

RUNNING HEAD: THE OBJECT PROJECT: EXPLORING IDENTITY

The Object Project: Exploring Identity

by

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Bachelor of Education, Simon Fraser University, 2006

Bachelor of Arts, University College of the Fraser Valley, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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Paige Fisher, Faculty of Education  
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## **Abstract**

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This study used the research method of autoethnography to reflect on life experiences and the subsequent affects they have had on the researcher's identity and role as a teacher. This study shares personal stories and reflects on their contribution to identity development. In this study the researcher gathers objects, assigns value to each object through story, and then reflects on story and their impact on identity development. The researcher used autoethnography to reflect on her current role as a teacher and the experiences that led to who she is today. This study provided a rich and cathartic insight into the researcher's role as a teacher and personal and cultural identity development.

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## Chapter 1

When I was three I pretended I was a teacher. My grandfather sat in his desk and I scribbled on the blackboard. He would goof around and I would turn to him and scold him. I loved it. I always knew that one day I would be a teacher.

Through my 13 years in the public school, system I came across all sorts of teachers. Teachers that I would like to forget, some I have forgotten, and those who I will never forget. Five teachers in particular stand out. My grade four teacher let my mother know that he disagreed with her choice to move me away from my peers. I remember running into him many years later and telling him how much I loved his class and appreciated him. I told him that he had been right, since we did end up moving back. In grade five I moved three times, broke my foot and both my arms. I remember my teacher making me write a test even though both my arms were broken. At that exact moment I thought, how could she make me do this when, clearly, I was at a disadvantage and in a lot of pain. What I know now. She made me do it because she knew I could. Her expectations of me didn't change because of my unfortunate circumstances. She believed in me. We knew she loved us even when our nine and ten year old selves thought she didn't. I wanted that.

In grade 9, middle school, I had a French language teacher who fought for me to go on a school trip with the high school. She encouraged my mother and pushed the staff of the high school to let me go. She didn't owe me anything, but she made sure I had that opportunity when I got into the high school. In grade 11 and 12 I admit I took the easy route. I stayed away from heavily academic courses and enrolled in mainly art classes.

Most students in my graphic arts class thought the teacher was mean. They thought she was tough and they definitely didn't appreciate her comments. She was one of those people that let you know if she thought you were slacking. She didn't let us get away with being sub par. I appreciated her so much and wish I had let her know this before she passed away. Lastly, I will always remember my vice principal. He also taught a teaching assistant course. He encouraged me to become a teacher. I took driving lessons with his son and he eventually hired me as a TTOC in the school district where I graduated. He was honest and it was clear to me that he truly cared about the students in our school. These educators further influenced my decision to become a teacher.

I dreamt of my own classroom with cute decorations, being extremely organized, and have rows of children who sat with their hands crossed patiently waiting for me to teach them something. The reality was beginning to not meet my expectation. I volunteered at my old elementary school in a grade one class before entering the Professional Development Program. I was the "guard" for one little guy who would run away from the school at the breaks. When he wasn't swearing at the mail man or telling other students what he thought of them, he was running. I also met a little fellow who informed me that Easter was nothing more than a creation of the devil. These students were not quite the patient little angels I had imagined, but they didn't deter me from the goal of getting my perfect little class.

I entered the PDP program and was sent to a school in a small community outside of Vancouver. I was with a grade 2/3 class for my entire practicum. At this school I was introduced to Autism Spectrum Disorder, a wide range of attention disorders, and children who were part of the "system". Nothing in my PDP program addressed these

things. No one prepared me for the culture clash both ethnically and socio-economically. No one prepared me to listen to care professionals suggest that one of my students have an outside “dog run” made for him when he got violent. No one prepared me to console 8 year olds. 8 year olds whose visit with daddy at the safe house next to the prison didn’t happen because mommy slept all weekend. Even after all that I still had a vision of that perfect classroom and was sure my experiences must have been anomalies.

I graduated from the program and eventually started teaching on call. My first day I replaced the Woodworking 9 and the P.E. 9 teacher at a middle school. Not exactly the cute little 8 year olds I had been trained on. Eventually I even found my way to the Alternative School and stayed for a bit. There was something about those students... those students that the other school didn’t want. I just felt good there. Some days we just talked about life and told stories about ourselves. Those students came to school because I was there. It wasn’t because I was going to teach them something brilliant but because I actually cared if they showed up or not. The relationships I built with those students caught the eye of the Vice Principal in the adjacent high school. He came over and offered me a job. Not exactly grade three, but a job was a job. I spent four years at the high school building relationships. The high school was great until it wasn’t. I didn’t know my rights, I didn’t know a lot of stuff and I was too scared to ask. There is an assumption that teachers just know how to do teacher stuff, well they don’t. I escaped the high school and went up to my current school.

Grade 2/3, finally. I had been packing around stickers, classroom decorations, and lesson plans for years. I went into my classroom with the same expectations of the perfect classroom even though I had experienced so much of the reality since. My class consisted

of eight little boys. Seven of the boys were First Nations. Four lived with their mothers, one lived with his grandma, one with his dad, one in foster care, and the last with both mom and dad. There were a few days where I realized that I had no idea what I was doing and that these little guys needed me and not my lesson plans. For example, I remember the two days we did show and tell. There were only eight of them so they could all take a turn as far as I was concerned. I was curious to see what stories they had to tell. Comic books? Toys? Some of the things they brought were: one fresh grouse leg in a baggy in his lunch box, half a cat skull, a picture of one of the boys holding a severed deer head, and a hunting knife. My deep down reaction was shock. However, the reaction they saw was pride. They knew that I loved them and the stuff they were into to. They shared stories of hunting and other things I knew nothing about. I knew nothing about First Nations culture and honestly I didn't know very much about my own cultural identity either.

Now I am a firm believer that in order to be truly successful in what you do that you have to have a strong sense of identity, both culturally and personally. The desire to help my learners develop this identity led me on a journey which has brought me to this project. During the 2013/2014 school year I realized that I wasn't servicing my learners as best I as I could. I was ignoring the fact that 85% of my students were First Nations. I remember asking my class who they were. I asked them what their heritages were. None of them knew. Barely any of them even could pronounce the territory name. I made it a personal mission to incorporate more First Nations content into my curriculum. I began in August of 2014 by compiling a list, from their guardians, of basic information about each child: birthdate, where they were born, who they were named after, where their name

came from, where their grandparents and parents were from, and what Nation they belonged to. Then when the school year started I began by introducing myself. I believe in being honest with my students and sharing my personal story. I told them about my adoption, my families, and my own heritage. My students saw me more as a person and less of an authoritarian figure. My goal was for all my students to simply be able to introduce who they were, where they were from, and who their families were. In the 2014/2015 school year I also used the First Nations Education Steering Committee's *Indian Residential Schools & Reconciliation Teacher Resource Guide Grade 5* as part of my English program. We were extremely fortunate to have an Elder join us as we went through the curriculum. She had attended the Residential School that was mentioned in the curriculum. One day in particular she did a family tree on the board and expressed that it was important for her to know where her ancestors were from. That when you introduced yourself to another person this was how connections were made. Day by day my students became more and more confident of who they were. They could say where they were from and their confidence levels improved. Building their cultural identities had become a crucial part of our school day. The FNESC resource was a stepping stone into developing our personal and cultural identity.

