vulnerable to read or hear or see that our experiences and someone else’s overlap in unique ways. It is also an experience that helps with finding meaning in our experiences. Bumping up against the stories of C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers was that for me. Discovering their friendship and the way in which they encouraged each other’s imagination became part of my formational story.

CHAPTER THREE:
IMAGINATION:
DOROTHY SAYERS, C. S. LEWIS AND ME:
A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

One fruitful resource for personal formation and increased understanding of the field of spiritual formation is spiritual biographies. During a study of the work, lives, and friendship of two Christian authors and apologists from the early 20th century, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) and Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), I was surprised and inspired by their attention to imagination and the friendship that transpired. This discovery led to the formative experience of formulating and presenting the impact of their imaginations on my own academic, vocational, and spiritual flourishing at the *C.S. Lewis: The Re-enchanted Academic* interdisciplinary conference in Romania in 2023 (Thompson 2023).

Engaging with the stories of other believers is important to the development of a more robust picture of what is involved in spiritual formation. Through the study of biographies, such as those of Sayers and Lewis, the reader is welcomed into the experiences and the life of another human. This creates an opportunity to observe the processes of formation and transformation and the challenges inherent in living the Christian faith. Reflection and sometimes even

an imaginary dialog and relationship between the reader and the author may result and from this insights and practical lessons may emerge.

This account begins with how I encountered Lewis and then Sayers during my study of imagination. How discovery of Sayers friendship with Lewis and their shared imagination impacted my academic, vocational and spiritual flourishing is then outlined. The conclusion reflects on the likelihood that embracing an interdisciplinary approach to academics, vocation and spiritual formation is a key to recovering a “baptized” imagination as C. S. Lewis experienced and called it (Lewis 1995, 172); one that is holy, shaped and inspired by the truth of the Gospel, and committed to creating as God creates.

The friendship that developed between Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis in their shared interest in imagination and writing was remarkable. This friendship took place during an exceedingly challenging time in history and crossed both social norms and distance. Sayers’ abilities as a novelist, playwright, and theologian developed under Lewis’ encouragement, and she challenged him in return, with their sparring developing into a lasting bond. A personal appreciation of Sayers’ and Lewis’ friendship, which was characterized by respect for humanity, unquenchable quest for truth, commitment to an unapologetic love of God, and adventurous pursuit of a robust and holy imagination provided me with unanticipated inspiration leading to the flourishing of academic, vocational and spiritual growth.

Meeting Clive Staples Lewis

It was a hot August day in Toronto, Canada, 2017. I can't remember how I decided to start listening to the audio book, but that was the day C.S. Lewis' *The Space Trilogy* (2013) stole my heart. Any spare moment I had that day I listened and in less than a week I had finished Audible's twenty-seven hours and twenty-seven-minute presentation of the story. From the adorable creatures I imagined the Hros to be in Malacandra, the "floating islands" and "green lady" of Perelandra, to the deep appreciation that Mr. and Mrs. Denniston like weather as much as I do, I experienced a part of myself I never had before. I had always been a C.S. Lewis fan, loving *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis 1995) as many children raised in evangelical homes like mine did. However, traveling into space with Lewis was different. Since that day, I have listened and read the book countless times, each time being moved more than the last. Upon reflecting on this, I have realized that beyond a love of science-fiction, I was introduced to Lewis in a new way. It was exceptional that this was a man who could create fictional characters like Ransom and the "green lady" and settings like Malacandra and Perelandra could also write some of the most impactful apologetic works most people will ever read. Though not imaginations of fiction, his academic commentaries and apologetic treatises were imaginatively created. As I read more about Lewis, I became curious about how someone could be and do so many things.

Exploring My Vocation

At the time of discovering what seemed like the limitlessness of who Lewis was in 2017, I was embarking on discovering all the limits of who I was.

The end of my Master of Clinical Counselling and the beginning of working in the field of psychotherapy brought hope and disappointment. My life up until this point had been one of twists and turns; trying to believe experiences were not dead ends but feeling like they certainly were. A lifelong struggle with misunderstood depression left finding a strong sense of who I am, what I love, and what I am called to do still feeling impossible many days. However, the milestone of graduation and start of a career felt like an opportunity to finally feel like I was going somewhere.

Over the next few years, advancement in a career in psychotherapy did inspire me. By 2020, I was also teaching in the field of graduate counselling and thanatology. I found an unmatched energy arise in the classroom. Learning with and from students touched yet another part of me. However, the feeling of connection and meaning I felt on that August day never left. With so many academic fields and personal interests, I was confused and unsure where I fit. Practically and academically narrowing myself to one or two topics or areas of speciality discouraged me. There was no way I could do that after having experienced even a tiny bit of how deep and wide Lewis was able to study and live life. The push-pull of trying to find the field where I belonged and the experience of having many eclectic thoughts and ideas at the same time continued as I started a Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation.

Meeting Dorothy Sayers

About halfway through my doctoral program in 2022, I approached my supervisor asking if I could write on *The Space Trilogy* (Lewis 2013). It had felt

like my north star for so many years. I wondered if perhaps analyzing it and myself would offer me some sort of hopeful information about being a “jack of all trades but [seemingly] master of none.” My request was met with “We have another idea for you. Have you heard of Dorothy L. Sayers?” I was embarrassed to say I had not. It was explained that she was a friend of C.S. Lewis and someone worth studying. I said I would do it immediately, despite the sadness of leaving the opportunity for further study on Lewis behind. My relationship with her has been complicated from the beginning.

I went to the library to check out the much-loved *Lord Peter Wimsey* series (Sayers 1982) Sayers is best known for. Lord Peter did not enrapture me as I had expected and hoped. Dismay growing again, I ordered a few biographies on the author and tried to be excited to try again. This is when I was surprised by Sayers.

By the end of the first biography I chose, *A Careless Rage for Life* by David Coomes (Coomes 1992), I was completely confused by who this woman was. Sayers both fascinated and distressed me and I was unsure if I was inspired or intimidated by her. The inferiority complex I had been battling for years slammed into Sayers bluntness. I did not read anything for a few days contemplating telling my supervisor Sayers and I were incompatible. However, I tried again, this time picking up Sayers’ *Mind of the Maker* (Sayers 1941). While her candid approach was still audacious, a beautifully imaginative side came out as she spoke of metaphors for understanding God (Sayers 1941, 26). I softened and decided, I needed to get to know her better. What followed was the unexpected discovery of myself.

Getting to know Sayers was not easy. Sayers lived during a time where being a brilliant woman making culturally questionable decisions would have been very problematic. From having a baby very few knew about, to willingly confronting what she felt was stupidity in anyone, her tenacity must have been strong simply to survive.

I could imagine Sayers walking into the room where I was reading, dressed in some extravagant fur coat with a big brooch on the collar smoking a cigarette (she apparently cared a lot about how she looked and died still smoking fifty cigarettes a day). She does not knock and tells me what is wrong with the book in my hand.

I critically reflected on this imagined scenario, gathering self-reflective data. I realized I was projecting from my inferiority complex; my insecurities of being less-than, stupid and inferior were about to get in the way of opening myself up to learning from one of the most brilliant minds I would ever come across.

Dimensions of Their Friendship

As I worked through my initial struggles reading Sayers, I became curious as to how Lewis, who seemed so gentle in comparison to her, could ever be friends with someone like this. Yet, somehow, he did accept her, even with geographical and gender differences in the way. He accepted her in all realms of her life: author, creator, scholar, follower of Christ, human. She did the same with him. They mutually encouraged each other academically, vocationally and spiritually.

Scholarly Friendship

Lewis and Sayers met through fan mail. Lewis states “Dorothy Sayers...was the first person of importance whoever wrote me a fan letter. I liked her, originally because she liked me; later, for the extraordinary zest and edge of conversation—as I like a high wind” (Dalfonzo 2020, 45). A mutual love of and career in writing gave the friendship a natural starting point. Many of their letters contain discussions about their vocation as creators and the use of imagination. In 1946, a series of letters exist, many of which contained “several pages of protest and explanation,” on the right attitude towards the work or vocation of “writing” (Lewis 2004, 730). While “clearing up [a] misapprehension” with Lewis about the correct way to respond to God’s call to write, Sayers’ states the only “apparatus” by which she can understand or announce any “truth” God gives to her to write about, is through intellect and imagination. However, she is quick to be clear that separately, intellect and imagination “can do nothing” and restated her most important instrument as “imaginative intellect” (Lewis 2004, 730). Another correspondence in December of 1955 shows the friends wrestling with the way society at the time was understanding the term “imagination” (Lewis 2007, 683). Sayers’ shows great frustration that people were not taking the time to understand the intricacies of the faculty of imagination, and simply lumping the nuances under the term “fantasy.” Lewis responds to Sayers’ frustration in agreement and takes the time to distinguish what imagination is as well as its particular uses (Lewis 2007, 683).

One of the most obvious ways Sayers and Lewis existed in each other's life was through a mutual congratulating of strengths. This is something remarkable given each other's backgrounds during this period in history. Remembering that Sayers was one of few women seeking higher education during a season of world wars (Reynolds 1993, 98), giving and receiving encouragement in a male and female relationship was uncommon. Dozens of letters exist expressing acclamations back and forth between the friends. On March 18th of 1942, Lewis calls *The Other Six Deadly Sins*, an address Sayers gave at Westminster England, "one of the few things which [was], within its limits, perfect" (Lewis 2004, 564).

Three years later, in December of 1945, Sayers encouraged Lewis after unexpectedly poor reviews of *That Hideous Strength* (Lewis 2013), the third book in *The Space Trilogy* (Lewis 2004, 682). However, encouragement need not exclude constructive criticism, and that was true of them. Suggesting areas for improvement to each other was a feature of their scholarly relationship (Dalton 2020, 68).

Vocational Friendship

Beyond a giving and receiving of encouragement and constructive criticism in their writing and presentations, they also worked together professionally. Correspondence shows them recommending each other for various jobs, some which would suit one more than the other. In June of 1946, Lewis wrote Sayers stating he was asked to "approach her" for a collaboration on a

Christian Dictionary and clearly offers her first choice in how to contribute to the project (Lewis 2004, 721-722).

Vocation, or the dignity of work, was something Sayers was especially passionate about. Both her fiction and non-fiction address the importance of a wide range of different occupations. From “Bill,” a converted lock smith who plays an integral part in solving a murder in *A Strong Poison* (Sayers 1930, 150), to an entire essay entitled *Why Work?* (Sayers 1949), Sayers frequents the importance of meaningful engagement of one’s time and gifting. Sayers clearly admits she has a self-proclaimed “obsession” about the “right attitude towards work” and that this is due to the repercussions of a post-war world (Sayers 1949, 63). She holds the conviction that vocation is a critical part of being a human and a follower of Christ. In the opening paragraphs of her essay *Why Work?* she articulates that work should not be something that is dreaded, but truly something to be looked forward to as innate in us and an act of worship to God (Sayers 1949, 63). Sayers’ also demonstrates in her fiction and her own life that work cannot be done alone. Even the incredible Lord Peter Wimsey could not solve crimes without help, including the help of Bill the locksmith (Sayers 1903, 150). Sayers likely needed Lewis’ friendship to come to full realization and fulfillment of her calling as well, seeing in each other gifts they may have missed on their own (Dalfonzo 2020, 13).

Spiritual Friendship

Perhaps the most complex area of their friendship was their lived experiences of faith. Both had upbringings that included faith, and both went

through “seasons of rebellion” before becoming formidable apologists (Dalton 2020, 9). As their writing career (and likely their own self-awareness) matured, so did their stance on what it meant to be a follower of Christ. While Sayers may have rarely darkened the door of a church, she held unapologetically to creedal truths and had little time for “Christians” who used religion as merely a dispensable guideline (Sayers 1949, 31). In *The Dogma Is the Drama*, she passionately writes about not treating God as if he is a “house pet”, but rather to remember the Lion of Judah has claws (Sayers 1949, 6). This is an echo of Lewis’ description of Aslan: “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you” (Lewis 1995, 80).

However, both were nervous about what it meant to share their beliefs publicly. Letters were exchanged about how each felt about being called an apologist (Lewis 2004, 728-729). Sayers, in particular, expressed discomfort because she felt that not only did she not have appropriate training to be called a theologian, she did not want to deflect Christ being honoured to herself: As Janice Brown, English literature professor and specialist in the work of Dorothy L. Sayer, comments, “She sees herself humbly, as a flawed participant in the work of the Kingdom of God, and, even more than Lewis, she was extremely apologetic about being an apologist” (Brown 2018, 48). Yet perhaps it was in the midst of conviction and discomfort that spiritual formation occurred for the friends. The quest for Truth must always take place in community. Parker J. Palmer, Quaker sociologist, educator, and activist states,

Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves. This dialogue saves personal truth from subjectivism, for genuine dialogue is possible only as I acknowledge an integrity in the other that cannot be reduced to my perceptions or needs. (Palmer 1993, 55-56)

Indeed, Sayers and Lewis stayed in genuine dialogue, discussing imagination and holding each other accountable for theological integrity until the day of Sayers death.

Formational Effect

This account of their academic, vocational and spiritual friendship only scratches the surface of the years and ideas Lewis and Sayers intentionally shared. I also know that I am only at the beginning of learning about the kind and depth of their friendship. However, its impact on my own life in the same areas has already proved to be formative.

The Learning Community and Interdisciplinarity

A great strength we see in work and relationship of Lewis and Sayers is importance of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity means the welcoming and intentional integration of multiple academic fields (Swora and Morrison 1974, 45). It takes openness, intelligence, and imagination to make it work. Interdisciplinarity can occur in one individual. For example, Lewis drew on fields, such as English literature, theology, philosophy, and mythology to name only a few.

However, interdisciplinarity can also be enhanced in and through community. Palmer, for example, suggests a philosophy of education that rests on

the belief all education occurs in community and that “we can know reality only by being in community with it” (Palmer 1998, 97). This “knowing reality” needs to include multiple disciplines and points of view. This suggests that through intentionally welcoming others into a shared experience of learning, we have the opportunity to experience reality because we have exposed ourselves to each other. This is the heart of interdisciplinarity to me: we bring ourselves and our disciplinary expertise to each other to be embraced in light of and because of our differences, to inspire shared imagination in community. While Lewis and Sayers shared many similarities, they were also very different. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, they welcomed each other. As a result, we are left with their legacies in a wide range of topics, ideas and hopes of what could be. It is part of what makes their influence meaningful and able to transcend generations.

Academic Effect

At the time I first encountered their friendship, I was trying to find an academic and professional box into which to fit. But neither Lewis or Sayers fit into just one box, nor did they require it of each other. They welcomed ideas on many topics and never limited the others’ ability to imagine (Lewis 2004, 683). Thought was deep and wide and accepted. They both honoured training and expertise and welcomed that these could be discovered in many ways, while also not allowing those to become constraints. Sayers states that even with all the information we have, we often put ourselves into unnecessary categories. She says in *The Mind of the Maker*,

Our minds are not finite; and as the volume of knowledge increases, we tend more and more to confine ourselves, each to his or her special sphere of interest and to the specialized metaphor belonging to it...and it is now very difficult for the artist to speak the language of the theologian, or the scientist the language of either. But the attempt must be made. (Sayers 1941, 30-31)

Sayers and Lewis encouraged each other beyond prescribed limits or self-imposed restrictions. Lewis was not a murder mystery author; Sayers was not a professor or tutor. However, they learned with and from each other. It must be made clear that this is not a reference-less pluralism, accepting anyone's own construction of truth. Nor does it suggest a lack of pursuit of excellence in the field in which one is working. It means recognizing that each of us bear the image of God who is Truth. Through intentional community and generous sharing of imagination, expertise and experience guided and inspired by the *imago Dei*, we can welcome each expression of this Truth as God has chosen to display it in each of us. It is also recognizing that our individual stories overlap with others' stories and, together, these overlap with God's story

As I have journaled, reflected and reviewed literature, it is still challenging to give myself permission to approach my own education in an interdisciplinary fashion, exploring topics beyond the suggested materials of my fields of psychotherapy and practical theology. However, I am noticing that the friends, mentors, professionals, peers and students that have had the greatest impact on my life do so because what they bring to me that is beyond my area of specialty. I have learned to be a better psychotherapist and professor by not only those who have taught me excellence in clinical thought and practice, but by those who have taught me how to read fiction, learn bird songs, play with children and fly fish.

Vocational Effect

A similar notion exists as I reflect on my work as a psychotherapist and professor. As Sayers often conveyed, God created us to imagine, create and work, yet we have lost the joy of work, the call to be co-creators and to delight in this (Sayers 1949, 63). Sayers' writing is almost prophetic on these accounts. Written 81 years ago, her call to imagine a society where work is seen as worship could have been written today. Sayers states (though not using inclusive language, as was the style of that day),

work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God. (Sayers 1949, 73)

Much like my struggle to allow myself to learn and embrace the joy of many things, I have struggled with what it means to embrace meaningful work. As mentioned, feeling confined to having to be an expert in very defined fields, left me feeling a lack of hope. Sayers and Lewis were experts, however they welcomed whatever God put in front of them, whether writing fiction, work in advertising, teaching or explaining and defending the Christian faith, as meaningful occupations and did it whole heartedly, an echo of Paul's admonition, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord" (Col 3:23 NASB). This gave me permission to allow myself to embrace what God puts in front of me knowing I can be an expert, and still wholeheartedly embrace a variety of opportunity and intentional integration of interdisciplinarity in and through vocation. This requires permission to imagine.