One particular story, *Shi-shi-etko* (Kroll, 2009), was about a little girl who was about to go to Residential School. She created a memory bag and filled it with objects that reminded her of her family, their teachings, and the land. Intrigued by this idea I had my class make their own memory bags. Every field trip my class went on they had to find one small thing to place in their bags to remind them of the experience we had. At the end of our last class trip to Educo Adventure School in 100 Mile House I handed out their

memory bags. On the bus they dropped their found object into the bag. Some students chose tiny rocks, some students picked flowers and some students grabbed little pine cones off the ground. I asked them what they were going to remember about the trip. The chatter about their experiences was exciting as they held their memory and placed it into their memory bags. They were talking about zip lining, the cabins, and having dishes parties.

At the end of the school year my students were asked to look through their memory bags. As they revisited each object in their bags, they talked about the science trip to Simon Fraser University, the Eco Dairy and the robots that milked cows. They talked about our Science World trip and how the IMAX movie made some of them feel a little sick. The tiny little objects, that to anyone else meant nothing, held so many memories and stories for my students. I was surprised and impressed with their recall of information. In my classroom, I have students with a range of abilities. Some students who are fantastic writers, some that are ok, and some that simply can't. I was amazed at the leveling ability of these objects and their stories. All students could recall, with detail, what they learned or remembered from each experience. Had someone come in and witnessed this assessment process, using story, they would never have known who could or couldn't write. They brought in things that were important to them, like a medicine pouch, and describe what it was for and how they made it. They would tell stories about something they had been taught or remembered how to do. Almost everyone has things they keep because it reminds them of someone or something. They remember something specific from a time long ago that was important enough to keep a memento. This led me to wonder about how these artifacts could be valid learning objects in the pursuit of

developing and strengthening personal and cultural identities. I decided to explore the objects I have kept and how the stories have contributed to my own personal and cultural identity.

The objects that I've kept have memories attached with them too. Some memories have been life changing and traumatic, some memories are about exploring identity and some memories are about change and adaptability. I have a teddy bear that is as old as I am. It's not soft, nor cuddly. One of its legs is barely attached. To anyone else my bear would be a candidate for the garbage, but to me I am reminded of the man who made it. I am reminded of the grandfather that I barely remember and the family that was lost. I keep many things because of who or what they represent. I am attached to these things. I sometimes wonder, did the trauma I experienced as a child predispose me to creating relationships with things and not people? Not only was I programmed early to distrust people but inherently I too suffered a loss. I did not know who I was or where I came from. I did not know my own cultural identity. As an adopted adult, I feel this heavy connection to my First Nation's learners. I want to explore our cultural identity together. The sadness and grief about my own cultural loss fuels my passion to help my learners build these strong connections to their cultures and their families.

As an adopted adult I wanted to explore the relationship between the severing of the mother child relationship and how it has affected me. I started reading about the long term effects that some adoptees experience. There is a link between trauma and the tendency to value objects more than human relationships. I understand now that the objects I keep and the stories I have attached to them contribute to my personal narrative of who I am. These experiences contribute to my changing identity and my role as a

teacher. This project was designed to help explore how my life experiences have contributed to my personal and cultural identity. This project is about the stories that led my journey into becoming a teacher. I began my research by exploring the value of things in culture. I immediately thought about all the things I keep. I started writing stories about these things and realized how much of an impact these stories had on me. When I completed writing the stories I looked for themes and found some exceptional occurrences. My stories were about dysfunction, loss, change, and identity development. My stories, the narrative of my life, have informed my review of literature, dictated which research method I should use, and ultimately contribute to the shaping of my identity and my role as a teacher.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review Types

Choosing to use narrative as data for this project I felt that a brief analysis of literature reviews themselves would be helpful. The literature review is a summary of what appropriate literature reveals about my topic. In that sense, the type of literature review itself is crucial in the development of this thesis. Feak (2009) describes “types and characteristics of literature reviews” (p. 2). Narrative literature “reviews are typically found in thesis, dissertations, grants and research proposals, and research articles” (p. 2), while “Systemic reviews follow a strict methodology in the selection of the literature discussed” (p. 3). This style of literature review follows strict protocol. A Meta-Analysis literature review “gathers data from a number of different, independent studies that have examined the same research question” (p. 3). A focused literature review is “limited to a single aspect, such as methodology.” My project is a story about exceptional occurrences that have contributed to shaping of my identity and as such are themselves a narrative. Narrative literature reviews answer questions on a broad basis and allow for an analysis of qualitative data. The narrative style allows for a more contextual interpretation of data. In order to effectively express and lead readers through my process, I will be using metadiscoursal elements. Metadiscoursal elements “help readers make their way through a text by revealing its organization, highlighting important parts, and evaluating, among other things” (p. 38). Feak states that metadiscourse is “discourse about discourse” (p.38). This project requires a conscious effort by the researcher to guide and elaborate with text features in order to keep the reader interacting throughout the narrative of the project.

The following section will define Material Culture as it pertains to cultural identity and the role that objects or things play in that development.

## **Material Culture**

By the third grade most students can identify themselves as Canadian. When you ask what makes them Canadian often they refer to the material culture of Canada. The objects that, although stereotypical, help define our cultural identity as Canadians. Canadians love hockey, Tim Hortons, snow, moose, beavers, and plaid (to name a few). The most significant thing they can identify is our flag. These objects contribute to our collective cultural identity as Canadians.

Tilley (2006) states that, “material culture is itself: an instance that things matter, the study of things makes a difference to the way in which we understand the social world and can make a unique and valuable contribution to the broader concerns of the social and historical sciences in general” (p. 6). Material culture can include many things from objects, to ideas, to foods, to smells, to clothing and so on. Tilley continues by adding that material culture is related to “an objectification perspective in the social world: the manner in which objects or material forms are embedded in the life worlds of individuals, groups, institutions or, more broadly, culture and society” (p. 60). Things contribute to the identities of so many. Each province and territory of Canada is associated with things. Flowers, birds, mammals, fish, gemstones, trees, and even a coat of arms.