Permission to use my imagination has impacted how I approach both classroom and therapy settings. Lewis and Sayers demonstrated how story, fairy tale, myth, personal narrative, and previous experiences with vocations impacted our own lives as well as interactions and relationships with others, which is critical in understanding the lives we have and live. Not only did Sayers and Lewis draw on voices and culture of their present time, but each was also committed to drawing on those who went before them. Permission to bring in thoughts from the past, not only from scholars in the fields of psychotherapy and thanatology and practical theology but also from lessons learned in literature has been critical for ethical case conceptualization, cultural sensitivity, rapport with students and clients, and their own learning and building of meaning and metaphor.

Spiritual Effect

Finally, the culmination of academic and vocational friendship came together in spiritual flourishing. Palmer states,

Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth – whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trust that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. (Palmer 1993, xi)

Sayer and Lewis were my first encounter with a friendship that was a lived experience of embracing true, God-given and inspired imagination, which is to me, an integral part of authentic spiritual flourishing.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the past is vital for both present and future. The lives of C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers are more relevant now than ever. Their prophetic ability to imagine academic, vocational and spiritual flourishing in multidisciplinary ways within a sustained constructive relationship is exemplary. Their convictions about the theology of what it means to be human addresses conflicts we face today just as well as they did during their friendship 80 years ago. Lewis and Sayers friendship shows interconnection of academic, vocational and spiritual growth by embracing one another's imagination, intentionally offering each other the space to be and see the world and therefore God in their own unique ways. They cared about what each other thought, giving each other permission to imagine and create from what God had given them to create with.

I smiled when I read that Sayers asked Lewis what colour the “green lady’s” hair was in *Perelandra*. Lewis stated that he asked Ransom, who did not remember. However, Ransom did say he remembered her eyes. They were violet (Lewis 2004, 578). I imagine they were eyes likely created through the inspiration of friendship and shared imagination.

This interaction with Lewis and Sayers occurred a few months before I embarked on autoethnographic research. I did not know it at the time, but looking back, I see how learning about their depth and potential of their shared imagination may have strengthened mine for the stretching and truly transformation experience that was about to take place, as I analyzed myself in a way I never had before

CHAPTER FOUR:
DESIRE:
DISCOVERING DEEPER PATTERNS IN A LIFE:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Desire, or felt need, is a significant and natural part of human experience yet one that is often overlooked or misunderstood, especially in spiritual formation. It is an axiom in spirituality that temporal things cannot satisfy our deepest desire, which is for reconnection and communion with God.

This exercise in autoethnography describes the author's use of qualitative analysis to explore themes and patterns in her life which highlighted the role of desire and the tension inherent in desire in her spiritual formation. Prior to working on this autoethnography, the author wrote a spiritual autobiography and constructed a model of spiritual formation that focused on how desire, imagination, the theological concept of *imago Dei*, and various stories or narrative frameworks inform our personal and spiritual growth.

The Project

This project stemmed from curiosity about what informs and drives the prominent stories in my life. While multiple themes and connections emerged from the data, this exercise in autoethnography focuses on the main theme of desire, and its psychological and spiritual implications.

Autoethnography

Ethnography is the immersive and qualitative study and description of a specific community or individuals in a particular culture. Autoethnography is a methodology in which researchers use their own lives as the subject of their study. It “seeks to systematically analyze and describe (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experiences” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 273), even regarding the person as a kind of culture with distinct behaviours, symbols, beliefs, and attitudes. As a “postmodern research method [it has] become increasingly popular” (Le Roux 2017, 196). Communications scholar, Andrew F. Herrmann, argues that autoethnography, though focused on the self is not self-centered research in a narcissistic sense but is rather an act of love, starting by caring for the self which allows a true caring for the culture and people in it (Herrmann 2002, 67, 75). This perspective will be revisited in the conclusion.

Spiritual formation pays close attention to the experiences of the people and the influences that shape their inner selves. This methodology helps to do this systematically and objectively. A number of authors have demonstrated how to take this path, such as Wendy Anne Bilgen in “Looking to Autoethnography as Spiritual Practice” (Bilgen 2022), Louise Long in “Narrative Autoethnography and the Promotion of Spiritual Well-being” (Long 2008), E. James Baesler’s “Searching for the Divine: An Autoethnographic Account of Religious/Spiritual and Academic Influences on the Journey to Professor” (Baesler 2017) and Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs in her book *Critical Autoethnography and Spiritual Discovery* (Tilley-Lubbs 2017).

The Problem

Important and personal questions surfaced while writing my spiritual autobiography, engaging in assisted self-reflection, answering questions raised in my counselling sessions and classes, and studying spiritual formation: What are the most consistent stories I tell myself? What has influenced these stories? How do I understand God in these stories? Why have I always had difficulty understanding God's love? How is spiritual transformation undertaken despite the difficulties life presents? These were not just academic questions, but questions vital to my own spiritual and emotional health and growth. Attending to psychospiritual issues is critical for my wholistic well-being and the ability to be effective over the long-term in my vocations of therapy and education. Ultimately, I wanted to experience communion with God, to be conformed to Christ, the image of God, and participate in God's mission in a way that conforms to the way that God has made me, and the Spirit continues to shape me. The desire for deeper relationship with God was a recurring theme throughout my spiritual autobiography. I recognized that these were also concerns for spiritual formation in theory and for others.

The Response

An exercise in autoethnography was chosen for its potential to provide personal insights for the author, broader insights applicable in the fields of counselling, education, ministry and spiritual formation, and to familiarize myself with one method of qualitative research relevant to spiritual formation. It was anticipated that this form of qualitative research would uncover one or two

important themes that would provide insight into the questions that had arisen in my spiritual autobiography. Through the identification of these themes, the anticipated outcome was to reveal what might be happening deeper in my life that was causing these questions to exist and often feel unanswerable.

The first phase of research took place in November and December of 2023. The second phase occurred in July of 2024.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

This project was accomplished under the supervision of the course professor and approved by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board on November 9, 2023 (Appendix A). The advisor for the final project of the doctoral program (a portfolio, including my spiritual autobiography, a model of spiritual formation, and this spiritual formation action research project), was a consultant and interlocuter. Conversations with the advisor assisted in broadening an understanding of the field of spiritual formation, refining research questions and analyzing and considering meaningful applications of data.

Because I was the subject of the project, permission and access were not issues, although my own commitment and ability to be open did matter. It must be noted that this research was done in two sections.

The research was as diligent, thorough and rigorous as possible with the intention that the outcomes would be applicable to communities around me, to the extent that my experiences were not idiosyncratic but common.

Context

The subject of this research is the researcher's own life. This focus was prompted by other assignments in the Doctor of Ministry Spiritual Formation program and by the kind of counselling and education ministry in which the researcher normally engages. These areas of ministry and vocation prioritize ongoing understanding of one's own life for ethical practice. However, the researcher also viewed self-awareness as essential for spiritual transformation and as a means through which individuals share in life and experience. As a result of the consistent and ongoing role self-awareness plays in the researcher's own life, it was decided that the researcher herself, was an appropriate context to study.

The Researcher as the Researched

Carolyn Ellis and Tony Adams state that autoethnography is an approach that considers personal experience to be an important source of knowledge. The individual who both goes through the process and creates the product of autoethnography, does not do so simply advanced self-awareness (Ellis and Adams 2020, 359). This approach to research offers an intentional way to allow personal experience to contribute to culture in ways, such as "breaking silence, and maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty" (Ellis and Adams 2020, 259). To do this, an individual takes on a challenging dual role of both researched and researcher. Conducting this project using the foundational principles of autoethnography required detailed attention to these co-existing roles. Frequent conversations with my advisor provided a sense of grounding and a way to clarify and differentiate the presence of researched and researcher.

Continued literature review allowed me to juxtapose what was uncovered in myself against already published findings and was a way to measure the reliability of what was uncovered.

As the researched, I am a 38-year-old white female. I work as a registered psychotherapist and a university lecturer in clinical counselling and thanatology programs. I live in the greater Toronto area in the same house as my parents. I am an only child. I grew up in a Christian family, but understanding and believing that God loved me unconditionally was always a challenge. This uncertainty has followed me through life and impacted me in many ways. A lifelong struggle with mental health has also been a significant factor. One of the elements that sets autoethnography apart from other methods of research is its access to “insider knowledge” (Ellis and Adams in Leave 2020, 368). The experience I have had specifically as it pertains to my journey through mental health, my vocational experiences in psychology and education and my spiritual transformation have indeed provided me with unique and valuable information. Ellis states that the value of this type of insider knowledge does not stay at the level of self-help but expands to using what was found to contribute to meaningful growth in society (Ellis and Adams 2020, 368). The choice of autoethnography gave a sense of hope that by being “the researched” there was an opportunity to more thoroughly understand a few specific elements of my own unique journey of spiritual transformation that may support others who may have had similar struggles, especially in their understanding of God’s love.

The Researcher

As the researcher, I have a master's degree in clinical counselling and am pursuing a Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation. I have many certifications in various theories and methods of counselling practices. These include Focusing, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). I have worked for a variety of psychotherapy clinics, each providing counselling to different populations of clients. In 2019, I started a private practice which has evolved into a small group practice. Most of my clinical work focuses on children ages seven to twelve and their parents, as well as individual adults. I also provide clinical supervision to other therapists. In addition to my clinical work, I continue to lecture in related fields.

During my master's education, I became increasingly interested in the integration of theology and psychology. The experience of seminary gave me the lived experience of how vocational and theological training can connect in transformative ways. As my field experience and education increased, I became more convinced that my faith and theology would impact my work as a therapist. I also began to experience the transformational connection of faith-informed psychotherapy. As I continued to research this, I realized that many of my findings had a direct correlation to the study of spiritual formation. It is important that the autoethnographer, as the researcher, is familiar with work and research that is being done in the areas they have chosen to address. My work as a therapist and lecturer proved to be effective ways to strengthen the role of "researcher" (Ellis and Adams 2020, 368).

Implications

Experts in the field of autoethnography, such as Tessa Muncey (Muncey 2014) and Ellis and Adams (Ellis and Adams 2020) and Cheryl Le Roux (Le Roux 2017), emphasize, “personal experience cannot be separated from social and relational contexts” (Le Roux 2017, 200). If this is the case, a method such as autoethnography, which explicitly explores personal experience and its inherent connection to social relationships, holds the potential to provide meaningful data that can touch the lives of many due to the likelihood of its relatability. It is suggested that the data that often comes from the narration of a personal experience is an “acceptable, feasible and indispensable kind of data from which to make meaning and use in research” (Le Roux 2017, 200). Because of the dynamic reality of the researcher being researched, the individual conducting autoethnography must be diligent in maintaining rigor in methods and treatment of data to ensure ethical and meaningful results. If this is maintained, resultant autoethnographic data may bear fruitful implications. My hope for this study was that through analyzing selected elements of my own life, implications could be made that would inform a specific realization about the process of Christian spiritual formation.

Background Resources

This autoethnography was inspired and informed by several other personal writing projects and assignments, as well as a selection of psychological and theological theories.

Background from Spiritual Autobiography

My spiritual autobiography paints a picture of both the researched and researcher. It highlights important childhood experiences and relationships. While the autobiography was not a data source for this research project, it served as an important document that confirmed themes and patterns that stood out in the data analyzed. Three important themes that emerged were longing or desire, willpower, and confusion. These factors were present in my life and impacted my spiritual formation.

Background from Model of Spiritual Formation

My theory of spiritual formation was first inspired by an increasing awareness of the role story in our lives. A quote from George MacDonald's fairy tale, *The Princess and the Goblin*, was the catalyst for deeper thought around the impact story has. MacDonald writes, "every little girl is a princess. She needs to have stories told about her because she's in trouble of forgetting about her rank and acting as if she grew up out of the mud" (MacDonald, 1920). This quote captured my imagination and put into image and words many of the thoughts and tensions I had been considering. MacDonald aptly depicts the power of hearing and believing stories that articulate the truth about who we are, specifically the truth about our identity in Christ.

I was inspired to consider a theory of Christian spiritual formation that captures the dynamics of the journey of connecting to God's ultimate story of love, redemption and freedom – something we deeply long for. As my research progressed, it was revealed that there are four elements that are sometimes

unnamed or underdeveloped in spiritual formation models: *imago Dei*, the image of God, in which humanity was created, and which is the intended *telos*, God's ultimate plan and purpose for humanity; desire, which is the core motivation for our journey; story, which gives us a narrative framework; and imagination, which is one of the critical means by which we apprehend our true story and purpose.

My impetus for this research came from observing, in both my spiritual autobiography and model of spiritual formation, a deep desire to story life towards something meaningful, and the tension that exists as this is wrestled with. James K. A. Smith writes, "to be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be embarked on a kind of unconscious journey towards a destination of your dreams" (Smith 2016, 10).

Background from Biographical and Memory/Narrative Research

In addition to my spiritual autobiography and model of spiritual formation, this exercise in autoethnography was influenced by several themes that arose during previous research projects. The MacDonald quote that inspired this model of spiritual formation came to my attention during an earlier research project, reported in Chapter Five, in which MacDonald's concern that the princess was at risk of forgetting about her truest identity was considered (MacDonald 1920, Root 2021). MacDonald's emphasis on memory led me to explore how "time, memory, and narrative are inextricably linked" (Bochner and Herman 2020, 287). This informed an earlier directed reading and research project that provided rich literature base for this autoethnography and provided a deeper understanding of

how experiences and the memories of them inform how we understand ourselves and our relationship with God and others, thus impacting how our lives are storied. Professor of Psychology, Jefferson A. Singer, argues that indeed, memories are critical to developing the stories that inform our identity. He states that different types of memory and patterns of memory are “building blocks of ongoing identity (Singer 2004, 442),” and he suggests that this process of organizing life is done through collecting, “accounts of past events that range from brief anecdotes to fully developed autobiographies. These accounts rely on vivid imagery, family plot structures... and are often linked to predominant culture themes or conflicts” (Singer 2004, 442). However, many memories put us at risk of believing insufficient storylines. In addition to this, as MacDonald suggests, some things are completely forgotten. This means relying on our own memories and stories may not be sufficient. This means turning to Scripture for the ultimate rehabilitation of memory and story. This research also introduced me to important conversation partners, such as the authors, Christian apologists, and friends C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers. Not only did I glean deeper understanding of story and memory through their work, I also learned from their commitment to community, friendship, vocation and intentional spiritual formation. Lewis and Sayers demonstrated the transformative power of friendship and a shared imagination, and the impacts of these on academic, vocational, and spiritual flourishing. This inspired a project critically reflecting on how their lives, relationships and development of imagination impacted me (Chapter Three).

Background from Psychological, Psychoanalytic and Theological Theory

Psychological, psychoanalytic and theological theories also informed this project. A few of the main guiding theories and voices have been psychiatrist Murray Bowen, a pioneer of family therapy (Kerr and Bowen, 1988), Edward John Mostyn Bowlby, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, notable as a child developmentalist and for his pioneering work in attachment theory (Bowlby 1988), C. G. Jung (Jung 1979), comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (Campbell 1988), psychologist Erik Erikson (Coles 2000, Erikson 1963), Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (Hagberg 2005), C. S. Lewis (2017), and Ronald Rolheiser (Rolheiser 1995). These scholars and theories cover research in family systems, developmental psychology, stages theories, mythology, theology and spiritual formation. Each have not only informed my work as psychotherapist and lecturer, but also my personal growth and spiritual formation.

Methodology

In this section, the nature of the project, methodology used, and methods by which it was conducted will be discussed.

The methodology for this project was autoethnography, a form of qualitative research. The goal of this approach to research and writing is to understand the researcher's personal experience, with the purpose of contributing to a specific cultural context or concern (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 273).

Field

As indicated, the field of the research was my own life and person. Both phases of the project sought to look at factors that impacted my psychospiritual growth. The second phase looked specifically at four different time periods of my life. Why and how these were chosen will be outlined in paragraphs that follow.

Scope

This example of autoethnography is very focused and delimited to one main theme that arose from the data. The scope of both the first and second phases of the project remained consistent, i.e., an analysis of my feelings, beliefs, and behaviours as documented in my available journals from college to present. The data was not applied to a particular cultural context but to an understanding of a specific experience that informs Christian spiritual formation.

Method

A discussion on methods serves the purpose of outlining in a comprehensive manner the ways in which this autoethnography was undertaken.