When I was 19 I moved to Austria to be an Au Pair (nanny). I lived there when the Kosovo War was happening. One particular evening a group of us were in the subway

station talking in English. A man several metres away muttered that we were stupid Americans. All I did was switch my back pack to the front of me and point to my identifying object. My Canadian flag patch. That little object at that moment made me Canadian. The man realizing his mistake apologized for the comment and made some general comment about how Canadians are so nice. This anecdote is an effective illustration of what material culture says about the ways we can understand ourselves and others through things:

That through the things we can understand ourselves and others, not because they are externalizations of ourselves or others, reflecting something prior and more basic in our consciousness or social relations but because these things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves. (Tilley, 2006, p. 61)

Are things and objects the only things what make up material culture? Not necessarily. My story of the man in the subway contributes to part of my material cultural identity. I am from a place that identifies me as peaceful and *nice*, I am Canadian. I have experienced positivity while traveling simply because I am from Canada. Canada itself, my Canadian flag patch, and the story about identifying as a Canadian all contribute to my material culture. Tilley (2006) supports this claim by stating that:

The artefact can thus be a place, a landscape, a story or an event, and concomitantly people's different relationships with the places, landscapes, paths and types of dwellings are primary ways in which individual and group biographies and identities become objectified. (p. 70)

My Canadian flag patch, my accent, and my stories do not contain intrinsic value unless I share them. The people I have come across that define me as a nice Canadian only do so because of their combined experiences with other Canadians. My accent is only defined as Canadian when compared to other languages. MacGregor (2011) expresses that “All museums rest on the hope – the belief – that the study of things can lead to a truer understanding of the world” (p. xxv). By examining things in relation to other cultures we begin to understand our own. A combination of experiences and stories are what give objects their value.

### **The Valuation of Objects**

I have had more than one person try to help me with my things. They would say it was time to throw out my junk. Junk is old stuff with no value... with no story. Those words cut into me and my anxiety begins to sore when I consider throwing away or sorting through my junk. I consciously chose to keep that junk. More than once I have thought or said the phrase: “It might come in handy one day,” as most teachers do. My husband found a box filled with empty coffee containers and asked if he could throw the box of junk away. I think of what the containers could be. The containers have no stories but potentially could. An experiment by Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker, *Significant objects: 100 extraordinary stories about ordinary things* (2012), was designed to show the value of story associated with things. Their hypothesis was that, “stories are such a powerful driver of emotional value that their effect on any given object’s subjective value can be measured objectively” (Introduction). Their method was to gather 100 objects that were as inexpensive as possible, have 100 writers create stories about each object, and

then sell these objects on EBay. They initially spent \$128.74 on all 100 objects. Some of the objects were considered junk. The objects with their stories sold for an amazing \$3,612.51. The value was in the stories attached to the things.

Appadurai's *The social life of things Commodities in cultural perspective* (1986), explores the social value of things. Appadurai states that "from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodical point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (p. 199). Things need human interaction to give them meaning and then those things require story and value to keep that meaning. This project has made me evaluate my things. If I am only keeping things because of their potential then perhaps I should be giving them away. Do their stories dictate a value that gives them a permission to exist without human contact? Are things that are kept in boxes truly valuable if they remain hidden until their stories are shared? When I die, the stories die, and my objects become junk.

When discussing the relationship between people and things, Brown (2001) writes:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (p. 6)

The valuation of objects is dependent on the relationship with people. One man's junk is another man's treasure. The constant valuation of things can be seen in antique stores, garage sales, museums, and so on. People attach stories to things and those things become valuable. The relationship between people and things is very complicated. My relationship with my things is complicated as well.

### **Relationships to Objects**

Until 5 years ago I had all my dolls from when I was small. Bins and bins filled with dolls. One day I made the decision to donate them to a transition house for battered women. People asked me why I didn't sell them because they would have been worth a lot of money. These dolls were my friends. I was ok with donating them. Perhaps a little girl, whose universe was disrupted by violence or tragedy, would be able to cope better or change their story a little bit because of the dolls. Maybe they would learn to build trust again. I was more than good with the potential of those new stories. Muensterberger (1994) discusses how attachment to things and the predetermination to collect things can be linked back to early childhood in a way that makes me think more deeply about my attachment to these dolls:

not surprisingly, these phenomena have their root in early childhood. They originate in the baby's experiences not simply with hunger and satiety but with the subjective perception of closeness and belief or, negatively, doubt in magical control. This is usually perceived as a sense of emptiness and disillusionment and the need for both physical and emotional replenishment. Thus, the values attached

to one's holdings usually follow an earlier affective prototype of yearning. In this inner affective state, a soft doll or the edge of a pillow or blanket can provide a sense of touch and the illusion of protection against the dread of being alone and powerless. Later, a toy or some special object can bring the same kind of comfort, thus providing the first passion for possession. (p. 16)

Children learn to soothe themselves either with the touch of a trusted adult or thing. Over the years I have had discussions with counselling professionals about the connection between collecting, hoarding, and other disorders and their connections to trauma. Trauma that occurred in utero has always fascinated me. One particular study always stands out to me when I think about prenatal influence and disorders. The Dutch Hunger Winter of 1944-1945 was a result of the German embargo on the Netherlands in response to the Dutch support of the Allied forces. Millions died from the famine. Franzek (2008) suggests that there is a link between the malnourished state of the fetus during development and the development of disorders as adults. Franzek (2008) found “an association between famine during gestation and participating in treatment for addiction in adulthood” (p. 438). I wondered if there was connection between my prenatal and perinatal experiences with adoption and my basic mistrust of human intentions, my tendency to collect things, and my need to be in control of relationships.

## **Adoption**

Prenatal and perinatal psychology would suggest that adoptees have difficulties in human relationships and predetermination to collect things. I was adopted as a small infant. I feel that this has shaped my relationships with people and things. Verrier (1993) states that:

the severing of that connection between adopted child and his birthmother causes a primal or narcissistic wound, which affects the adoptee's sense of Self and often manifests in a sense of loss, basic mistrust, anxiety and depression, emotional and/or behavioural problems, and difficulties in relationships with significant others (p. 21 ).

Renaldo Maduro writes that the adoptee “would substitute things for people, especially when they offered comfort, safety, and reliability” (as cited in Verrier, 1993, p. 36). I suffered a breach of trust as part of my prenatal programming. This has made me more conditioned to keep things close, as opposed to people. When people are a disappointment, objects become the things you cherish and value.

As an adoptee, I have experienced a disconnection from my own personal and cultural identity. To help my students explore and create their own identities, I must first examine what personal and cultural identities are and why their role in education is crucial.

## **Personal and Cultural Identity**

British Columbia's Ministry of Education sees the value and link between establishing positive personal and cultural identities and their importance in education. According to the Ministry of Education:

A positive personal and cultural identity is the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of all the facets that contribute to a healthy sense of oneself. It includes awareness and understanding of one's family background, heritage(s), language(s), beliefs, and perspectives in a pluralistic society. Students who have a positive personal and cultural identity value their personal and cultural narratives, and understand how these shape their identity. Supported by a sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and positive identity, students become confident individuals who take satisfaction in who they are, and what they can do to contribute to their own well-being and to the well-being of their family, community, and society. (MOE, 2015)

Altugan (2015) writes, "Cultural backgrounds of learners are significant because ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious or economic differences can cause cultural disconnection leading corruption of motivation to learning" (p. 1161). Recognizing and addressing issues of cultural identity allows and promotes learners to understand the world around them. Students' strong or weak sense of identity affects their motivation to learn. Martin (2014) states that "a multicultural curriculum positively affects not only students' intellectual engagement (factual knowledge), but also their view of themselves vis-à-vis others (relational knowledge or self-identity)" (p. 121). Examining personal narratives of the student and teacher helps to create a learning environment that benefits both. Personal narratives are the stories that make up who and what they are. I feel that as a teacher it is my responsibility to examine my own personal narratives and how they have affected me and my role as a teacher.

## Personal Narratives

McAdams (1999) suggests there are six common principles in developing narrative identity: “The Self is Storied, Stories Integrate Lives, Stories are Told in Social Relationships, Stories Change over Time, Stories are Cultural Texts, and Some Stories are Better than Others” (p. 244-248). I feel that it can be agreed upon that personal identity is ever changing. I am not the same person I was when I was at three and nor will I be the same person when I am 80. However, several exceptional occurrences have contributed to who I am at this moment. I remember things that happened to me when I was small and they affect my current relationships and how I deal with things today. I remember the grade three teacher that refused to let us go the bathroom and did not care even if we had accidents during class. I knew at that moment when I became a teacher I would never allow my students to be embarrassed in that fashion.

Not only am I a teacher, but I am a step-mother, a daughter, a wife, a sister, and an aunt. When I wake up I don’t think about which role I’ll play that day because I am all those things. I recognize in my students that they too have roles. They are friends, brothers, sisters, cousins, and the list goes on. Their stories and circumstances have made them who they are, at that exact moment. They are the child that at recess had no friends. At that very moment, they are alone. I give value to these experiences because I know, from my own narratives, how it feels to be alone when you’re eight.

McAdams (1999) suggests there is a “‘diachronic integration’ where the person moves through life events which all contribute to their current being” and that “a particular sequence of events helps to explain how they came to be who they are today” (p. 245). Had I not been adopted, I wouldn’t have had a grandfather who pretended to be

my student. Had I not been adopted, I wouldn't have dreamed of being a teacher. Had I not been adopted, I wouldn't have met my vice principal who encouraged me to go into teaching. This project has allowed me to share my personal narratives which have helped me come to terms with some difficult things that I have experienced. McAdams suggests that "Telling the story of an event again and again may help the teller to clarify the event's emotional meaning" (p. 245). I have come to some basic understandings about my own personal behaviours because of the stories I have written about my things.

I am aware that when a student has a rough day on Thursday, next week they may not even remember it. I am not the same person as when I was at three and I will be a different version of myself tomorrow. This idea is supported by McAdam's assertion that "As people's motivations, goals, personal concerns, and social positions change, furthermore, their memories of important events in their lives and the meanings they attribute to those events may also change" (p. 246).

The stories about our lives contribute to our cultural identities. My students share stories of fish camps, hunting, and Pow Wows. They are from First Nations communities. Our experiences are what create the atmosphere in our classroom, where no stories are evaluated they are simply shared. This process has taught me that stories are the basis of who we are as human beings, we must share our stories to give them value, and stories contribute to our identities and the many roles we have. "We are all story" writes Wagamese (2015, p. 2). The stories of this project are written as a self-reflection on identity, an introspection. As Wagamese describes the role of stories in introspection, they are:

a means of seeing how those apply to our lives. It's a place of vision. It's a resting place where the story, the song each of us has created up to this moment can be inspected and those things deemed unnecessary be let go. It's a place of courage, because the hardest place to look is within. Many people stop here, deterred by the trials of the journey and the sudden hurts that sometimes make life hard. But introspection is meant to bring us to balance. It is the place where all things are ordered, where all things ring true at the same time. Balance allows us to move forward, and when we do, the journey becomes wondrous again by virtue of our ability to see the whole trail. (p. 108)

Our stories are an important factor in who we are, what we ultimately believe in, and represent who we are personally and culturally. My stories have shaped why I teach and how I teach.

Hanna and Henry (1995) state:

The most important qualities of our culture are our language and our stories. In oral traditions such as ours, telling stories is how we pass on the history and the teachings of our ancestors. Without these stories, we would have to rely on other people for guidance and information about our past. Teachings in the form of stories are an integral part of our identity as a people and as a nation. If we lose these stories, we will do a disservice to our ancestors – those who gave us the responsibility to keep our culture alive. (p. 201)

Stories play a critical role in who we are. They tell our histories and influence our presence. These stories contribute to my cultural and personal identities and my role as a teacher.

## **Conclusion**

I collected things because of what I have experienced and it was my way of coping with things I did not understand. This project allowed me to explore how my own personal narratives contribute to who I am in my many roles, especially as a teacher. The things I have kept and the stories they hold have helped me realize some major factors in my own personal and cultural identity. I chose things over people because I did not trust the people around me. I am aware of this tendency and continue to work on allowing people to get close. I realize that many of my students come with the same mistrust and know that it is my job to build that relationship with them. My students and myself have stories to share. Stories about good things and bad things. I hope that through this journey I will be able to empower my students to see that even though they may have some bad stories it is within their power to write new, positive stories. I do not want them to forget the bad ones, but to use them as a building block in the discovery of their own personal and cultural identities.

The following chapter will describe the methodology of this project as I explore my autoethnographical stories and how they have contributed to my evolving personal and cultural identity, and my role as a teacher.

## Chapter 3

This chapter discusses the research procedure and methodology for this study. The methodology of this research project is autoethnography. This chapter will explain the purpose of the project, define autoethnography, identify the process of the project, describe ethical considerations, and detail what the final project will look like.