Decision to Use Autoethnography

The Ministry-Based Field Research course (DMSF 0943 2023-2024) in Tyndale University's Doctor of Ministry program requires students to conduct a research project that analyzes his or her ministry context and considers the implications of the research for ministry and personal development. A critical part of my vocation and ministry in both counselling and education is the role of one's self in the process. In clinical counselling, the "person of the therapist" and "safe

and effective use of self' are foundational to ethical work (Aponte 2022; Aponte and Kissil 2016). Throughout my continued education and experience, the place of spiritual formation has become inextricably connected to understanding both concepts.

As a result of the critical place that development of the person has, the method of autoethnography was appropriate for two reasons. First autoethnography offered the opportunity to explore myself in a systematic way. Using an accepted qualitative research method was an important opportunity to expand ways that are available to get to know oneself. The second and more important factor that commended this method was that the goal of autoethnography is not just self-awareness for its own sake but to cast light on the cultural context, in this case involving theology and a Christian tradition.

Spiritual formation must take place in community. However, it is imperative that as members of the body of Christ, in and for community, we continue the work of self-development, "Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ; we must no longer be children." Eph. 4:13-14). As a result, the methodology of autoethnography was chosen because of its ability to analyze spiritual formation of the individual but with the purpose of applying how this formation impacts community (Ellis and Adams 2020, 359).

Approval by the Course Instructor and Research Ethics Board

This autoethnographic research project was submitted first to the instructor for the course Ministry Based Field Research. After this was approved, the proposal went to the Tyndale University Research Ethics Board which approved it on November 9, 2023 (Appendix A).

First Phase

In the first phase of this project, journals from roughly the past ten years of my life were reviewed, looking specifically for themes related to stories I tell myself about who God is, who I am, where these stories come from (movies, songs, art or perhaps conversations with people), when these stories were received (seasons, stages or circumstances of life), and what I seemed to receive (something about God's love for me or an incomplete story I have constructed for myself). This was targeted research rather than a more open observation.

After the initial review of my personal documents, the project was to collect something every day that depicts or expresses the story I have heard related to the above questions, anything from a newspaper article to a piece of art, a photo or something from nature. The information was then to be put together in the form of Bricolage.

Bricolage is a modern qualitative research method which produces "a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings and interpretation of the world or phenomenon under analysis" (Andrew and Karetai 2022, 95). This method is attributed to French

anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and particularly his thoughts in *The Savage Mind* (Strauss 1968). Strauss was interested in the idea that good research often includes interdisciplinarity and nuanced ways of putting together the researcher's data, training and experience. A researcher who uses Bricolage (called a bricoleur) is "someone who is skilled in performing a large number of tasks" (Ben-Asher 2022, 1). This methodology is "a combination of the researcher's imagination with all the tools of knowledge at their disposal, using a rich repertoire of rituals, meaningful objects, observations and social practices (Ben-Asher 2022, 1). Bricolage captured my attention as a method for my project because of my experience with interdisciplinary work and research, as well as having the opportunity to express findings in a creative way. It is also a method that shows great potential for meaningful thought and reflection in psycho-spiritual care (Iaslas 2014; Bone 2009; Devenish-Meares 2020).

The original timeline got pushed back significantly because of circumstances with the Research Ethics Board unrelated to this proposal. As a result, the self-study was compressed between November 20 and December 31, 2023. Unfortunately, not only was the timeline shortened but it came at a time of physical, emotional, and mental depletion. Almost immediately upon beginning, I experienced deep discouragement, fatigue, and resistance to engage. However, I did journal my thoughts and feelings. In one entry I wrote, "The first few weeks I could not bring myself to look for God's story of love anywhere. It felt like too much work." This feeling and state of mind existed through the entire research period.

As the time approached to analyze the data that was emerging from the original research period, it was apparent that the project was not going to be completed as planned. I needed to attempt another approach to the project.

One difficulty I identified was that I was confronting one of my core difficulties head-on, i.e., desiring to feel loved by God. Even when I was trying to come up with a research question at the start of the process this “confrontation” approach left me feeling lost and a failure. I decided that it would be better to zoom out to look at the whole context to see just what was there and if there might be hints as to why my first attempt seemed unachievable.

Second Phase

During the time of planning for the second phase of the autoethnographic project, I was emerging from a season of burn out that manifested strongly after the commencement of the initial autoethnographic project on November 20, 2023. I was unexpectedly gifted a three-week period to recover in June 2024. During this time, I experienced a profound shift mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. In light of this bottoming out and turning point, it became prudent to include journals from this most recent season. It turned out that the data from these journals was pivotal, as well as the perspective I was able to obtain after a time of rest.

Journals as Data Source

For the second research phase, the past personal journals that were available to review were still used, but in addition the journals that were kept

during the first attempt of the research project and following were included. That data sets became three journals (labelled 1, 2 and 3) from 2004-2005 “First Year College,” three journals (numbered 4–6) from 2019 to 2022 “Early Career Years,” three journals (7–9) from 2023-2024 themed “Burning Out,” and two journals (10 and 11) from 2024 during the “Turning” period.

In addition to these journals, my spiritual autobiography written in 2021 and transcriptions from coaching sessions in 2024 throughout the burnout and turning phases were used as background data. Although these items were not content analyzed, they served as additional anchor points and verification for insights that arose from the analysis.

Journal Samples

The entries that were transcribed from each journal were sampled systematically using periodical entry, the frequency depending on the length and number of the journal entries.

The first three journals were large, but filled with images, newspaper articles and other notes and short written entries. They were sampled using every tenth entry. Starting with Journal 5 (after the one-hundredth entry) the sampling frequency was changed to every twentieth. For all other journals (8-10), the entries were far fewer so all entries were included.

Sampling keeps the data manageable while random sampling ensures there is no bias in the selection. However, because I have knowledge of the journals and my life, I know that many critical events happened during the years of journals that were transcribed. Many of these events were either not documented, or not

part of the sample. The sampling still accurately reflected my experience, but if I were to do this type of research again, it would be more satisfying to include a greater number of entries which may yield a richer analysis. It was also unfortunate that the journals from 2006-2019 could not be located.

Entry of Data into Qualitative Data Analysis Software

As the journal entries were selected using protocols described above, they were transcribed by the researcher using *Google Transcribe Voice to Text*. After all the journal entries were transcribed, they were entered into a data analysis software program, *Delve* Software. *Delve* is a cloud-based computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) tool with many accompanying articles and training videos (Ho and Limpaecher 2024).

Content Analysis and Coding

After the selected journal entries were entered into *Delve*, the next step was coding and analyzing the data. The methodology of content analysis was chosen to guide this process. This methodology is often used for data found in cultural communications in order to understand how individuals talk to one another. It is interested in “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” according to English professor Karen Swallow Prior (Prior 2020, 541). Throughout the course of my life, I have used journaling to communicate with myself and with God. With the additional interest in revealing more about story in my life, a methodology that regards the data as pertinent information about communication and storytelling was fitting.

Codes were created to organize the data. The first codes were based on related words or ideas that were repeated, e.g., a repeated idea was concern about weight gain and overeating. These broad or umbrella codes were meant to capture large but recurring themes. These themes included God, Work, Fear, Desire, Movement, Keeping to Self, Mental Health, Will Power/Effort, Uncertainty, Food/Body Image, Emotional/Physical Response. In some cases, “in vivo” codes, which employ the actual words or phrases of the speaker (Saldaña 2020, 890), are used. This became particularly important as there were many actual phrases I said repeatedly across the timespan of the journals, including “should” and “so lost.” Table 2 displays the umbrella codes and their frequency.

The umbrella codes were then broken down into subcategories. The subcategories were developed to better understand the broader themes represented by the umbrella codes. For instance, the umbrella code of desire was able to be further nuanced to see what, in particular, I desired, such as my desire for God. This subcode was in some cases further broken down into a third level of categories, e.g. desire to look for God, desire to know God, and desire to understand God. The umbrella and subcategory codes, their frequency, and sample phrases are displayed in Table 3 (Appendix B).

Table 1. Umbrella Codes and Frequencies

Phases :	1 st Year College			Early Career			Burning Out			Turning	
Journals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Date 2000's	'04	'04	'05	'19	'20-'21	'22	'23	Nov Dec '23	Jan May '24	Jun-Jul '24	
Code	Frequency										Total
Emotions	2	1	5	13	20	17	12	14	19	2	105
Desire	7	3	21	4	22	6	8	5	11	12	99
Will Power	3	8	21	6	8	1	2	12	4	7	71
Mental Health	1		6	6	16	4	7	4	9	0	53
Fear	7	2	6	3	5	6	3	2	5	12	51
Rules to Live by	14	4	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	43
Uncertainty/Confusion	2	1	2	5	0	0	5	10	2	2	30
Body Image	2	2	13	0	0	0		0	5	1	23
Positives	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	14	0	18
Secrecy	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	4	1	10
Love of Movement	1			1	1		0	0	0	3	3

Entry of Key Words into Word Cloud Software

In addition to *Delve*, a word cloud generator (*Free Word Cloud Generator* 2024) was utilized to provide an additional layer of analysis. Word clouds turn documents or word lists into an image that displays by size and prominence how



Figure 6. Word Cloud from Journal 5–2020-2021



Figure 7. Word Cloud from Journal 6–2022

Phases and Timetable

Table 2 contains the timeline of this project:

Table 2. Timeline of Project

Date	Events
September 5, 2023	Original research proposal approved by course instructor
September 8, 2023	Proposal submitted to Research Ethics Board
November 9, 2023	Approval received from REB
November 20, 2023- December 31, 2022	First research phase
July 1- August 1, 2024	Second research phase: Journal transcription and content analysis
August 1-31, 2024	Interpretation and writing research report

Ethics in Ministry-Based Research

Because the focus of this project was my own life, concern for power differentials, dual relationships or authority not relevant. I had conversations with individuals throughout the duration of my research, however the people I spoke with were not considered participants, nor were the conversations considered to be sources of data.

As indicated at the outset, autoethnography requires the researcher to take steps to maintain the clarity of positions of both the researched and the researcher. I engaged in literature review and consultation with my advisor, to help maintain this distinction to the best of my ability. In the process, I developed the ability to even have a dialog within myself between the “researcher” component and the “researched” part and these distinctions were carried into my conversations with my advisor and in the writing of this report.

One factor that required intentional and ongoing attention was monitoring how the depth of the research and the vulnerability in exposing it could impact me personally and professionally. During the second attempt especially, I committed to ongoing work with a Christian life coach and intentional conversation with my advisor. I also sought prayer support from my church community. Vulnerability in this autoethnography was required and became part of the reason that this project became spiritually formative.

Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

The heart of this project has been to discover patterns in my life which influenced how I perceived incidences that became narratives, specifically those related to God's love. Findings from the second phase, though informed by the first phase, revealed the integral theme of the role of desire and its impact on spiritual formation.

Findings

To organize findings from the coded journal entries, three tables were created. Table 1 is a set of the main or umbrella codes used. The journal where the coded content was found as well as its frequency is indicated. Table 3 (Appendix B) contains the umbrella codes as well as the subcodes that were derived from them. This table also indicates the frequency of these codes and verbatim examples of the coded text from a journal. Table 4 is a frequency count from each word cloud created for each journal. A number of findings flowed from the data captured in these tables.

Table 3. Word Counts from Journals 1-10

Journal:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Word:										
Mind	7									
Know	7				15	7		11	*7	
Want		10	9	6		8	6	13	*6	
Lord	7	6	9				*5			
Time		7	7		*7					
Please										
Help			7				*5			
Really				5	11		6	11	9	5
Word				5						
Day					10					
Trying					*9					
Work					*8					5
Feel						8	8	11	15	
Need							*5			
Rest				5						5
Today							6			
Just									12	
Lost									9	
Fun										*14

*Not top three but notable

The first significant finding was the consistency of themes for over twenty years of my life. Journal entries from 2024 often sounded identical to ones written in 2004. These findings seem to indicate that there were, and continue to be, core patterns and concerns in my life that remain consistent with time. The tables display that although the frequency of the themes changed depending on the season of life, the presence of the themes stayed consistent. As I gradually uncovered this, I felt both validation and pain. I felt validated in that what I was constantly feeling was confirmed. I felt pained because despite the constant work on myself – through counselling, reading, spiritual direction, church attendance,

engagement in various spiritual disciplines and education – I still struggled with many of the same issues.

The second finding was identification of desire as the most consistent and frequent theme. The word clouds indicate the use of the word “want” as being the most consistent and present. As the one who was researched, I know my use of the word “want” was synonymous with desire. I can make this connection based on the understanding of my use of these words in my current context; “I desire” would rarely be used but would indicate the same deep longing and passion as “I want.” Desire is also a more frequently used word in spiritual and psychological literature. The word clouds also show the use of “really,” suggesting a sense of urgency or even passion for those wants or desires. These findings are consistent with themes that were present in my autobiography and inspired my model.

The next finding was the prominence and frequent mention of physical reactions and symptoms. There was a significant presence of painful somatic experiences throughout all journals. Situations involving mental health challenges seemed to correlate with more frequent mention of physical sensations, such as exhaustion, migraines and nausea. While this does not mean physical pain occurred in the exact same entry as the occurrence of a presenting mental health concern, it would be a reasonable assumption that during times of mental and emotional difficulty, physical pain was also persistent (Thompson 2010). While this was not a surprising observation, it did evoke a sense of compassion towards myself. Reading about the decades of physical pain I had endured offered a unique opportunity to step back from the lived physical experience and observe

myself as if I were someone else. If someone else had experienced this degree of pain, I would feel deep compassion towards them.

It was also observed that over the time of the first attempt at research, many of the themes related to somatic experiences were acute or enflamed. This was only an eight-week journal and the frequency of references of physical distress were as high as samples from journals much longer in length. This may indicate that something abnormal, or at least significant, was occurring. Taking the stance of the research subject, I know that was an extremely stressful period and the specific tasks I required of myself for the research enflamed areas of my life that were already tender. Requiring myself to look for God's love in a more intentional and even strict manner was a small example of how I have lived much of my life – willing myself to try harder.

While the observations mentioned above are most significant, many others were made. For example, journals one to three, held a high frequency of themes coded as “rules to live by.” This was a significant observation for a greater understanding of human development and its correlation with spiritual development. These journals occurred during my early adult years, a time when Erikson suggests that understanding identity and relationships are critical (Erikson 2000). As the researched, I know that setting standards or “rules” for myself was a way of trying to understand who I was and how I would fit in. For example, I felt that if I created a rule, such as limiting unhealthy eating, this would prove my identity as a healthy, disciplined person and would increase the likelihood of proving my worth to anyone: my parents, my peers, myself and God. In this

season of my life, my journey coincided with stage one, “The Recognition of God” and stage two “The Life of Discipleship” of Hagberg and Guelich’s *Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Hagberg and Guelich 2005) Much like Erikson’s stages, stage one and two of the critical journey highlight the role of making meaning, the fight against feeling worthless, letting go of rigidity and accepting our unique gifts and ways we can contribute to our faith communities (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 28, 67). It was enlightening to see the overlap between the stage I was at developmentally and how I was developing spiritually. While everyone’s human and spiritual development is different to some extent, I am curious about the frequency of overlap between stage theories such as these.

Another notable finding was that the majority of any exceptions to my typical negative thoughts or feelings or behaviours, that is, positive experiences and feelings, exist primarily in Journal 10 during what was considered a rest time and which I labelled as a “turning point.” This was not surprising to see as it was an experience that pointed to foundational truths about who Jesus is and the life into which he invites us (Matt. 11:28-30). However, like many of the other observations, seeing my thoughts and feelings in the form of data in tables was humbling as it showed the reality of my experiences in a clear way.

Interpretations

Looking back on painful seasons of life is often challenging. This analysis and interpretation practice helped me maintain an objective stance as researcher and stay grounded for my day-to-day work. During the initial rounds of coding, I had moments of feeling emotional and frustrated. While the content of the data

was not surprising, I found it jarring to see parts of my life displayed quantitatively in charts. At times it was painful to see not only the volume of thoughts and feelings but the longevity of their existence. I intentionally spent time in prayer and reflection as I worked through the data as a way of orienting my thoughts and feelings towards Jesus' grounding peace and love. I engaged in the interpretative task maintaining the dual stance of the researched and the researcher. (Any areas where I drew upon my experience as the researched are explicitly noted.)

Interpreting the data associated with desire was a rich experience. The findings indicated that not only did I desire many things – a relationship with God, health, vocation – but I also desire them strongly. The words clouds indicated the use of “really” frequently. When I referred to the primary sources, “really” was often attached to “want” which I know is synonymous with desire.

The frequency and depth at which I desired created tension. The data shows I was frequently very confused about what to do with these longings. My spiritual autobiography expands on how my childhood informed my understanding of desire. From a noticeably young age I was unsure if having desires was allowed. If I felt them, I was immediately fearful of feeling them too much or in a way that would make my friends, family and even God upset. I interpret the data as having a constant sense of wanting to experience fulfillment of desires but being fearful of not doing this well or appropriately. Rolheiser suggests that a great tension does indeed exist with how to deal with heart desires. How God says our desires are to be filled and what the world says are

exceptionally contradictory. Rolheiser states “the world both intensifies and trivializes our restlessness” (Rolheiser 1995, 12). To manage this, I would attempt to increase my willpower. I heavily relied on strong willpower to push through the frustration of the contradictions I felt regarding my longings and manage pain and confusion that came with it. When the tension persisted, I assumed personal responsibility for it – that the reason for not feeling satisfied was that I was not looking hard enough for God to give me the answers or trusting him enough to see and experience his love which would guide me to how to morally and adequately meet my desires. I have come to see that the transcending force that truly manages the tension of desire is God’s grace (see Figure 12).