### **Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to reflect on past exceptional occurrences using objects and story. Reflecting on these experiences will contribute positively to understanding the effects of the past and how they influence my identity as a teacher. This project is a personal narrative about my experiences and therefore is favourable to an autoethnographical study.

When I began this project, a year ago, I was focused on the experiences of my students. I wanted to explore the potential of them using artefacts as a means to express their learning, their stories. People have noted that I have an ability to make connections with all students and that I evoke compassion for my students. As the year progressed the focus of the project shifted from my students onto myself. I began to wonder why am I able to connect so strongly with my students. What occurrences in my past have influenced my personal and cultural identities and my role as a teacher? I decided that I would write stories about objects I have kept and how they have affected me personally. This project is a reflective narrative journey about the exceptional occurrences that have contributed to my role as a teacher and my evolving personal and cultural identity.

## **Autoethnography as Method**

Autoethnography uses personal experiences as a data collection tool in order to understand personal and cultural experiences. Autoethnography helps the researcher examine their relationships to other people and cultures. The reflective nature of autoethnography allows the researcher to explore themselves. According to Adams (2015) autoethnography is an effective tool for “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (p. 1).

Unlike ethnography, which describes people and culture, autoethnography explores the interpretation of experiences as data from the perspective of the researcher. Fetterman (2010) states that “Autoethnography is a form of postmodern ethnography. In autoethnography, the researcher is the center of focus and inquiry” (p. 131).

Autoethnography allows the researcher to use themselves as the primary data source and gives the researcher permission to be vulnerable with their audience. The purpose of this research is for the readers to sympathize with the narrative of the research, make connections to how personal experience has contributed to my identity and my role as a teacher, learn the importance of their own stories in shaping their own identities, and ultimately how personal stories affect the learner’s connections to personal and cultural identities.

## Project Process

The process started with gathering objects that I have kept over the years. I evaluated each item for their potential narrative value as it pertains to identity development. I chose 16 objects that represent 16 exceptional occurrences. I selected these objects to connect to, what I feel, are exceptional occurrences or life changing events or experiences that have played a crucial role in my identity development. Chang (2016) suggests 10 strategies to interpret data:

- (1) Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes;
- (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyze inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyze relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly;
- (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories. (p. 131)

Upon completion of the narratives, I looked for recurring themes. I reviewed literature on material culture, the valuation of objects, relationships to objects, adoption, personal and cultural identity, personal narratives, and stories. As part of this project I also explore the different writing styles associated with autoethnography. Chang (2016) discusses four different writing styles that can be applied to autoethnography, "descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative" (p. 143). For the purpose of this study I used the "imaginative-creative" and "confessional-emotive" writing styles. Imaginative-creative writing allows a less structured format. "Imaginative-creative" writing allowed me to express my stories in

various styles, use poetry, and to visually represent myself while “confessional-emotive” writing allowed me to express fears and hidden personal narratives.

The design of this project places the researcher in the role of the topic of investigation. One of the purposes of this project is to reflect on my experiences as they pertain to my role as a teacher. Adams (2015) wrote that “autoethnographers sometimes begin with personal experiences that we want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningfully” (p. 47). As such, this methodology felt as though it was the most appropriate for what I was hoping to achieve.

Each story and experience associated with the object illustrates how compounding exceptional occurrences have contributed to my identity and role as a teacher. Therefore the objects were arranged in a chronological order. The stories were written one per day in order to give myself time to develop tone, style, and to capture the emotions felt during the process.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This project is about exceptional occurrences that have shaped my identity and how they are reflected in my role as a teacher. When narratives include others, pseudonyms or pronouns will replace participant names.

**Final Project**

I have created a website, [alisonwebber.com](http://alisonwebber.com), that will display the content of this paper. The website will be active upon granting approval of the thesis and will remain active for one year.

## Chapter 4: Objects and Stories

1979

a fe male child, Birth Registration No. 17039 1978  
by Vincent James Webber and Catherine Janet Webber

ORE HIS HONOUR *JUDGE S. V. LEGG* } *Thursday the 4th* day  
e Law Courts, (Edmonton, Alberta) of *March* A.D. 19*79*

**ADOPTION ORDER**

UPON the Application of the Director of Child Welfare; AND UPON READING the  
ion of [redacted] and his wife [redacted]  
of Spruce Grove in the Province of Alberta, and the  
avite of [redacted]

AND UPON THIS HONOURABLE COURT being satisfied with the ability of the Petitioners to fulfil  
obligations and perform the duties of parents toward the said child, and of the propriety of the adoption of the said child  
the Petitioners pursuant of the provisions of the said Act:

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED AND ADJUDGED that the Petition of [redacted]  
1 [redacted] his wife, be and the same is hereby granted, and that the said  
id is hereby ordered to be, from and after the date of this Order, the adopted child of the said petitioners and shall  
wafter bear the christian and surname of Allison Janet Webber

tered this *April 4th* day *1979* A.D., 19*79* *J. Legg*  
J.D.C.

C.D.C.  
I hereby certify this to be a true copy of  
the original *[signature]*

**Figure 1: Adoption Order**

My mother told me that I rarely cried when I was first born. She told me I was a content baby and for two weeks she held me constantly and told me everything I needed to know. After the adoption was complete I went to live with my new mother. I asked my adopted mother if I cried a lot when she brought me home. Once again I heard no. You would think that after being taken from my mother and given to a stranger I would have cried. Was this my first lesson in relationships? People come, people go, I only have myself so no use crying about it especially when I couldn't control the situation.

I found Nancy Verrier's book *Primal Wound, Understanding the Adopted Child* (1993). I've never been scared to read a book before... but I was about this one. I even left it wrapped in the plastic it came in like somehow its contents might leak out and absorb into me when I wasn't ready for it. At this moment where this intense fear and

emotion about what I might read or learn about myself lived... I knew I was on the right road.

There are many theories about this stage in the development of a child - the severing of this connection between biological mother and infant and the ultimate surrender of that infant to a stranger. Concepts about adoption fascinate me and make me want to delve more deeply into psychology of it. However, for purposes of this project I wanted to explore how this initial event and subsequent personal experiences have contributed to the shaping of my identity as a teacher and how this identity contributes to my view of the people in my world.

**1980****Figure 2: Doll**

I remember getting her. I remember him coming back from somewhere. I must have been only two or three but I remember it.

My daddy gave me her.

She looks now just about how I feel about him. Like at one point she was new and loved. Then as the years go on, the face wore off. Even though I tried to draw it back on... it isn't the same. She had a long dress to match her hat. I don't know where that dress is now. The clothes are different and they don't quite fit her.

She looks dirty. I know that with a good tumble through the wash she would maybe be better. I don't wash her though because I know that she will fall apart, her face will disappear and I'm not quite sure if I even want to draw it back on.

She looks disappointed. She looks like until she was four her daddy was there and then he wasn't. She looks like she was put on an airplane to fly alone to visit him and his new family.

She looks older than she is. She looks like even though she might have been many years younger than her step sister she was the responsible one. She looks like she had to be responsible for someone and their sickness. She looks like she felt it was up to her to keep her step sister safe.

She looks exhausted. She looks like she figured out that her daddy is just a man with a mental illness, a sociopath. She looks like she hasn't talked to him in 20 years. She looks like she might be staring at the screen when she googles his name and sees his obituary.

1981



f

**Figure 3: Teddy Bear**

I was eight when I asked, “Why doesn’t grandma love me?”

I was told, “She doesn’t love anyone, just herself.”

At eight years old it made sense. I didn’t cry about it. I just knew that she couldn’t love me and I was fine with that.

Grandma didn’t love my father either. When my father was small... around six or seven... he was stung by a box jelly fish. My grandmother did not rush to his side to help him but told him how stupid he was and that his brother better get some lemons to help with the sting. He also told me that one evening he refused to eat his dinner. Grandma made him sit at the table until he ate it. Around four in the morning she grew fed up and “made him” eat. He choked and coughed up what he had eaten. She “made him” eat that too. He didn’t love her either.

Grandma didn't love my step mother. I remember her sitting in her rocking chair telling my step mother how her cooking, cleaning, wife and mothering skills were terrible. My step mother didn't love her either.

Grandma didn't love my grandpa. When my grandmother and grandfather were living in England my grandfather was struck by a car. He received severe trauma to his head which resulted in him having a partial lobotomy. His family said it was a blessing so that he could blissfully deal with my grandmother's abuse and not know what was happening. My grandmother and grandfather were both in the British Army and my grandmother was a nurse. So after the accident she took care of him. My father is pretty sure that my grandmother euthanized my grandfather when she was tired of taking care of him.

This bear is the bear my grandfather made for me during his rehabilitation from his lobotomy. This is the bear I was given, with love, from the man whom I was named after. This is the bear from my grandfather and NOT from my grandmother, because she didn't love anyone.

1982



**Figure 4: Dress Form**

My mom and I left my dad and moved to B.C.. She worked hard. I remember her studying and going to work. She always made sure I was being taken care of.

I got on airplanes to go visit my dad. I remember crying about when he was coming to be with us. She never once told me he was a bad man. She never once told me she was scared that I might never come back.

No matter how awful I was to her I always knew she loved me, she might not have liked me, but she definitely loved me. My mom protected me and never showed me how scared she was, she made me think we were ok and we were, and she showed me

how strong she was and never let me know if she was stressed. She is brave, she is supportive, she is strong, and she is a role model.

I remember the time I came home from school and she was crying. Her friend had died. This strong woman who rarely showed any weakness, had broken. Years and years of pent up emotions had erupted out of her. She decided to go to counselling, to take care of herself, and eventually I went too.

I appreciate her loving and protecting me from everything... but I appreciate our relationship now more than ever. The choice to go to counselling has benefited us both beyond words. It has helped me both personally and professionally. I have become more patient and I understand my mom and my students better.

1983



**Figure 5: Brooch**

My Paternal Grandmother: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder...

The shrapnel remains embedded in your calf. A crude reminder of the Malaya War. You ran for your life leaving everything you ever had to be destroyed by the bombs dropped by the Japanese. Your escape vessel was sunk and after spending many hours floating in the ocean, you were rescued by a British Destroyer. You survived and within a year you were pregnant with my father. You would unknowingly influence him with your disorders.

The narrow pathways through your apartment led people to spots where you existed. You threw nothing away. A box for elastic bands, a box for the plastic wrapping and a box for the cardboard inserts off pantyhose packets. It took weeks to empty out your apartment. When the family finished purging the vast weight from your hoard it had warped the floor so badly that the front door would not close. You hated everyone in your life and it was obvious.

### My Adoptive Father: The Sociopath (Antisocial Personality Disorder)...

Born in 1943 at a cantonment in India to a mother suffering from PTSD you developed severe mechanisms to survive. Your mother didn't care about you or your brother. She showboated for her own benefit. Your birthday parties as a child were grand revelries, with elephants and delusions. You survived your childhood but developed a serious disorder.

Above average intelligence and a skillful manipulator you fooled and hurt a lot of people to satisfy your will. You lavished people with gifts and you didn't care who you hurt or abused along the way. You coped with your inherited dysfunction with alcohol as you poisoned yourself with vodka. Even you, a genius, couldn't hide or get away with fraud forever and your actions sent you to prison and isolated you from family members. Your inability to sustain healthy relationships hopefully stopped you from passing on your disorder to the many people you had influence over.

1986



**Figure 6: Archie Comics**

I am not one of those people that loves reading. I remember trying. I actually remember my best attempts at trying to be a “reader”. Judy Bloom books were the first try and then 10 years later I tried John Saul books. It never took.

This is not to say I don’t read. I am constantly reading. I read articles, facts, mostly non-fiction. I may not have read all the regular students stuff but I read Archie Comics. Those comics are part of the reason I read as well as I do.

Not only was I a “reader”, thanks to those comics, but it satisfied my underlying need to collect things. I have found that you can fly under the crazy lady radar if you collect things that are socially acceptable. I have over 1000 comics. Other acceptable collectables would be sports cards, books and stickers. Some things verge on the edge of unacceptable such as teacups, teaspoons, fabric, and dolls.

Imagine collecting 1000 cats, 1000 bikes, 1000 toe nail clippings, or a 1000 newspapers. Now you're crazy and now this collecting becomes hoarding. A socially unacceptable collection characterized by a mental illness.

Is my level of collecting not just an acceptable form of hoarding? Could that initial separation during the adoption process and subsequent events have contributed to my mild form of OCD?

**1987 / 1988**



**Figure 7: Casts**

1987/1988: 8 things: Timeline

June 1987

Chilliwack,

Moving was a bad idea he said...

We went anyways.

August 1987

Port Renfrew,

Crashing waves and a large tree...

Broken foot.

September 1987

Victoria,

Hobbling through halls on crutches...

Spell Agassiz.

December 1987

East Vancouver,

Fighting, Expulsions, and Zero times tables...

Crying.

December 1987

East Vancouver,

Moving to Grandmas, with or without you...

Moved home.