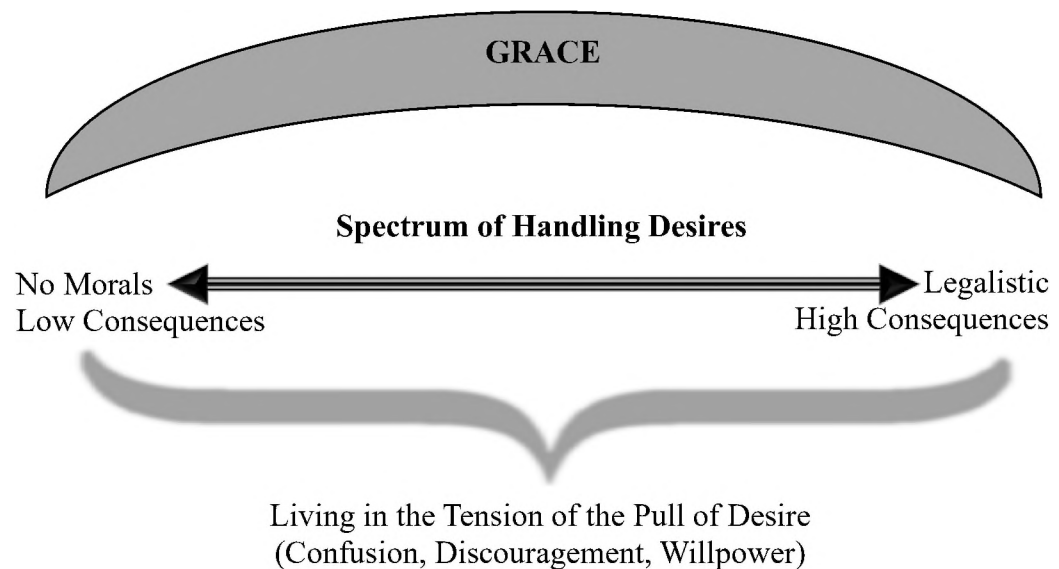


Figure 12. The Tension of Desire

This attempt to mitigate frustration by looking hard for God was the impetus for the first phase of my project. I felt that if I created a project that forced me to look more intentionally for how God was revealing his story of love

to me, I would find it, and this would prove that I simply had not been looking hard enough.

A significant interpretation of the data is the potential relationship between desire and mental health. There is typically no one cause for any mental health concern, however there are often multiple risk factors that can contribute to an individual experiencing mental and emotional distress. From the data produced in this research, I am hypothesizing that one factor contributing to both my mental health concerns and my physical pain was the pressure I put myself under to live up to the rules I set for myself. These rules were informed by my family of origin and were discussed in my spiritual autobiography. These rules or standards were meant to ensure I would handle desire in the most ethical and moral ways that would guarantee I had made my best attempt to please God and those around me. This method of managing desire was ineffective. My strategies were based on incomplete stories I constructed from my upbringing and did not consider God's story of love and freedom. As a result, denying desires completely or managing them with forceful willpower led to burn out due to the physical, emotional and mental pain caused by the pressure I put on myself. This pain added to what I already experienced daily due to the presence of the mental health diagnosis I live with.

The hinge or turning point in interpreting the data came from observing the exceptions to the general pattern. In Journal 10, the most recent, it seems I come closest to having desires that satisfy my deep longing for adventure and peace and that glorifies God at the same time. This volume was journaled during

an unexpected, gifted season of rest. It was the first time in over two decades where I was provided the opportunity to step away from all obligations and still have all my needs provided for. This time occurred in a location that was perfectly suited to my passions of hiking, running, mountain biking and fly fishing. This surprising gift was the antithesis to how I believed life was to be lived. The themes of fear of wasting time and money, being lazy, feeling lost and confused as well as physical pain were, for the first time countered with rest, gratitude, peace, fun and an extraordinary sense of God's grace. This is the hinge point of my research because the fulfillment of desire came not from willpower and searching, but from receiving and simply being. Rolheiser suggests that it is through an inward journey towards rest in God that is the antidote to our restlessness. He states "this restlessness cannot be stilled by a journey outward. It is inward that we need to go. Inside our own, actual lives, beyond our restless yearnings and fantasies, God, love, community, meaning, timeless significance, and everything else that we search for, are already there" (Rolheiser 1995, 12). Rolheiser draws attention to Augustine's famous quote, which is the epigraph to this portfolio, and which perfectly articulates the summation of the interpretation of this data when he says, "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest on you" (as quoted in Rolheiser 1995, 11). It was truly not until I gave in to grace and rest that I began to understand my lifelong restlessness in a new way.

As a result, I have interpreted this data as suggesting that there is a deep need to pay attention to the restlessness and tension all humans experience due to the need to fulfill God-given instinctual desires, most importantly the "homing"

instinct of the *imago Dei* towards God. Based on lived experience, professional training and work, and literature research, I have concluded that tensions of desire are universal even though individually experienced. These desires are part of the human condition and are the main drivers in our lives. Understanding desire is critical to understanding how God created us. If we can understand this, we are better able to understand ourselves and our community. Because desires can be demonized or lead us astray, as well as can be appreciated and lead us to God, understanding and responding to desire is a critical element in Christian spiritual formation.

Outcomes

The first major outcome from this autoethnographic exercise was the realization of the multifaceted role desire plays in our lives and how we experience it. As Proverbs 13:12 states, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life;” we deeply feel both fulfilled and unfulfilled desires. Drawing on Rolheiser, it is critical to honour that we are “infinite in yearning and infinite in capacity. Yet, in this life, what we meet is never the infinite but the finite” (Rolheiser 1995, 6). As my model suggests, we are created to desire and live into God’s story of love and redemption. We long for this. However, if we do not have a framework for addressing this, we are at risk of turning to the world’s standards for meeting our desires. A framework for understanding longings is culturally relevant as we live in a desire-driven culture that looks at fulfilling these longings in inadequate or harmful ways. Before this research, I was not aware that desire has such a profound impact on our lives, and

more specifically, my own mental health. The most significant outcome was not only confirmation that desires exist in our lives and drive our behaviour, but an understanding that these roles and functions are an integral dynamic in the human person and their relationship with others and with God.

A personal response to this outcome was to prayerfully and intentionally observe how my past informed my understanding of desire and how this continued to impact my life. The confusion I felt about desire and the strategy of employing willpower to manage confusion was limiting and destructive, ultimately leading me to a point of physical, emotional and mental pain that could no longer be momentarily solved through my own willpower. It was only through unearned grace, love and provision during this deep season of burn out that I was able to admit my limits and turn to God and his abounding grace to meet the deep longings in my heart. While this is an area for further discussion, there is a link between honouring limits and finding fulfillment of desire. Again, Rolheiser articulates this well suggesting that it is “renunciation that has the potential to healthily ground us in reality in a way that, to my mind, few other experiences can” (Rolheiser 1995, 7). It was forced renunciation of depending on my willpower that led to the place where I was able to accept the invitation to rest which is where the beginning of change occurred.

The second personal outcome was a sense of agency. Childhood attachment patterns and journey with mental health informed a belief that much of what I experience in life I have no control over. I often felt resigned to a sense that God’s will for my life was a painful one and this is something I would have to

accept. However, observing myself through a qualitative research lens reminded me that in fact through the power of the resurrection of Jesus, we are given powerful agency as heirs to royalty. Much like my draw to MacDonald's quote, we have the right and responsibility to choose to live into our inheritance and full story, which includes the unique yet universal gift of desire. We have a choice about how we honour these tensions in our lives. Qualitative researchers Arthur Bochner and Andrew Herrmann (Bochner 2020, 286-7) suggest that we can "re-story our lives, revisiting the meaning of the tales in which we have been immersed, constructing new storylines to *help us exert agency and control over life's possibilities*, ambiguities, and limitations. In some of our stories, we claim ourselves as heroes; in others, we are dreamers; in still others, we are traumatized victims or survivors" [italics mine]. The data, which is also supported by my spiritual autobiography, reveals a story of learned patterns of coping and managing desire through human willpower, and very little on choosing to depend on the unmatched grace of God. Thompson articulates that yes, "coping can be necessary at times, but it is not life in its fullest. It is not the agency of creativity" (Thompson 2021, 73). The moments that were opposite to this main story line occurred only when willpower was no longer physically possible, and unexpected grace was received and thus imagination and creativity renewed. Through this experience, I began to see that in fact, there were other ways of understanding desire and pain and that I did have a choice in how to respond to situations and experiences in life.

Implications

I have only scratched the surface of discussing interpretations and outcomes of this data. There are many opportunities for further exploration and development. One such opportunity is more explicitly addressing desire and its role in spiritual formation in and through community. While all formation occurs in community, this research has looked at the formation of an individual, while acknowledging the role of community in formation. I will specifically focus on four implications and some general conclusions which I feel are most pertinent.

The Role of Desire in My Life

The first implication is in regard to my own self-awareness and self-acceptance. My spiritual autobiography illustrates that since childhood, I have been highly energetic and passionate, deeply feeling the weight of desire in my life. Data from this project shows that this continued into my adulthood. This is an important implication for two reasons. First, it is an invitation to accept myself. Being someone who feels desires and pursues them with passion is part of who God created me and an integral part of my “personal story”. The subcoded themes in my data show that one of my most deeply felt desires was to truly know and be who God created me to be. I constantly felt tension and torment because I was never sure if having desire was ok. I felt guilty for the energy, passion and dreams I had and therefore thought that I must not be living correctly or understanding who God made me to be. This led to deep discouragement, self-loathing and it directly impacted my ability to manage my mental health diagnosis. I resonated with Rolheiser’s statement that “the first, and deep reason [we are tormented], is

that we are congenitally overcharged and overbuilt for this earth, infinite spirits living in finite situation, hearts made for union with everything and everybody meeting only moral persons and things. Small wonder we have problems with insatiability, daydreams, loneliness and restlessness. ...to be tormented by restlessness is to be human” (Rolheiser 1995, 3). As my autobiography shows, my restlessness came out in patterns that were categorized as bipolar tendencies. I was constantly trying to find opportunities that would both sooth the frustration I felt and please those around me; This could be working multiple jobs or running hundreds of kilometers.

The Role of Desire in Mental Health

The second implication was towards a more ample understanding that the degree to which one feels passion and tension may be a factor in understanding some mental health concerns. As discussed, I often attempted to use willpower to get myself through the incredible pain of feeling longings and not knowing how to appropriately respond to them in ways that were both authentic to me and would please my parents and God. I was in constant fear that the desires I felt were wrong. Despite using will power to do everything I knew how to do to ensure my actions would please my parents, and my beliefs aligned with Biblical teaching, the pain between between who I was and who I thought I had to be became too much to bear. This was likely a factor leading to hospitalization in 2009.

In his book *The Myth of Normal*, Canadian physician Gabor Maté highlights two needs in life: attachment and authenticity (Maté 2022, 105).

Attachment is the core need to know we are cared for. As mentioned in my autobiography in chapter two, this theory was first developed by Bowlby who suggests that as children we need to have a secure base from which we can learn about ourselves and the world (Bowlby 1988, 11). This secure base is typically our mother. Here we learn what it means to be physically, emotionally and neurobiologically safe. Dan Siegel, another best-selling author and psychiatrist talks extensively about the power and importance of attachment figures from birth to death (Siegel 2012, 9). The availability and strength of these relationships impact how our nervous systems learn to relate to ourselves as well as others and to God.

The second need Maté highlights is authenticity. Maté defines authenticity as “the quality of being true to oneself, and the capacity to shape one’s own life from a deep knowledge of that self... to be true to a sense of self arising from one’s own unique and genuine essence...” (Maté 2022, 107). Maté goes on to say that although both attachment and authenticity are true needs, there is a “pecking order”: attachment always comes before authenticity (Maté 2022, 107). As children, we will always put the need for connection to another human before being authentic. This is outlined in my autobiography through the many ways I expended energy on ensuring my parents were pleased while I hid my authentic desires. I used willpower to push through the pain this caused. This led to enflamed symptoms of depression. Maté agrees that when we receive the message that some parts of ourselves are better than others, we cannot be authentic about

our full selves and the likelihood of experiencing something like depression increases (Maté 2022, 107).

As both my autobiography and autoethnography show, fear of upsetting my most important attachment relationships caused me to willingly push past authentically expressing and experiencing desire. While I was not raised with a sufficient framework from which to understand desire, exploring this on my own was not worth the risk of upsetting my parents or God. Because authenticity is such a core need, as Maté suggests, being unable to express it has deep implications on the human. I can see that for me specifically, the implications were increased symptoms of depression as well as feelings of self-hate. Maté suggests that while authenticity is a critical need, we cannot achieve it by striving for it or earning it; it comes from a place of love and complete acceptance (Maté 2022, 375). It can be argued that the most perfect place of love and acceptance is found in a relationship with the triune God – the most perfect attachment figure and the one in whom we experience our most authentic selves. As such, an implication of this study is the necessity to highlight the connection between relationship with God, authentically expressing desire, and experiences of mental health. As seen in my life, this connection has some significant impacts on psychospiritual health. These impacts are worthy of further discussion.

The Role of Desire in Spiritual Formation

The third implication is about desire and transformation. The data from this project and the narrative of my autobiography demonstrate the pain misunderstood desire caused me. However, it also shows that desire was the only

force that was strong enough to lead me to God’s love. While willpower proved to be a force that allowed me to accomplish and survive for a brief period, it was not sustainable, nor did it lead to life God invites us into which is experienced and demonstrated by the fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22). However, the force of desire was experienced differently. As explained in my autobiography and just above, my upbringing was insufficient in explaining the role of desire and how to manage it. When I was able to come to a new understanding of the role of desire, chiefly through the outcomes of this project, I realized desire is a force stronger and more loving than willpower. Well-formed desire feels like love and offers freedom and fulfillment. Prior suggests that indeed to be fully awakened to life in Jesus is to “desire what we are created for” (Prior 2023, 34). Augustine of Hippo speaks of the awakening that comes with this realized desire as he confesses,

I took too long to fall in love with you, beauty so ancient and so new. I took too long to fall in love with you! But there you were, inside, and I was outside—and there I searched for you, and into those shapely things you made, my misshapen self went sliding. You were with me, but I wasn’t with you. Those things, which wouldn’t exist unless they existed in you, held me back, far from you. You called and shouted and shattered my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you put my blindness to flight. You smelled sweet, and I drew breath, and now I pant for you. I tasted you, and now I’m starving and parched you touched me, and I burst flame with desire for your peace. (Augustine 2018, 10.38, 312-313)

Augustine clearly states that he deeply felt desire but attempted to fulfill it in insufficient ways. When he finally realized his desire was for God and allowed God to take hold of him, his desires were both deepened and satisfied by the vastness of God’s goodness and peace.

When this understanding of desire is realized, it is then that desire becomes a critical element moving us towards transformation into the likeness of Christ.

The Role of Desire in Counselling and Christian Education

A final implication is for my work in counselling and Christian education. I am determined that a theology and psychology of instinctual desire could deeply impact how we view the human person. I am convinced that some people's mental and emotional pain may be a response to the tension of never being able to achieve holistically spiritual access and satiation of desire. Considering the role of desire and tension would provide the therapist with another lens to look at both safe and effective use of themselves as well as a lens to observe presenting concerns of clients. A next step to addressing some of these thoughts may be to construct a set of indicators or questions that may prompt conversations about what one's desire is, how they know this, how they are filling this, and if the way they are experiencing this desire and any related tension is drawing them closer to God's story of love and redemption. This conversation could also prompt an even deeper understanding transference and countertransference which is critical to a healthy client therapist relationship.

Conclusion

Helpful insight on the nature and power of autoethnography is offered by Herrmann in his chapter, "Autoethnography as Acts of Love" (Herrmann 2022, 67). He draws on the ideas of existentialist theologian and philosopher, Soren

Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who himself often wrote in first person narrative, about love (Kierkegaard 1962) and argues how these ideas parallel with the purpose of autoethnography. Herrmann contends that “autoethnography is, at heart, about love...connects to three imperatives described by Kierkegaard: love of self, preferential love and agape love” (Herrmann 2022, 67). While Kierkegaard was not an autoethnographer *per se*, he wrote in first person narrative and his work provides important basis for understanding the construction of meaningful personal narratives in which an understanding of self and love are critical.

This project did not go as I had imagined and initially hoped. My initial proposal proved to be one that was unrealistic and in fact enflamed the issue I was trying to address which was finding God’s story of love in my life. However, the second phase was quite surprising and fruitful and, I believe, truly demonstrated love as a verb.

The methodology of autoethnography provided me with a significant opportunity to look at my life in a way that is not often afforded. Through content analysis on a sample of journal entries, I observed long-standing themes and patterns of how I handled instinctual desires and their impact on my mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. These observations, allowed for a dynamic connection between spiritual formation as well as psychotherapeutic and theological theories and voices that speak to the themes and curiosities that arose. This experience demonstrated that autoethnographic exercises hold potential for both personal and scientifically valuable insight and application.

For me, the transformation was a shift in narrative from one of self-hate, frustration and disappointment, to one of accepting grace and love from others and God, which led to an increased acceptance of who God created me to be. My story changed from one of fear and desperation of not being good enough or working hard enough to find God's love, to one of receiving grace and love that is completely unearned.

When describing the role of love in autobiography, Herrmann draws the reader's attention to the well-known passage in which Jesus states, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-40). Herrmann suggests that theologians are quick to discuss loving God and loving your neighbor but often focus less on loving self; in contrast Kierkegaard thinks a robust understanding of self-love is critical. He is emphatic that it is the exact opposite of self-centeredness, with which it is often associated. "For Kierkegaard self-centeredness involves a narcissism that disregards others, whereas self-love necessarily includes our love for others" (Herrmann 2022, 70). This is critical to good autoethnography because it is not simply about self in a self-centred or self-absorbed way but rather an essential stage toward genuine and healthy love for others.

This captures my experience of spiritual transformation well. My constant struggle with self-hate was highlighted through the data. Through this autoethnographic practice, I was able to gain better insight on what it means to

love myself and see myself through God's eyes and how this informed my understanding of desire. Herrmann says,

Autoethnographers do not come out and state that being self-reflexive is an act of self-love. However, when one ponders the self-reflexive parts of autoethnographic writings, self-love is there in the midst. These autoethnographic acts of love are self-reflective ascertainings and implementations of where and when to "care for the self." (Herrmann 2022, 71)

This exercise did increase my care for myself which allowed me to come to a humble acceptance of grace and love that was given through God and through others. The power of receiving grace would not have been noticed if it were not for this exercise. In addition to this, while my reflection has been on my personal experience, it would not have occurred if it were not for community, which Herrmann and Kierkegaard suggest is critical to autoethnography as an act of love.

Desire was the final element of the quartet of spiritual formation factors to emerge strongly. What took place after this discovery was the realization of the deep interconnection of desire with the other elements of story, imagination and imago Dei. This interconnection will be explained and displayed through the development of a model of spiritual formation focusing on these components.

CHAPTER FIVE:
THE ROLE OF
DESIRE, IMAGINATION, *IMAGO DEI*, AND STORY
IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION:
A MODEL

As a contribution to a more general model and theory of Christian spiritual formation, four critical elements of the transformational process are identified, described, and inter-related: desire, imagination, *imago Dei* and story. They are then further developed within four levels of narrative: God's story, humanity's, story, culture's story, and the individual's story.

Introduction

Christian spiritual formation is the process of acquiring the attitudes and virtues of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:1-8) who is the image of God (Col. 3:12-14) for the glory of God (Col. 1:15) and for the sake of others (Eph. 1:12). Christian spiritual formation is a journey of connecting to God's ultimate story of love, redemption and freedom; this is what we long for. This journey to spiritual maturity takes personal commitment, the support of the Christian community, and the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, who uses a variety of means of grace to sustain us and bring about our transformation. While this is first and foremost a

personal and experiential journey, the understanding and description of it takes significant scholarly work.

Contemporary theorists and writers in spiritual formation, such as Evan B. Howard in *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Howard 2018), Diane Chandler in *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Chandler 2014), Dallas Willard in *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Willard 1988) and Robert M. Mulholland in *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Mulholland 1993), present comprehensive models of spiritual formation and describe in detail the mysterious transformational process itself. They highlight the requisite ingredients of Christian spiritual formation without which the journey to Christlikeness cannot take place. Primary among them is knowing and aligning with truths revealed in the Bible, including the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the intentionality of spiritual practices and participation in Christian community.

Despite areas of overlap, these scholars differ in how they present their theory and what they emphasize. Mulholland emphasizes the role of the Spirit and Christ, personality, spiritual disciplines, community, and the classical three-stage journey of purgation, illumination and union (Mulholland 1993). Howard enumerates the object and aim of formation, the context in which it occurs, agents and means involved, as well as the process and task of formation itself (Howard 2018, 19). Chandler promotes a model of spiritual formation that is about a

balanced approach to connecting with the *imago Dei* for “internal formation for external effectiveness,” emphasizing several formational dimensions which have the potential to reflect the glory of God: our spirit, emotions, relationship, intellect, vocation, physical health and wellness and resource stewardship (Chandler 2014, 152-3). Willard suggests a model he calls the “golden triangle” of spiritual formation, which is an acceptance of the hardships of life, interaction with God’s spirit in and around us, and the intentional practice of spiritual disciplines (Willard 2006, ch. 4).

Four Critical Elements in Spiritual Formation

Some important elements have come to my attention through research and personal experience, although they seem to be sometimes overlooked or underdeveloped in spiritual formation models. These include *imago Dei*, the image of God, in which humanity was created, and which is the intended *telos*, God’s ultimate plan and purpose for humanity; desire, which is the core motivation for our journey; story, which gives us a context and narrative account, and imagination, which is one of the critical means by which we apprehend our true story and purpose.

Each of these elements are intricately connected, both in the transformational process of spiritual formation and to each other. God created us into being in his image (*imago Dei*) which included desire and imagination. This is part of God’s story, a story of perfect love and relationship epitomized in the unity and dynamic interaction of the Trinity. However, humanity’s story includes the misuse of our freedom and the spurning of God’s persistent love and attempts

to draw us back to his redemptive plan. Culture's story plays out in the specific ways societies and cultures develop. And then there is the unique and personal story of each individual. At every level of story, the factors of desire, imagination, and the *imago Dei* are potent. The God-given faculty of imagination is a way in which God has equipped us to manage desire, foresee our completion, and navigate our stories. This managing of desire through imagination is an integral part of re-orienting our personal and cultural stories back towards the *imago Dei* and God's complete and perfect tale of our lives and ultimate spiritual transformation. While this discussion could begin or end with any of these elements, desire is often the first and most obviously experienced in our lives, so we will start with that.

Desire

Desire, as we are using it, is the experience of instinctual, fundamental needs and attractions built into humanity. In the Genesis account we see this illustrated "when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (Gen. 3:6). Desire and longing are at the core of our being and identity. Desire is a driving force. In analytic psychology, desire is sometimes referred to as libido or psychological-spiritual drive or energy. While the Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, thought all libido or desire was sexual in nature, his early disciple and subsequent developer of analytic psychology, C. G. Jung, and many others saw libido as a generic life energy or desire, which could distinguish itself in several different ways. James K. A. Smith says, "we

cannot *not* love or desire something” (Smith 2016, 1). Being human is about desire.

Desire is both a verb and a noun. As a verb it means “to hope or long for,” to “express a wish or to have or feel,” and as a noun, it is a “conscious impulse towards something that promises enjoyment or satisfaction in its attainment, a craving or longing, an urge, something hoped for or a formal request or petition” (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2024, “desire”). In the *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, desire is defined as “a strong, natural, morally neutral force that drives humans to satisfy needs of life” and is used extensively with positive, negative and neutral meanings and connotations throughout both the Old and New Testaments and theology (Sutter 2016, “desire”).

While desire itself is morally neutral, uncontrolled or misdirected desires are indeed problematic. Scripture is abundantly clear about protecting oneself from both misguided and inordinate amounts of desire (e.g., “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life,” Prov. 4:23 and “Desire without knowledge is not good, and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way,” Prov. 19:2). Because of the danger of power of desires, we see the New Testament focus on a “more cautious and prohibitory approach to desire than the Old Testament”; however, the Old Testament explores the range of desire acknowledging, “both the goodness of desire (and its objects) and the danger of imbalanced desire” (Sutter 2016, “Desire”).

A brief survey of the Hebrew language shows how extensive and dynamic the word “desire” can be. In the Old Testament, the root *hmd* has a wide range of

usages and derivatives related to desire. All derivatives of *hmd* are related to “beautiful appearance” and “high value” from the perceiver’s perspective (Holladay 1972, 313). For example, German theologian lexicographer and Gerhard Wallis says, *chāmadh*, one of these derivatives, refers not to desire that is inherently human and needed to survive, but to the specific act of desire that “begins with the visual impression made by the desired object or person” because it is of value (Wallis 1980, 454). While desiring something beautiful is not wrong, it is *what* is desired and *how* it is achieved that becomes problematic. Thus, the derivatives *hmd* can be negative, neutral or positive.

Wallis notes that desire has both negative and positive senses (Wallis 1980, 455-456). Negative senses arise when, for example, the desire is that of people such as “the wicked” (Prov. 12:12), “the scoffer” (Prov. 1:22), “the godless” (Job 20:5, 20), or “those who work evil” (Mic. 2:1f.). Another situation is when the object of desire is not of God’s will, such as idols or adulterous lovers (Isa. 1:29; 44:9; Ezek. 23:6, 12, 23). *Hmd* occurs as neutral when it refers generally to things that are pleasant, nice clothing (Gen. 27:15) or good food (Dan.10:3). Positive occurrences of *hmd* appear when the object of desire is something worthwhile in itself. These include the ordinances of Yahweh (Ps. 19:11) and sufficient provisions (Prov. 21:10).

Another Hebrew word similar to *chāmadh* is *’avah*, “to desire” (Gen. 3:6, Prov. 6:25, Ps 68: 17). This word is particularly important. Joseph Reider, Biblical philologist notes “to desire is not exhausted by a mere regulation of the will. The aspiration is rooted deep in human existence” and is connected to the heart and

soul (Reider 1952, 113). Wisdom Literature discusses this type of desire and suggests that “fulfilled desire increases self-confidence” (Prov. 13: 19, trans. by Mayer 2011, 136 “’*avah*, desire”); see also Prov. 13:12, 19:22), “while a man who has everything he desires, but cannot enjoy it, has an empty life” (Eccl. 6:2, trans. by Mayer 2011, 136 “’*avah*, desire”). ‘*Avah* is connected to ‘*ivvah* and the reality that God also desires. This word accentuates that desire is more than a simple instinct to survive. Desire is also a source of motivation to delight in God and is intricately connected to *bachar* or “choice” “to choose” (Ps. 132:13; Job 23:13) (Mayer 2011, 136).

In the New Testament, although Paul often speaks of the danger of desires, but, as evangelical theologian Walter Elwell notes, he does not “regard desire itself as destructive, but rather – along with most Hellenistic and Jewish philosophers of his time – he viewed excessive desire as destructive” (Elwell 1996). This is also true when the object of the desire is prohibited. Many scriptures that seem to censor desire are really condemning the choice of the object of our desire, such as whether to have someone else’s spouse (Deut. 5:21), to recover the silver and gold of graven images (Deut. 7:25), to be primary (Mark 9:35), or to be prominent (Luke 20:46).

There is a clear correlation between what moves a desire from neutral to positive. Scripture points us towards God himself as the object and direction of perfect desire (Deut. 6:5; Mark. 12:30; John. 21:16). We see that Jesus is clear about this too: New Testament calls believers to subordinate their desire to the Father’s desires (Matt. 6:33), not eliminate them all together.

According to humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, our needs include desire for safety, belonging, esteem, understanding, beauty, authenticity, and self-transcendence (Maslow 1943; Maslow 1969). These needs and instincts typically reveal themselves in the things we long for, thus becoming the objects of our desire. Desires may appear through interests, talents, loves and hates, vocational callings, and more. The writer of Proverbs says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).

If we are created in God’s image, this means God too must desire. God gave us the ability to desire because he also desires. Thompson declares, “desire begins and ends with God – God’s desire for us is to desire unity with him” (Thompson 2021, 10). Scripture portrays a passionate God with deep desire for all his creation and the human race: “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16) and “God first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Solomon, the wise king, acknowledges in both Ecclesiastes and Proverbs that there exists a deep desiring, a driving force or motivating factor in our lives, that often produces a sense of restlessness. At the end of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher gives us the “solution” to “meaninglessness” and the restlessness that often accompanies it: a relationship with and hope in God. This is the common message or lesson we receive when we hear from Ecclesiastes. However, a central theme to the book is desire, and the futility of fulfilling it without God. In addition to Ecclesiastes, most of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon. In Proverbs 13:12 he says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” Solomon seems to be saying in Ecclesiastes that on one hand, if we try to fulfill

desire the way the world suggests, we will experience meaninglessness or worse. On the other hand, in Proverbs he suggests that a desire fulfilled in the right way is life giving. But what happens in the middle? We can viscerally feel the reality of the restlessness that comes from deeply felt desires, yet be unable to fulfill them sufficiently on earth. Rolheiser agrees with Solomon and says, “desire is real and yes, we feel torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable on this side of heaven” (Rolheiser 1995, 31).

In my autoethnography (Chapter Four), I found that “desire” has been a central part of my entire life. I have constantly battled a restlessness that comes with deeply felt desire but not knowing how to fill it or what to do with it. My heart has often felt sick, as Solomon says, as I waited and wrestled with what it means to feel deeply and dream deeply and pursue God’s best in my life. Not one sermon that I ever heard seemed to suggest it was normal to have desires and that restlessness is a part of the deep work of spiritual formation. Smith says that in fact, discipleship is all about hungering and desiring but hungering and desiring for that which God hungers and desires (Smith 2016, 2).

While human desire is multi-directional, its initially intended north star is God, the sense of whom is built into the *imago Dei*. However, how we go about satisfying our desires easily becomes distorted, complicated, contradictory, and corrupted because of sin. We often attempt to satisfy our desire with something insufficient and inappropriate. Consequently, there is considerable tension brought on by desire and thus the reputation of desire has become considerably suspect.

Desire is incredibly hard to manage in the reality of our sinful state. As a result, humanity is in constant restless pursuit of making sense of and fulfilling our desires. How we do it becomes the story. We see the tension and conflicts of desire play out in humanity's, culture's and our personal stories. Agency becomes an integral part of understanding and managing desire: we must choose, by God's grace, to channel our desire toward God's pattern of his image in us, which is fundamental to our spiritual formation. As psychologist and writer of numerous works in psycho-spirituality, David G. Benner, states, "Desire is right at the center of the spiritual life" (Benner 2011, 22).

Imago Dei

The second element in this quaternity is the *imago Dei*, the image of God. Being created in the image of God is our origin. The *imago Dei* is the form for the creation of humans. Though the exact term "*imago Dei*" does not occur in the Latin translation of the Bible, the term is nevertheless a central concept in theology. It is first used in the Bible in the account of creation where, "God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

There are a number of views as to the meaning of *imago Dei*. The substantive or functional view sees human capacities, such as rationality, emotions, volition, imagination, archetypes, and so forth, as reflections of the same capacities as God has. The relational view underlines that there is some kind of kinship that makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God and with other humans. Mathias Nygaard states, "humans were created in the image of God

and for a relationship with Him. Through temptation and sin, they were cut off from that relationship (Matt. 16:23; Rom. 1:18–3:20; 1 Cor. 1:25)” (Nygaard 2016, “Humanity”). The vocational view says that we are like God in that we are able to rule and that we are representatives of God’s rule in creation. A fourth view, the essentialist, is indicated by South African Reformed theologian Matthew O’Kelly, “there’s something about what we are as humans, something about human nature that also reflects something of what God is like” (O’Kelly 2021). Old Testament scholar and linguist Michael Heiser goes further,

The image of God is not a quality within human beings; it is what humans are...Every human, regardless of the stage of development, is an imager of God. There is no incremental or partial of the image via some ability, physical or spiritual. No member of the animal kingdom, regardless of any cognitive ability it might have, is an imager of God... Being created as God’s imagers means we are His representatives on earth – the only qualification for this is that we are human. (Heiser 2016, “image of God”)

Matthew O’Kelly argues that these views are complimentary (O’Kelly 2021).

We, as humans, created by God, bear a resemblance or likeness to him because he created us to be like him. By God’s mercy and grace, we are destined to fully recover it. This likeness is said to be wholistic; being created “in the image of God as integrated beings entail a spiritual endowment, emotions, relational capacity, intelligence, vocational propensity for work, capability for physical health and wellness, and the ability to be stewards of themselves, God’s creation and God-given resources” (Chandler 2014, 31). This means having desires because he has desires and imagination because he has imagination. In the life of Jesus, we see a perfect example of this in flesh and blood (Col. 1:15-16). Because of humanity’s misuse of freedom, our perception and connection with

that image has been distorted, deformed, and disconnected. The recovery of our true selves lies in part through seeing the unblemished *imago Dei* in Jesus Christ. The recovery of the *imago Dei* is our *telos* or end. Chandler says that God's image can be seen as “a divinely given goal or destiny that anticipates present transformation for future eschatological fulfillment” (Chandler 2014, 27).