April 1988

Chilliwack,

Using a tarzan swing to get down a hill...

Two broken arms.

November 1988

Jasper,

Winter car accident,

Kelly died.

November 1988

Chilliwack,

Moving was a bad idea he said...

He was right.

1991



**Figure 8: Jean Jacket**

First Day

Who is this guy picking up my mom? Does this stranger, in his cowboy boots and jeans,  
think he can mosey on in and pretend to be my dad?

Another Day,

“YOU’RE NOT PART OF MY FAMILY!” I screamed at him. Maybe he’ll leave now.

Wedding Day,

I fell onto my bed and cried. The tragedy of this day, their wedding day, ended any hope  
of my parents getting back together.

Crash Day,

I didn’t want to talk to my mom, she was going to be furious. He wouldn’t silence me  
out. I phoned and asked for him.

The Day,

He had a heart attack... thank god he's ok.

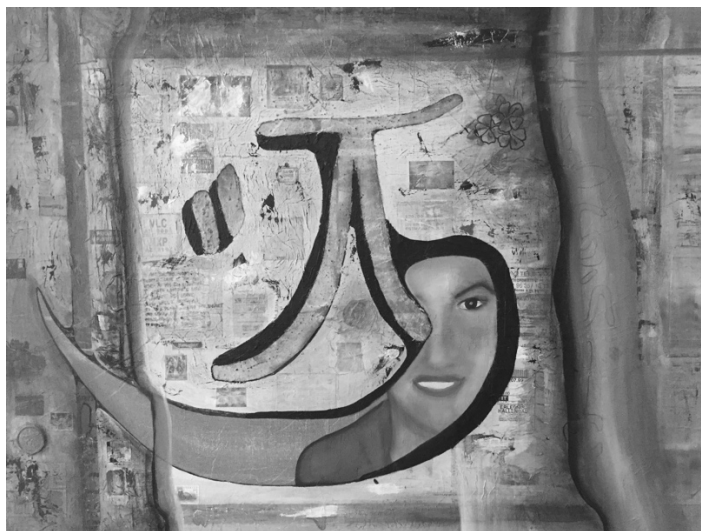
Everyday,

He is proud of me, he wants the best for me, he is there for me, and he loves me.

Today,

He is my dad. Always had been I just never saw it.

1998



**Figure 9: Austria Painting**

I was done with school... obviously university wasn't for me. I remember walking to the university counsellor and thinking what am I going to do now. I saw this poster on the wall:

“Do you like traveling? Do you like children? Become an Au Pair!”

There it was... Nanny. So I walked out of that counselling office and went back to my room and started making some calls. Within two months I was on a plane to Austria.

No one really prepares you for what this experience is truly. They wine and dine you with the adventure. Sort of like teaching programs, nothing prepares you for the actuality of the situation. The pictures I had received were of two little blonde girls and a baby. Much like a classroom setting no one tells you these children have baggage. They have had several nannies come and go so they were obviously distrusting from the get go. The baby was almost a year old. It wasn't doing the normal things a baby of that age

might do and for good reason. After having surgery to remove tumours from his stomach he was behind on the developmental curve. Not to mention he puked a lot.

I couldn't speak any German and everything was new. I spent two weeks crying in my room. I remember crying the first week up at my current school. I was overwhelmed and underprepared. A few weeks there I enrolled in German classes. That is where I met the other Nannies. Our group consisted of a couple of Swedish girls, a couple of Finnish girls, and a Spanish girl. This scary adventure became not so scary. We all had interesting families and my sick little angel was nothing compared to some of the stories I heard. Like teaching, after I heard that I was not alone and it is hard, it gave me permission to just try and do my best. I had people who knew almost exactly what I was experiencing. It allowed me to relax to enjoy what I was doing.

I travelled and I grew as a person. I loved that little boy with all my heart and it broke when I left. I made mistakes, poor choices, fantastic connections, all in all the experiences were irreplaceable.

I came back to Canada, full of new found confidence, I worked for a year until I could register for school again... I wasn't done with school.

2000



**Figure 10: Jasper**

Ever since I knew I was adopted I thought about meeting my birth parents. All the regular questions filled my head:

“Who do I look like?”

“Who is artistic like me?” and the list goes on...

I made attempts at locating them after I was 18 but I nothing serious. One day I found the Alberta Adoption Registry. So I signed up. Less than 24 hours later a social worker called:

Her: “Hi, is this Alison Webber?”

Me: “Yes.”

Her: “Your birth mother is Maureen, she lives in Jasper and they are waiting for your call.”

Me: “ok”

Pertinent information was exchanged and I called her. She and her twin sister were waiting for me to call. I don't remember much of the conversation just that they had been searching for me and my dad was dead. Within a week my birth mother was on her way to the coast. We met at a restaurant in town. I didn't ask what she was driving or any identifying information. I sat in my car and waited. Then she arrived. I knew right away it was her, without a doubt. We sat in the restaurant and weirdly enough it wasn't like we were strangers. It wasn't uncomfortable or strange it was like it had only been a few months since we had seen each other last. We drove back to Jasper together. Everywhere we went in Jasper the following happened:

“You must be Mo's daughter!”

“Wow you look alike!”

Every friend of my dad's that I met the meetings went like this:

“Your mannerisms are the same. You remind me of Kelly.”

Followed by grown men and women crying.

Intense. When we were done I took a greyhound bus back home.

2003



**Figure 11: Cameras (Harvey, 2017)**

They were my favourites...

They allowed me to be bold, they gave me permission to go out and explore... alone.

I was in control, they saw what I wanted them to see. We went to places I wouldn't go on my own, I had an excuse with them.

Using film is a very personal process. You and the camera go out in a search for things that appeal to your eye. After you've captured these moments your return with your surprise hidden in a little canister. You could have botched it up and the entire roll could be blank. The roll could be average or it could be amazing. The gamble and anticipation was so alluring.

The first process was removing the film from the canister and loading it onto reel into the tank. It is done in complete darkness. Which is funny for an art form that depends so heavily on sight. You need to feel your way through the process. Can opener, scissors, reel... you crank as it loads... hopefully. Still unaware if the film is even any good you

develop the film. Wash, develop, wash, and reveal. The satisfaction of seeing any images is worth the hard work.

In the dark room you line up your cut strips of film onto the enlarger and produce a contact sheet. Chemicals ready for the event. Develop, stop, fix, wash, then dry. Finally you can take the mystery into the daylight and hope that one out of the many negatives has something magical.

That moment when you find that one image, that one picture that exudes emotion, that expresses how you feel without you having to say a word. That moment makes photography addictive.