We have many potentialities to act in certain ways, whether patterns of behaviour (e.g., the instinctual suckling of a baby) or sets of attitudes (e.g., being motherly), which we can live into. These are sometimes called archetypes, inherited unconscious predispositions, tendencies, instincts, or life patterns that are part of the human inheritance and pre-exist our birth, explains clinical psychologist and writer Robin Robertson, commenting on the psychological concept of Jung (Robertson 2016; Jung 1969). These patterns or God-given forms are part of the human story and hint at God's greater story. The cultural story is the way archetypes have and continue to take shape across time within the collective, often with our barely noticing. Our individual story is how we personally experience and express these potentialities or archetypes in our own lives. Like all that is created, the typical and symbolic expressions of archetypes have in them the fingerprints of God; Campbell observes, “metaphor is the mask of God through which eternity is to be experienced” (Campbell 1988, 73). Many personified archetypes from father to mother, saviour to sacrifice, prophet to priest, husband to heir of all, and more are applied to Christ, as are various archetypal actions, such as serving, healing, teaching, naming, prophesying, and praying.

The overall or summative archetype is that of the *imago Dei* or the image of God that is in all of us. Joseph Eugene Talley comments that the archetype “most familiar in the Christian tradition is the *imago Dei*, or image of God, which is imprinted in every person” (Talley 1999, 97). This most comprehensive archetype has only ever been lived out fully in Jesus, the one who was and is both human and divine. So, the *imago Dei* language is employed in Scripture for Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us that Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), he is pristine *imago Dei* in flesh and blood and the template for the one who reflects God. Several early church theologians, such as Tyrannius Rufinius of Aquileia, refer to the *imago Dei* and the Christ as archetypes (Jung 1969, 4), e.g., “Christ is set forth all through as the archetype” (Rufinius 1892, I:7). In the model presented here, the image of God is a critical element at each level of story.

Story

A story is a narrative, an account of something which connects events, and a method used for generations as a way of creating coherence in life. As meaning-making and meaning-finding people, stories, or narratives, are ways in which we organize and relate the events of our lives to make sense of and give purpose to existence and critical experiences. While some scholars distinguish between the terms story and narrative, for the purposes of this discussion, story and narrative are used interchangeably, referring to how we put together and make sense of the experiences of our lives (Riessman 2012, 368).

Many theories of narrative (e.g., White and Epston, 2015) suggest that we oversee and are responsible for our own stories. How we make sense of memories

and order personal meaning is subjective and completely individualistic.

However, scripture suggests that while we do uniquely experience the story of our own lives, we are a part of many other narratives (since we are created to be in community) and so there is shared authorship of our lives. Spiritual formation implies that we are not cocooned as individuals but are shaped by the contexts in which we live.

The element of story in spiritual formation is multi-layered. We experience God's original story, humanity's experience or story, a culture's story and personal story. A more robust perspective on the times and places in which spiritual formation takes place can result from a more accurate reflection of the dynamic ability of God as, at each level of story, desire, imagination, and the God-image are operative.

Imagination

The final element to be considered is imagination. We have several God-given faculties or human capacities. These include reason, volition, conscience, emotion, and memory; each are important in our life functioning and spiritual formation. Over the centuries, the nature and value of imagination has been greatly contested. An understanding and appreciation of the role it has in both spiritual formation and general human development has ebbed and flowed over the course of history.

Throughout the Renaissance (1400-1600), European scholars and artists had differing opinions on the role and function of the imagination. However, there was an increasing belief that imagination was critical to the development of new

ideas and the experience of creativity. In the Scientific Revolution (1540-1680) and the Enlightenment (1650-1800), the critical faculties of the mind became most important. Since the imagination had largely been associated with creativity, the Enlightenment – an era that prioritized reason and intellect – gave less attention to imagination, relegating it to “purely private...and...subjective truth” (Guite 2022, 14). Anglican poet and lecturer on religion and the arts, Malcolm Guite, states the “enlightenment ushered in a mistrust and marginalization of imaginative and poetic vision... some philosophers of the Enlightenment thought that image and imagination simply clouded and obscured the pure dry knowledge which they were after” (Guite 2022, 14).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the pendulum began to swing back, as scholars reconsidered the importance of creativity and thus, the role of the imagination and the Romantic Era (1798-1870) began to emerge. This was a movement towards reclaiming the power of subjectivity, and pushing back on the notion that science, reason and reductionism were superior. This period began to champion the power of imagination and the importance of art and beauty. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), a poet and theologian during the period of Romanticism, wrote extensively on the subject of imagination. He suggested that there is primary imagination and a secondary imagination (Coleridge 1817, ch. 13; Jang 1986, 509). Primary imagination is God’s creation, “in the beginning.” We could not exist without being imagined, created or called from “something out of nothing” (Hollis 2003, 6).

Secondary imagination, on the other hand, is an “echo to replicate” this primary imagination (Guite 2022, 55). It is a “pull back to our original form, a generative movement toward who we are” (Hollis 2003, 6). For Coleridge, “the imagination is part of the image of God in us, a reflection of the divine” (Guite 2022, 13). Coleridge felt that God called us all into being through his “divine imagination, which calls our deep imagination if we can respond to God as profoundly as he called and created us” (Guite 2022b, 4). Secondary imagination, then, is an integral part of our design. It is a faculty that facilitates creatively thinking about what we desire and how it can be obtained.

The push and pull between reason and imagination continued. Even through World Wars I and II, societies disagreed on the balance and connection between the faculties. Lewis and Sayers are examples of two individuals who wrestled deeply with what it meant to believe in and exercise the God-given faculty of imagination during this period. They valued both creativity and reason. Not only did they hold both in high regard, but they also believed them to be inseparable. As one of the most popular Christian authors to this day, Lewis’ journey towards appreciating imagination is particularly compelling. Being highly trained in reason and logic, his shift towards rehabilitating the understanding and engagement of imagination was pivotal, especially for the evangelical Christians (Guite 2022, 16).

Not only has there been tension between imagination and reason among scholars and in culture, but there is also a challenge in how to build and convey an

understanding of what imagination is from how it is used in the Bible. Quite aptly suggests this has caused a great divide among Christians, with some being

driven to a mere literalism which treated the whole vast poem of scripture as though it were some kind of literalistic science manual, and others abandoning any real historical and factual core to the Gospel and just agreeing to treat it as a set of symbols which they could re-invent or re-interpret in any way that suited them. (Guite 2022, 15)

However, Guite appeals for Christians to see imagination as “a truth-bearing faculty” (Guite 2022, 11). He elaborates,

From the first moment that he proclaims the Kingdom of God, Jesus appeals to our imagination. It is just this imagination, to which Jesus appeals, that helps us lift the veil, or rather allows us to let Christ and the gift of his Spirit begin to lift it for us and in us. This is not to say the imagination, left to itself, and separated from its roots in the loving communion of the Trinity, cannot sometimes be dark, shadowed, or misleading. All things are shadowed in this fallen world and the best in us, severed from our roots in God, and in the divine image we bear, can become corrupted and misleading. But this is not a council of despair. We cannot abandon the imagination God has given us because we are sometimes afraid of it. Rather we need what C.S. Lewis called “a baptised Imagination” (Guite 2022, 107).

The terms imagination, imaginations, imagining and imagine are only used in Scripture about 30 times (depending on the translation). The occasions of use in the Old Testament include Gen. 6:5, 8:21, Deut. 29:18, I Chron. 29:18, Job 6:26, 2:127, Ps. 2:1, 38:12, 41:7, 62:3, 140:2, Pr. 12:20, 18:11, Ezek. 13:2, 17, Is 53:8, Jer. 3:17, 7:23, 9:14, 11:8, 13:10, Hos 7:15, Nah. 1:9, Zach. 7:10, 8:17. In the New Testament the references are fewer: Luke 1:51, Acts 4:25, 17:29, Rom 2:3, Eph 3:20, I Tim. 6:5. It is usually the translation of the Hebrew *ēyṣer* for conceiving, framing, or forming or *ḥāšab* for fabricating, contriving, planning or inventing or *šerīyrūt* for twisted or hard, or of the Greek *dianoia* or *logismos* for

the faculty of the mind or thoughts (Strong 1986, “Imagination” h2803 *ḥāšab*, h3336 *yēser*, h8307 *šʾrîrût*, g3053 *logismos*, g1271 *dianoia*). It is forming a picture or sense impression or concept of some thing or situation that does not currently exist and so is critical to intentionally moving into the future. While it is often linked to the proud, wealthy, wicked, false prophets and creation of idols, it is not the faculty of imagination that is critiqued, but the corruption of the imagination or its use for evil.

Christian and Missionary Alliance minister and author, A.W. Tozer (1897-1963), helps our understanding of the function of the imagination when he states, “like every other power belonging to us, the imagination may be either a blessing or a curse, depending, altogether upon how it is used and how well it is disciplined” (Tozer 1978, 49). Thus, he advocates for what he calls a sanctified or cleansed imagination: “a purified, and Spirit-controlled imagination...the sacred gift of seeing, the ability to peer beyond the veil and gaze with astonished wonder upon the beauties and mysteries of things holy and eternal” (Tozer 1978, 51). Paul uses the word in a beautiful benediction that shows that the imagination, though limited as are all human faculties, can be positive: “Now to him [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine...” (Eph 3:20).

Being created in God’s image means we have access to imagination, just as God does. It is imagination that can bridge the original design and the end goal of the *imago Dei*, and address the restlessness felt in between. James Hollis

comments that imagination is the faculty all humans have that drives us forward and toward God's primary imagination (Hollis 2000, 7).

Our ability to long for God's story, draw on robust archetypes, and connect with the *imago Dei* requires imagination. We must imagine, in the secondary sense, that there is something more to which we are being conformed. Archetypes and their symbolic expression are helpful for guiding the spiritual formation journey insofar as they provide us with symbols for guiding our imaginations. Lewis, drawing on Jung and J. R. R. Tolkien, suggests that archetypes, especially when used in story, are a way of drawing us into a deeper knowledge of ourselves and an active expression of co-creating with God (Lewis 1966, 41).

American psychologist and specialist in narrative identity, Dan McAdams, suggests that something innate within us guides how we understand our narrative, not just from past experiences but with a desire to move forward (McAdams and McLean 2013, 232). McAdams proposes “that our actions are guided not simply by what we have experienced, but by what we anticipate and desire. This last component, generativity, may greatly influence the enthusiasm individuals bring to the carrying forward of their personal stories – their view of how the story ends affects what they are building or tearing down in the present” (quoted in Singer 1997, 326). It could be argued that imagination may be a faculty that aids in our desire for generativity towards a future lived as our most authentic selves. In order to receive a better story about ourselves, the most powerful way of doing this is through a radically and divinely inspired imagination.

The Interaction of Desire, Imagination, and *Imago Dei* at Four Levels of Story

Each level of story is embedded in the greater one and each of these factors, the motivation of desire, anchoring of the *imago Dei* and the faculty of imagination, interact with one another at each of the four main levels of story (see Figure 13). One reason for highlighting different levels of story is to remind us that we are not at the beginning nor the end. Our lives matter: however, we live within narratives and exist for a greater narrative.

In the figure, *imago Dei* is displayed as an ellipse overlapping with all levels of story and in the centre of the trio of elements, as it is at the core of our being and our story—the beginning and the *telos*. Desire is portrayed as an ellipse which surrounds *imago Dei*, as it is a motivating factor that pulls us towards God, and God towards us. Imagination is displayed as an oval surrounding motivation and *imago Dei*, as it is the faculty through which both God and the human person, at every level of story, create possibilities of how to uniquely access and manage desire in ways that facilitate relationship between humans and the triune God. All elements, imagination, desire, *imago Dei*, and each level of story are deeply interrelated and interact with each other in dynamic ways. This is portrayed through transparent ovals and circles, allowing the multiple lines and points of intersection to be seen.

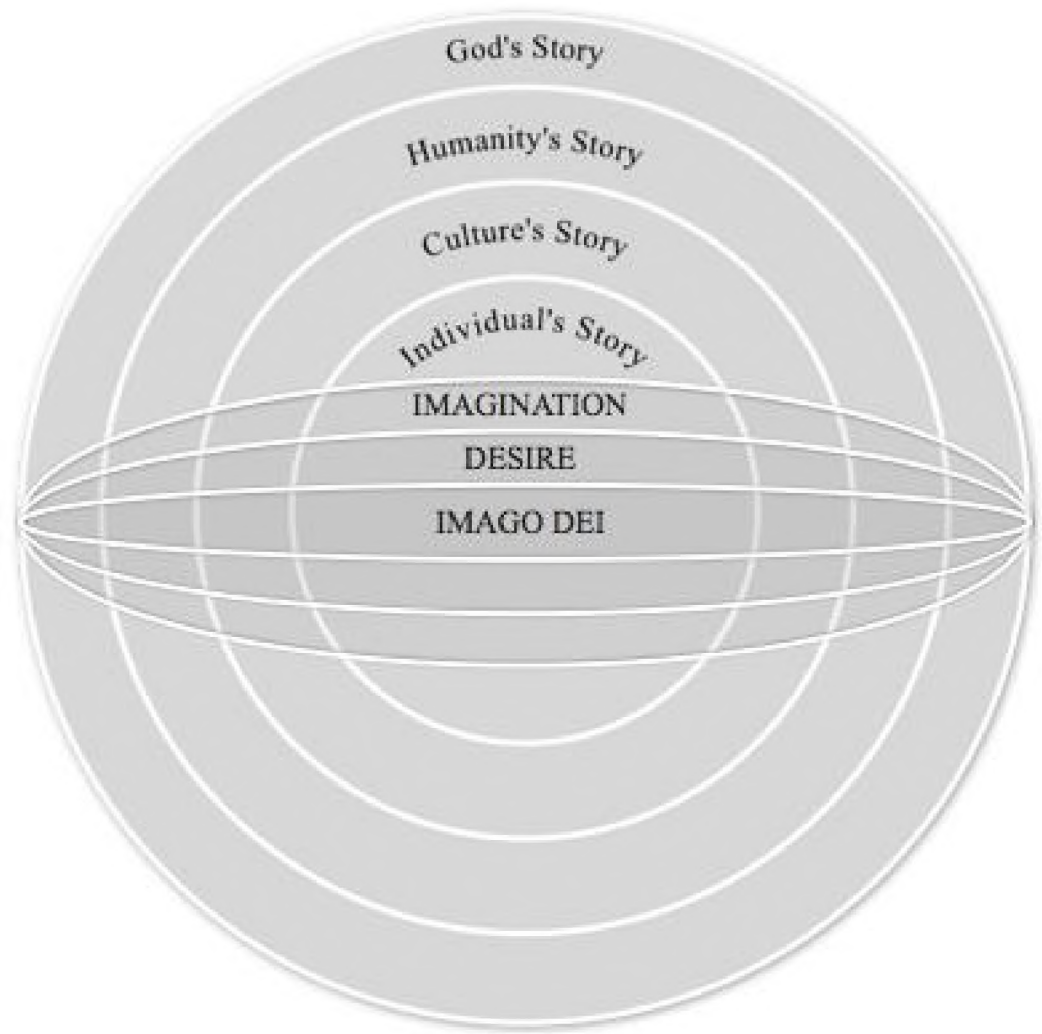


Figure 13: The Four Elements and Four Levels of Story

God's Story

Theology professor at the Quaker Friends University in Kansas, James Bryan Smith notes the critical and fundamental nature of God's story: "...there is a magnificent story, which is the most important thing happening on this earth. It is our only hope as individuals, communities, countries, and a species" (Smith 2017, 13). *Gōdspel* is the old English "God's story," from which we get the current term "Gospel," good news. The study of narrative theology, according to

theologians Joseph A. Komonchack and Mary Collins, focuses on how God's story is understood and seeks "to understand the life and faith of the communities in the biblical traditions" which is done through analyzing stories passed down through generations (Komonchak, Collins and Lane 2000, 702).

Spiritual formation takes place individually as well as communally. We experience the transformation process in our own lives, but also in relationships with those around us. The experiences of transformation story our lives individually and collectively and create narratives that pattern our understanding of who God is and who we are. However, the plotlines most frequently felt in our personal or collective day-to-day lives are not a full reflection of the originally intended story authored by God, into which we are invited. It is the Divine story that holds potential for all of humanity's flourishing into perfection, beauty, love and relationship.

God's story, depicted by the all-encompassing circle in the diagram (Figure 13), at the first, the triune God, then creation including humans which included relationship with them, tragically followed by fellowship broken, succeeded by restoration. The story of creation starts with God's creative imagination, what Coleridge calls primary imagination (Hollis 2000, 6), his original design for beauty and love. We were created as perfect works of his imagination, in his own image, which we experience as the *imago Dei*. Humanity was freely invited into relationship with God and to fulfill the full potential of our creativity. God's story begins on the basis of love and freedom.

A critical element of God's story and humanity's story is the granting of agency to humans. For humanity to actually love God in return, they had to exercise choice, a freedom depicted in the garden in Genesis 3. Although man and woman chose wrongly, God did not abandon them. Despite disappointment, he tries to reconnect, but with discipline because human's freedom had gone too far. When humans overdo freedom, God calls them back and disciplines them to move his people into a place where they can have a second chance. This discipline was not able to reach the heart of humanity. We read in the Old Testament of God's many attempts to bring people back to relationship through the law and correction, but that this was not enough; humanity was not understanding.

In the New Testament, we see something categorically different about Jesus and discipline. From God's point of view Jesus was the "sin eater" (McNutt 2023), from humanity's point of view, he is the scapegoat (Baker 2021). God sends Jesus, as a way of taking responsibility for what happened, to "save" us: God's evidence that he approved of what Jesus did, approved of Jesus being the sin eater was raising him from the dead. After the resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit begins the transformative work, the commission of the church and the consummation of the full circle of God in heaven and the completion of his story.

This model of spiritual formation suggests that this meta-narrative of God's story of creation, relationship, discipline, redemption, and eternity is that which we are designed to be drawn into and live out of. In the midst of this story

and this story alone, do we truly “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Humanity’s Story

Humanity's story mirrors God’s story in several ways. The biblical description of humanity is best presented as a narrative recounting the relationship between humans and the Divine.

God created us for relationship with him. However, because of sin, a misuse of our freedom, the relationship was impacted. Nygaard says “God worked to reestablish His relationship with humanity through the election of Israel. This process reached a climax in Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection, which provides people with the opportunity to enter a restored relationship with God (Rom. 3:21–26; Eph. 2:1–22; 1 Pet. 1:18–2:10)” (Nygaard 2016, “Humanity”).

While the first humans are depicted in Scripture as having full and unhindered relationship with God, the breach in that occurred through the original humans’ choice, bringing about the universal condition of alienation and fallenness. Since the moment in the Garden when the exercise of human freedom exceeded trust in and obedience to God, humanity has lived with the impact of a perfect relationship with God severed. However, throughout the generations, the *imago Dei* continues to be felt and its *telos* exerts its pull. Chandler draws on scholars, such as Willard, Mulholland, and Wilhoit, when she suggests the “*imago Dei* points to ‘the mystery of human identity that must be rediscovered by each generation of the believing community’” (Chandler 2014, 33).

Reconnecting with our deepest callings requires not only a belief that we are created for more than we are often living into, but also a willingness to find it. Parker J. Palmer states that this requires slowing down to listen to our lives: “Before you tell your life what you intend it to be, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent” (Palmer 2000, 2). Parker articulates that before we were born, God had a plan for every life according to his extraordinary story and his perfect imagination: God says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer. 1:4-5) and the Psalmist sings, “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed” (Ps. 139:14-15).

Christian spiritual formation attempts to address the reality that because of the fall, humanity has lost sight of God’s original intent and design for our lives. We are unable to adequately take care of all the pain we experience in life, and at the same time, deep within us, we still sense the imprint of Eden. Spiritual formation entails engaging in meaningful practices, such as creating relative silence and receptivity, praying, engaging with the message of Scripture, participating in the church, etc., allowing us to hear the voice of God calling us towards the patterns into which he wants us to live.

We see that, ultimately, the journey of faith throughout generations is radical receptivity to “something more” and the constant longing for connection to the image of God and God’s story. As a result, desire remains and drives us

constantly forward in pursuit of soothing restlessness that comes with this fracture. We are left with the generational pain of what it means to feel the pull of the desire for the *imago Dei* in the insufficiency of a fallen world. Humanity's story contains constant restlessness, as Paul points out,

Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity. (Rom. 1:20-26)

Part of the story of humanity is remembering the *imago Dei* is always within us and part of God's witness to us, despite our continued tendency to struggle accessing it in our lives. Spiritual transformation requires that we become aware of this. Smith states it is about "awakening to the way history lives in you... [and] discerning the spiritual repercussions of a history that precedes you, lives in you and shapes the future to which you are called" (Smith 2022, 9).

The pull of the *imago Dei* is deeply embedded in humanity's story as the telos, or the goal, that generations reach for and desire. Humanity experiences the innate desire to search for whom we were created to be and what we were created to be like. For a variety of reasons, the gospel message heard for generations, the story often told, has been shrunken and distorted. We feel the frustration of this. It is through the faculty of imagination that humanity remains equipped to stay connected to the *imago Dei* with the potential to be drawn back to God's intended narrative.

Culture's Story

In *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr, a neo-orthodox Protestant theologian and prominent ethicist (1894-1962), defines culture as an “artificial and secondary environment imposed on the natural” (Niebuhr 2001, 32). It is socially constructed and includes things like “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values... speech, education, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, invention, technologies” (Niebuhr 2001, 33).

Niebuhr alludes to the fact that myths, iconography, fairy tales and art are created to express the depth of these stories of restless desire (Niebuhr 2001, 33). Thompson agrees: “The evidence of our longing is writ large in our culture, from U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” to Rembrandt’s *Return of the Prodigal Son* to Gabriel Axel’s *Babette’s Feast* to the words of the New Testament, where we read that “the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Thompson 2021, 14).

Cultural stories demonstrate the ways groups of people find to channel human desires and fulfill human imaginations and live within the human condition. This includes sometimes enacting what is good for humankind and pleasing to God (such as the Mosaic law), but more often deviating significantly from God’s intentions and meriting judgement (e.g., pre-Noahic Mesopotamia [Gen 6:5-7] and ancient Babylonia [Is. 47, Jer. 50-51]). Consistent with the greater narrative of humanity’s separation from God, nations and cultures have tended to drift towards corruption, rejecting the true God and creating

alternatives; as Deuteronomy says, “They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols” (Deut. 32:21). As the culture drifts and corrupts, so too do most individuals in it; Smith states,

We, both individually and collectively, are products of a contingent history. Our identities are bound up with roads taken and not...Our characters and capacities reflect histories that long preceded us as well as the personal histories that amount to our own stories.” (Smith 2022, 9)

In other words, our cultural story can and usually does differ from God’s story in many ways and can be malformational.

Niebuhr makes the important point that culture is always built on a past culture. However, this continuation takes “effort and achievement” to accomplish the continued preservation of the patterns of a culture (Niebuhr 2001, 22). This assumes, then, that culture can be changed; it is not permanent. As Karen Swallow Prior articulates, culture is both “descriptive and prescriptive” (Prior 2023, 16).

This matters because we have the ability to reimagine how the ways we fulfill our desires impact the culture we find ourselves in. Prior quotes C. S. Lewis as saying,

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (Lewis 1980, 26 in Prior 2023, 14)

Prior goes on to say,

In other words, we cannot desire what we cannot imagine. If we are to envision an expression of the Christian faith within our culture that is as true to Christ as can be, then we must imagine beyond the realities of our culture that limit our sight. (Prior 2023, 14)

This is a call in both the Old and New Testament; to be set apart, to step out from the sin that holds us back (Is. 52:11 and repeated in 2 Cor. 6:17). An important part of the individual's story includes separating themselves from deformational aspects of the cultural story and locating themselves within God's story.

The Individual's Story

As detailed in my autobiography and analyzed in the autoethnography, the life of the author is a story of wanting more. From childhood, my life has been full of an intense desire to do, feel, be and experience more. The desire has been so pervasive and overwhelming that my state of mind has been labelled pathological, and I have struggled with depression, anorexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and hyperfunctioning. There has always been an extremely deep need to access something else I knew is within me. Depth psychologist Carol Pearson in *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By* states,

Any time you identify a wasteland in your life – illness, boredom, lethargy, alienation, emptiness, loss, addiction, failure, anger or outrage – it is time to take a journey. You can be called to the quest by such dissatisfaction or simply by a desire for adventure. The journey you take inevitably will transform you.” (Pearson 1986, 5)

We often come to a point in our lives where we ache for something more, or we are faced with an experience that makes us critically reflect on who we are and how we are living our lives.

Individuals' Stories in the Bible

The Bible shows how individuals have felt the pull of the *imago Dei* on their lives in unique ways. Randolph Tate in *Biblical Interpretation* argues that

the Bible is full of "master images around which meaning is organized" (Tate 2014, 99). We see hundreds of individual stories within the biblical narrative that have aspects that are unique but with plots we see repeated through cultures and patterns that are humanly universal.

For example, Hebrews 11 is a well-known "hall of fame" of the giants of faith. The passage names sixteen people and refers to many others, many of whom longed for a true home. God had imagined and created wonderful worlds (Heb. 11:3) where things were as they should be, and God had promised they would be a part of that. They knew they were meant for more and their desire led them into remarkable, heroic lives, though "all of these died in faith without having received the promises" (Heb 11:13).

Noah (Heb.11:7, Gen. 6-10), Abraham (Heb.11: 8-17, Gen.12-24), and Moses (Heb.11:24-29, Ex. 2-Deut. 34:5) show patterns of individuals on a quest. The hero archetype hears of a treasure and sets out on an often-risky quest to find it (Madsen 2020, 4). They also incarnate the strong warrior-patriarch archetype (Madsen 2020, 5). Gideon lived into patterns of a military leader, mighty warrior, judge and prophet (Heb 11:32, Judges 6). Samson shows patterns of the avenger (Heb 11:32, Judges 13-16). David combines the warrior-king-poet archetypes (Heb 11:32, 1 and 2 Samuel) and Rahab that of the outsider or "underdog" (Heb. 11:31, Joshua 2).

While Hebrews 11 is a chapter that clearly identifies individual living in various cultural stories but all reflecting God's story, many more examples are found elsewhere in the Bible. We see Deborah (Judg. 4-5) and Anna (Luke 2:36-

38) as prophetesses, Ruth as a lover (Ruth 1-4), and Esther as queen (Esther 1-10). We also see the mother archetype in Mary, the mother of Jesus, first mentioned in Luke 1:26 and last mentioned in Acts 1:14.

The Hebrews account culminates in Jesus as the archetype of these people of faith, “the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2), where God’s story, the human story, and the individual story intersect. An entreaty for us to follow that pattern in our own stories occupies the rest of Hebrew 12. While there is a definite pattern, each person’s experience and story was unique. The aspects of cultures they spurned, the tests they underwent, and the deaths they died were all different. Their lives populated these archetypal patterns with their lived experience, which, in turn, played out in a beautiful narrative pointing to God's story. Like a matryoshka nesting doll, individual stories are contained and shaped by cultural stories, the human story, and God’s story in whom, as referenced before, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The Role of Stories and Imagination in the Finding of Self

Individual stories then are personal, unique experiences of human potentialities or archetypes, pre-eminently the *imago Dei*. While collective, cultural stories are essential because we are not created to be alone, and Christian community is critical to Christian spiritual development, finding our true selves in our personal stories authored by God is essential though often not fully accomplished.

As a psychotherapist and lecturer in clinical counselling, I have seen the role of story in the development of self. Story is integral to mental health and neurobiological integration. When life is experienced in a disintegrated way, and the path towards a neurobiological state of rest and safety is compromised, it becomes challenging to find a personal narrative of healthy, authentic meaning, purpose and identity in life. Furthermore, as a student of theology, I have observed how Scripture follows an intricate metanarrative pointing to Jesus and how every individual's story has a place in this plot line. No individual story is wasted, and each is involved in a plot conceived before creation. The fields of narrative theology (e.g., Pinnock 1990), narrative identity (e.g., McAdams 2013) and narrative therapy (e.g., DeKruyf 2008) develop this idea.

As I began to observe more closely the role stories played in the health and well-being of my clients, students and myself, I became curious about what factors or elements were at play and hence the quaternity of desire, imagination, story, and *imago Dei*. For example, I became curious if imagination could assist in bridging the gap between what happened and how we remember it. Could imagination impact how we adaptively integrate our experiences in meaningful ways; ways that touch our most profound and authentic identities, contributing to meaningful spiritual growth towards *imago Dei*? Unexpectedly coming across a comment about a fairy tale character prompted me to explore these questions further.

Jerry Root, during a lecture, quoted George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*: "every little girl is a princess. She needs to have stories told about

her because she's in trouble of forgetting about her rank and acting as if she grew up out of the mud" (MacDonald 1920, Root 2021). Reflecting on the character of Tangle in MacDonald's other fairy tale *The Golden Key* (MacDonald 1906), Root articulated the role story has in an individual's real and authentic life. In addition to story, Root gave space to explore the significance of memory and imagination when considering personal narrative (Root 2021).

Secondary imagination plays a significant role in remembering our true selves and meaningfully integrating episodic memories into our story in healthy ways that promote authentic spiritual growth. While the character Tangle is a young girl, this process can apply to everyone: finding our true selves is a journey for both males and females, young and old.

Root (2021) also uses MacDonald's character to highlight the importance of identity. He suggests that there is an original identity that Tangle, as well as every other girl and boy, possesses. This identity is that of royalty, and Tangle needs to know this about herself. In the story, Tangle has no "royal" connection or heritage. Her rank as a princess is an identity beyond genetics, an identity that was given and completely unearned. We see the presence of an archetypal pattern of royalty, especially royalty that is hidden from the person.

This archetype of royalty, prince and princess, king and queen, points to a part of our identity in Christ. As children of God, we are a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). This identity is not a role to be taken lightly. Royalty demands bravery, responsibility, willingness and dignity that inform behaviour. Our status of royal priesthood is also a glimpse at the even greater reality of the *imago Dei*. This

identity pre-exists anyone's birth (we are made in God's image, though also adopted as his children through redemption, Rom. 8:15) and is a beautiful and massive storyline chosen for us, waiting for us to live into. The *imago Dei*, which infers royalty, has nothing to do with anything we have done or earned. The *imago Dei* is the most comprehensive of all archetypes, holding every element of who God is and therefore touching on all that we were created to be.

Unfortunately, as we move through life, we really are, as MacDonald states, "in trouble of forgetting about our rank" or the archetypal patterns that reflect our true identity given to us in Christ (MacDonald 1920). This is why story becomes so important in our lives. When Root states that Tangle needs to have stories told about her own personal story, he is suggesting that the telling of true narrative has the potential to remind us of our true identity, the *imago Dei*, and therefore inform our future way of living.

The power of story touches and frees something within us. One reason for this may be that elements of our stories are universals of human experiences. C. S. Lewis states that in fact "fairy tale [a type of story] liberates archetypes – when we read good fairy tales we are obeying 'know thyself'" (Lewis 1966, 41). Jung would agree that archetypal patterns are critical in telling our story. These patterns are populated by our experiences and then become uniquely our own stories. As stated earlier, archetypal patterns are a sense of pre-existing instincts that exist in all of us (Robertson 2016, 127). These patterns are "empty until the actual experience provides it with the content necessary for expression" (Robertson 2016, 132). Ann Belford Ulanov, Professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union

Theological Seminary, suggests that “the form plus the personal material make up the experience of an archetype” (Ulanov 1971, 49). Therefore, our experiences and how we incorporate them into our lives are significant in that they have the opportunity to “fill in” our personal narrative based on archetypal patterns.

As Christians, our desire is to have our personal stories and influencing archetypes align with God’s story. This can be done through continually trying to find the *imago Dei*, the most complete archetype, lived out in Jesus, but latent in us and animated by the Spirit.

MacDonald's quote, “she’s in trouble of forgetting about her rank” implies that there is a truth about us that is more than what we have experienced; the truth about who we really are is at risk of being forgotten because of experiences of “growing out of the mud” (MacDonald, 1920). We are vulnerable to knowing ourselves only through the limited memories of our personal experience. These memories do not fully tell the story of who we are or align with the story that has already been told about us before creation that, when ‘remembered,’ acts as a north star. We come to know our rank and identity when we find ourselves within God’s story.

Conclusion

Christian spiritual formation is the journey of connecting to God’s ultimate story of love, redemption and freedom; this is what we long for. Restlessness that accompanies this journey is not uncommon to the Christian experience. In fact, this restlessness is what drives the heart of the study of Christian spiritual formation. At the heart of spiritual formation is acknowledging that our deepest

desire is to experience the reality of the image of God, universal to the human experience, yet unique in expression. Desire is the motivator that draws every human into the narrative of his love and redemption. Desire is innately human; story is how desire plays out. Thus, honouring our own personal story, the story of our culture and the greater story of humanity in which we exist, as well as God's meta-narrative is how we come to understand and make meaning of God's work in our lives together.

This model suggests that spiritual formation includes finding the image of God that exists in everyone and allowing imagination and connection with it to draw us into God's ultimate story of love and redemption. The journey of finding the image of God is "the same yet different" for all of us. It is the same in that everyone bears the image of God and goes through some form of experience to find it. It is different in how this plays out in everyone's life: "God does not love us exclusively, but he does love us uniquely" (Freeman 2019). The use of archetypes can act as a guide along this journey by offering hints at the *imago Dei* through common storylines that all our lives tend to follow which we see in collective stories throughout generations.

Part of spiritual transformation is choosing to commit to the journey of finding the *imago Dei* that existed before creation. The *imago Dei* is unique to every individual yet found in Jesus and resembled and strengthened in community. Archetypes are experienced individually but are expressed collectively and could not exist outside of relationship with others. Finding the *imago Dei* through the use of archetypes is a dynamic process towards authentic

spiritual transformation into the likeness of Christ, states Gerald Lawson, Counselor Education specialist (Lawson 2005, 134).

This model presents the culmination of four specific elements of Christian spiritual formation. Each element was discovered in unique ways, and during different seasons of a spiritual journey. Despite their individual importance, story, imagination, desire and imago Dei come together in a way that demonstrates an interconnectedness that is distinct to these four elements. Without one, the ways in which the others interact would need to be explored, understood and presented in a different way. This portfolio, which comes to summation in this model, demonstrates the journey of both the discovery of these elements, the unique ways in which they can be woven together and the potentialities of transformation that is held in their interaction. In the conclusion following, the elements and methodologies are summarized and suggestions made for further research and discussion.

**CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSION:
STUDYING AND EXPERIENCING
SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

This portfolio is an exploration of selected elements of Christian spiritual formation. These include desire as motivation, imagination as means, story as context, the *imago Dei* as the goal or telos of formation. Using a number of different approaches, each element as well as the role each plays in the dynamic of transformation was analyzed and discussed.

Summary

Christian spiritual formation is understood as the process of becoming more aligned and faithful to God, more guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, more characterized by the virtues of Jesus Christ, and more engaged in the work God is doing in our world. It is a cooperative journey between the individual, the Holy Spirit, and the agents which God uses to transform us, by his grace, into the people he always intended us to be. It addresses the biggest and deepest felt desire in the human heart, which is to reconnect with God and experience God's love, redemption and freedom.

The components of this document were created and compiled to bring attention to the topics of desire, *imago Dei*, story and imagination, and the role

each play in Christian spiritual formation. While this is only a partial list of the factors in Christian spiritual formation, these elements are inter-related and integral to the experience of transformation to the likeness of Jesus Christ, yet often underemphasized in spiritual formation discussions. The topics are explored through the research methods of composing an autobiography (Chapter Two), appreciating and appropriating biography (Chapter Three), researching and writing an autoethnography (Chapter Four), and building a theoretical model (Chapter Five).

Experience of the Process

Tyndale University's Doctor of Ministry program in Spiritual Formation aims to develop,

- a) the ability to interpret, critique and apply a set of self-development practices to facilitate ongoing self-understanding, growth, and reflection in context,
- b) an understanding of the academic field of spiritual formation,
- c) the ability to teach and guide those they minister to in spiritual practices and community formation,
- d) the skills to create, implement, assess and communicate ministry projects with specific value to their ministry and the ministry of others,
- e) an integrated project portfolio including their spiritual autobiography, model of spiritual formation, and ministry field project (Tyndale 2024, I:9.2.1.).

Significant progress has been made toward accomplishing the objectives. Each of the projects as contained in Chapters Two through Five involved practices of self-development, pressed me to expand and critically read in the field of spiritual formation, enhanced my counselling and teaching, and entailed the challenging work of ordering and revising the original projects into an integrated work.

Developing the contents of this portfolio and integrating them into a coherent whole has been challenging and profound, and resulted in a wealth of

new knowledge, understanding and skill. Each chapter contains a component that used a different methodology for analyzing God's work in my life. Through each avenue of research, a new understanding of myself, the human person and the experience of spiritual transformation emerged. While each element was rich in itself, the integration of the components stretched me academically, emotionally and spiritually. Seeing patterns and experiences of life in data and documents is a rare opportunity. Despite painful moments, a veil was lifted. I see myself, others and Jesus in a new way because of the nature and requirements of this doctoral program and portfolio. I feel more equipped in my vocation, strengthened in my leadership skills and mature in my faith as a result of this process.

While the appreciation of the power and role of desire is not new to the study of psychology, theology or spiritual formation, it is seeing a resurgence in the literature, and it certainly was new to me. Joining giants like St. Augustine of Hippo, James K.A. Smith, Ronald Rolheiser and Richard Rohr in their passionate discussion of desire was humbling, but exciting. I hope this portfolio makes a contribution to this discussion and I am inspired by the endless opportunities desire gives for further research, personal growth, and spiritual transformation.

The same could be said of the process of uncovering, exploring and connecting the factors of the *imago Dei*, story, imagination and spiritual friendship. While each element was revealed gradually over time and in non-linear, overlapping ways, the experience of the gradual revelation of these elements was truly transformative. The deep interconnection of these components in my life had gone unrealized. The research methods and the integration their

findings showed the intricate and beautiful connection these elements have played in my own spiritual formation as well as the opportunity they offer for the broader discussion of Christian spiritual transformation.

Further Research

From the complexity to the inherent mystery to the interdisciplinarity involved in the topics introduced here – *imago Dei*, desire, imagination, levels of story – there could be almost limitless study. However, several specific and feasible opportunities arose during the course of this study.

The first area of interest for further development is the opportunity for broader use of autoethnography. The experience of the discipline of autoethnography documented in this portfolio was unexpectedly formative. The method proved to be rigorous but impactful. The very nature of autoethnography, the systematic study of one's own life, sets the stage for therapeutic and formational experiences. The perspectives of being both the researched and the researcher offers a framework for healing and growth for the fields of psychotherapy and spiritual formation. The development of autoethnographic exercises would aim to equip participants with the structure and support to see material from their own lives (journals, pictures, letters, etc.) as a rich source of data for detecting and interpreting themes and patterns in their lives. The resultant insights would then be used to develop practices that could address areas of concern with the prospect of healing and personal spiritual transformation.

Further research is warranted on the connection between depression and desire. Many of the authors drawn on in the portfolio believe that a correlation at

least exists and that understanding it is important for human growth and spiritual formation. As an individual who has experienced the implications of this connection, a greater awareness and understanding of it, as well as practical disciplines and methods for how to manage it, are greatly needed.

Finally, this research has revealed other elements of spiritual formation that are critical, yet under-discussed and under-developed, such as the constructs of beauty, time, habits, ambition and creativity. Further research could be done by observing cultural expressions and theological understanding of these elements. Insights could then be applied, compared and contrasted as to the role they play in the cultural story and in Christian spiritual transformation.

Implications and Applications

Any model or theory of growth or human change will have different implications for different audiences based on what the theory emphasizes. The findings from this study produced examples of human experience relevant to conversation about Christian spiritual formation. Several questions arise for discussion and further consideration.

Questions Regarding Desire

This model encourages attention to the role desire plays in both spiritual formation and human development. While the acknowledgement of desire in Christian spiritual formation is not new, it is worthy of increased attention. Scholars, such as Curt Thompson, James K. A. Smith, and Ronald Rolheiser, have been leading contemporary voices in this conversation; spiritual directors and

writers in spiritual formation Ruth Haley Barton (2023) and David Nichols (2014) have added their voices. Paying attention to the reality of desire in the Christian life would mean considering questions, such as:

- How do individuals and cultures define desire?
- How do individuals and cultures come to understand the role of desire in the Christian faith?
- How might the suppression of desire impact wholistic health?
- How might the aim and fulfillment of desire become “malformed” over stages of development?
- How can worship in community be a place where desires are considered, celebrated, and nurtured in God-honouring ways?

Questions Regarding *Imago Dei*

While the *imago Dei* is a more familiar concept to spiritual formation, intentionally remembering our telos remains critical. As a result, questions, such as the following may be helpful:

- How do faith communities understand what it means to be created in the image of God?
- How does this understanding inform day to day life as well as corporate worship?
- In what ways might nurturing desire within the context of community inspire and strengthen the reality of the *imago Dei* in our lives?

- What role might an increased understanding of the *imago Dei* have on the ability to lean into God given agency and authority for Kingdom work?
- How do embodied experiences of grace impact connection with the *imago Dei* in the lives and transformation of followers of Jesus?

Questions Regarding Story

Considering the idea that story exists at multiple levels is another nuance highlighted in this discussion of spiritual formation. This suggested view of story offers options for dynamic implications on Christian transformation. Some questions that could be asked to stir curiosity about these implications include:

- What role does story play in an individual's life? ...in the culture in which they were raised? ...in the culture in which they currently live?
- What do these stories say about the nature and process of Christian spiritual transformation?
- What would indicate if these were “accurate” or “complete” stories, pointing to God’s most comprehensive story?
- How might a faith community intentionally engage in interdisciplinary approaches that engage all members in helping each other become more aware of what populates personal story and how this impacts connection to the divine story?

Questions Regarding Imagination

The human faculty of imagination is a concept that has been gaining traction in the world of spiritual formation. However, a full understanding of the

capacity of the imagination is yet to be realized by anyone. The following questions may be useful to begin to understand this human faculty as well as understanding its role in spiritual transformation:

- The word “imagination” holds many different feelings and meanings for various groups of people (cultures, faith traditions, denominations, and generations). How might a particular population or person come to their understanding of what the imagination is and its function in the human person? How might this understanding impact the ability to incorporate the imagination into spiritual formation?
- What spiritual disciplines might aid in a “cleansed” or “baptized” imagination?
- Many of the authors drawn on in this conversation, specifically Curt Thompson, James K. A. Smith, C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers, are passionate about the use of imagination creating possibilities for social change. What might be ways to start conversations in faith communities that allow for opportunities to imagine differently to create possibilities for service that seek justice and generativity for our current cultural climates?

Conclusion

This portfolio presents a variety of research methods that highlight the interaction of story, desire, imagination, and the *imago Dei* in Christian spiritual formation. The means of research included biographical study, autobiographical composition and autoethnographical qualitative research, and the development of

a theoretical model. The importance of giving due consideration to these components in Christian spiritual formation is emphasized.

It is a challenge to accurately articulate the immense impact the learning and formational experiences of the Doctor of Ministry program had on my life. The process of study, research and writing provided an opportunity to explore personal, corporate, and general spiritual formation. Conducting and integrating the components of this research has been an academically challenging, personally enriching and spiritually transformative journey. Over the five years of study, I have grown and changed in all areas of my life. I have increased understanding of spiritual formation, myself, and of the ministry to which God has called me. I am grateful.

APPENDICES

**Appendix A:
Research Ethics Board Approval**



***Certificate of Ethics Review Approval for
Research Involving Human Subjects***

Primary Investigator:	Lyndsay Thompson
Faculty Supervisor: (if applicable)	NA
REB File Number:	2023 00024
Title of Project:	An Autoethnography on Transformational Approaches to Accepting God's Message of Love
Approval Date:	November 9, 2023
Expiry Date:	November 9, 2024

This certificate indicates that the Tyndale Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the delegated review process.

This protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date. Please ensure that an Ethics Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report is submitted 30 days prior to the expiry date of this protocol.

Heather J. S. Birch, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Figure 14. Certificate of Ethics Review Approval

**Appendix B:
Umbrella Codes with Subcodes, Frequencies
and Verbatim Examples from Data**

Table 4. Umbrella Codes with Subcodes, Frequencies, and Examples

Codes and Sub-Codes	Frequ- ency	Examples
Desire		
To know who I am	2	Who am I and who do I want to be, how will I know,
To be fully me	8	pushing me and showing me what I am capable of and who I am-physically, mentally and emotionally.
To be active	3	I really do love to run but I'm terrified of gaining weight and it completely takes over my mind.
To change	2	How do I redo my thoughts?
Desiring God		
To look for him	14	I can't see you because the stack of stuff I'm carrying is in my line of view and I refuse to put on the glasses you've given me.
To know him	10	I want to know all that I can about you, but I want to feel you too. I want that deep personal friendship with you. Lord start forming that in me.
To understand his character	9	Thinking of the Holy Spirit as a creative friend sitting or walking with me.
To find his help	19	Lord I feel like I need a miracle
To know who he says I am	7	I want to know who God says I am and how to live life. I don't know what that is yet.
To show gratitude	3	For some reason she imagining she is female is really helpful. Lord thank you so much for this gift. it brings me tears how perfectly you are doing this trip.
To find his love for me	8	When I don't "see" God's love, I get mad at myself and feel like I am doing something wrong

Codes and Sub-Codes	Frequ- ency	Examples
To find his will for me	17	Please direct me about what to do next.
Fear		
Of lack of exercise	2	I will exercise all the time.
Of not enough money	3	I work because I'm so scared of being broke and not able to pay the bills
Of wasting time	25	I want a clearly outlined way of how to use my days and I feel like I'm just floating between whatever is happening next but not really getting ahead. where do you want my time and energy to go? how do you want my days to be spent?
Of gaining weight	11	I will never allow myself to gain weight I will never be fat.
Of enjoying	4	I don't think I believe that you could possibly love me if all I did was rest and have fun.
Of not having enough energy	6	I panicked a little bit about going back to real life. I just don't have it in me.
Of workload	6	I can't face the thought of work or school.
Body Image (no subcode)	6	Having a hard time with food and Body Image again.
Mental Health (incl. diagnosis or symptoms) (no subcode)	59	On Friday Dr Berber diagnosed me with ADHD. it really bothered me and is still bothering me. I don't know why. it makes sense but it just feels like there is another thing wrong with me and another reason why I can't function. it leaves me with no answers about how to deal with it.
Secrecy (no subcode)	10	I feel like I need to tell someone I'm really not doing well. I feel alone even though I'm not. I don't want a therapist but I want someone to talk to professionally.
Will power/ Effort		

Codes and Sub-Codes	Frequ- ency	Examples
Keep try/ “should”	8	I feel guilty for not doing more and feel like because things are already “slower” I should be ready to just get up and at it.
Sense of despera- tion to hold on	9	I feel so desperate for physical healing, I just have nothing in me.
Will power/ effort to find God	9	I have so much racing through my heart and mind and so many decisions to make and I just don't understand where God is in the midst of it all.
Motivational Issues	14	I have NO motivation to do ANYTHING. if I am “burnt out” how long can I be okay with doing nothing. I can't do this forever because I have I'm already behind.
Uncertainty		
Confusion/“I don't know”	21	I'm so confused about who I am and what I meant to do.
Stuck	2	I feel like I was able to catch up a bit on things over the last week of holidays. My heart felt heavy and discouraged. I think actually mostly it's because of my research. My 8 weeks flew by and I have nothing to show for it and I feel more stuck than ever I just keep trying too hard.
In vivo: “so lost”	15	Sad tired and frustrated and so so lost.
Rules to Live By (no subcode)	43	Be nicer to people... have time for them when they want to talk and not just be thinking about what I need to do
Love of Movement (no subcode)	6	So much fun mountain biking yesterday.
Physical and Emotional Responses		
Worry/Stress	8	I think I want to do that but I'm also really scared that if I drop it my motivation might never come back and then I'm worried I'll never finish.

Codes and Sub-Codes	Frequency	Examples
Anger/Frustration	11	I feel frustrated again. almost like I am undoing what it's supposed to be doing. feeling lost and sad and tired again. such low motivation. Lord what do I do? where do you want me to put my energy? Because clearly I have so little of it. I keep thinking about self-experimenting what would you have me experiment on? and how? how can I find this out? how will I know? I feel so beyond tired and frustrated with myself. the word that continues to describe how I feel is TORMENT. My heart and mind continue to feel in CONSTANT TORMENT. Can you help me with this?
Sad	5	Feeling very sad today. Tired and frustrated with myself
Guilty	4	Whenever I start to feel happy or have Joy, I feel so guilty.
Burnout	6	If I am "burnt out" how long can I be okay with doing nothing.
Lazy	2	I'm feeling so lost and I'm so worried that I'm lost because I admitted burnout. and I like this Because I said it and now I'm a victim to it? my body shows are more upfront right now too. feeling fat lazy old and ugly.
Anxious	11	Horrible day. so anxious and worried that I gave myself massive anxiety and tinnitus which made me completely exhausted and unable to work. I took two naps and am so mad at myself. but I also wondering if it just might be the modafinil and waking up at 5:00. over medicated and exhausting myself. so mad as it

Codes and Sub-Codes	Frequ- ency	Examples
		feels like I wasted all of today I hate being like this.
Tired/Exhausted	21	I'm so exhausted from all this and feel borderline like I've got the flu all the time so drained.
Physiological Responses	30	Continue to feel really sick, really sick to my stomach and then fever and sweats at night.
Struggling	1	I'm struggling
Discouraged	4	My heart felt heavy and discouraged. I think actually mostly it's because of my research. my 8 weeks flew by and I have nothing to show for it and I feel more stuck than ever. I just keep trying too hard.
State of mind	13	I feel like my brain is on constant scroll mode.
Positives		
I was fun	3	Thank you for laughing, loving and playing so hard and so wholeheartedly.
Not trying (giving up will power)	1	Really loving slow pace. not having a schedule and being able to come and go and do what I want has been the biggest gift.
Feeling good/enjoyment	6	Learn to tie flies today best time in so long.
Talking back/against fear	5	I think it's time we aren't so scared. You telling me all the things I "should do" has kept me from being lazy. but it has also killed me. I can't keep up to those standards. It will be weird not listening to you as much. I even feel anxious telling you about this.
I was myself	4	Thanks for being yourself and showing me what I am capable of - physically, mentally and emotionally.

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