Back to the dark room with your prize. Where the process becomes more intimate. You develop it as is so you know what it truly looks like. Dodge, burn, mask... develop, stop, fix, wash, and dry. You manipulate the image to suit your needs. You are in ultimate control of what others see.

2010



**Figure 12: BBESS Boys Painting**

Maybe you shouldn't be a teacher...

I had just gone over another observation and as we left the portable at a high school near me, without a soul around, it looked at me and said... Maybe you shouldn't be a teacher... I always knew I wanted to be a teacher.

I graduated from high school and went straight to a university on Vancouver Island. I worked on an Elementary Education program. What I know now. I was too immature to be away from home. Nothing prepared me to live on my own with thousands of my peers. I needed support.

I am amazed that anyone succeeds without any preparation for such a dramatic change. Maybe you shouldn't be a teacher...

I received my Bachelor of Arts from another university and I found a professional development program. The program affirmed that I was doing what I was supposed to. What I know now. I was more mature, not quite enough though and I was not prepared. I was missing several key ingredients: what my rights were, professional relationships,

ethics, or even how to mark or set up a grade book. I needed support. I know why so many teachers quit after a few years. Maybe you shouldn't be a teacher...

I still had this twisted vision of a classroom, funny enough. It was filled with desks in rows and cute little faces that stared up at me anticipating what brilliant bit of information I would have for them. Then I would take their little journals and with an old school red pen and stickers in tow and would comment on how lovely their sentiments were.

I left the high school and was on my way to teach primary at my current school, Boston Bar Elementary Secondary School. I was so excited. I bought them all journals. What I know now. I still wasn't prepared but that's ok because there are many different people to support me and my students.

I should be a teacher,

Maybe you shouldn't be an administrator...

2014



**Figure 13: Parking Ticket**

She is one of those people that just gets it. She knows all my blunders and may have even participated in a few but doesn't judge. Partners in crime and reality.

I remember the day I went to visit her while her mom was in town. I offered her a beer and she declined. I said, "What are you... pregnant?" She was. I wish I shoved my own baggage deep down.

I regret to this day my response... I didn't say congratulations right away. I was shocked. I immediately panicked. I guess I just pictured the two of us carrying on as always. In my mind I thought she was moving on from me. I wasn't ready for her to leave me. So selfish...

The day comes. I got to the hospital as quickly as I could. Every part of me was terrified. I hated seeing her in pain and there was nothing I could do. Would today change our friendship forever? Then there were two.

I realize now that this new little person isn't a saboteur he's an extension of one of the best people I know.

I should have trusted her and that she wasn't planning an escape. I should have trusted that she knew what she was doing. I should have trusted our friendship. I do now.

2015



**Figure 14: Stopwatch**

My Grandpa played school with me...

My Grandpa taught me how to ride a bike...

My Grandpa built me two playhouses, one with running water...

My Grandpa got me to sell metal polisher to old ladies...

My Grandpa bathed my budgies...

My Grandpa let my guinea pig run free...

My Grandpa told me my eyes were different colours (they aren't)

My Grandpa ate raw onions...

My Grandpa made horseradish...

My Grandpa made up ridiculous stories and told them to my friends...

My Grandpa was a trampoline jumping champion...

My Grandpa wanted me to learn how to darn socks...

My Grandpa got sprayed by a skunk...

My Grandpa trained to be a paratrooper during WWII...

My Grandpa was an unofficial genealogist...

My Grandpa had a stroke...

My Grandpa wept...

My Grandpa deteriorated...

My Grandpa died two days before I started my master's program...

My Grandpa died without me there...

2016



**Figure 15: Pinecone**

Me get married? Laughable. I never dreamt of the white dress, the church wedding, and the ultimate reproducing. I've seen what marriage is... overrated. The carnage it leaves in its wake. The legality of getting married would be such a pain to deal with since men eventually leave or die.

I remember when we met. My defence mechanisms were already up. He came up the stairs and I thought, "Who is this idiot?" Now I know.

He is the one that understands why I keep that my stuffed bear, that an old man I don't remember made it for me. He supported me when I sorted through my stuffed animals and didn't judge about why it was so important to find them homes.

He thought that that old dress form was junk but was ok with me finding someone who would use it and love it. He knows that I will always have a little box of things, tucked away somewhere, that makes me cry when I look in it.

He knows I'm a mild hoarder. He's met my birth family and saw that my mother and aunt are both mild hoarders too. They too were adopted as babies. He gets it. He considers my families his too.

He held my hand and walked me to the apartment in Vancouver two days after my grandpa died. The day the boxes came from my grandma full of 30 year old funeral notices and baby pictures of my dead dad he just was there for me.

So ya... I married him. He is patient, he is proud of me, and he loves me no matter what dysfunctions I may have. There was no white dress but there was a church. He keeps this pinecone out on display... it fell from the tree, in the courtyard, the day we were married.

2017



**Figure 16: Norwegian Box**

Up until I was eight I was who they said. I was Alison Janet Webber born in Edmonton. I think I was eight when I realized or was told I was adopted.

I had lots of friends with all sorts of backgrounds. There were the Dutch kids, the First Nations kids, the church kids, the rich kids and then the other kids. I was an ‘other’ kid. I was associated with all those groups but always kept a good distance.

I always felt a disconnection. I never understood why I had the characteristics or inclinations I did. After I met my birth family some of my questions were answered.

My journey into exploring who I am is continuous process. I’ve just started looking into my ancestry. I have run into speed bumps and simple brick walls.

This project has helped me explore traumatic events and personal experiences that have contributed to the shaping of my identity as a teacher and how this identity contributes to my view of the people in my world and my role as a teacher.

## Chapter 5: The Final Story

What I've learned about myself. My name is Alison, but it was originally Kristi-Lee for two weeks. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta. I was adopted by my mom, Cathy, from my mother, Maureen. I am Canadian with Norwegian heritage. I am an adoptee, a collector, a step-mother, an artist, a writer, a wife, a daughter, a teacher, and so much more. My adoption and my experiences have taught me some things about my own identity and have influenced how I am today. I've learned that having a positive personal and cultural identity is crucial to effective learning for my students and myself.

What I've learned about trust. My experiences and stories have programmed me with a basic mistrust of others. My students walk through my classroom door with their own stories. I don't expect them to trust me right away when we meet. I don't trust new people either. Much like my own stories, my students have come across adults in their lives that didn't behave like they expected. I know now, and I explain to my students, that some adults can't always be what we need them to be. It does not mean that they aren't loved or important, it just means that the relationship will be challenging. We work on building relationships by understanding others and their stories in order to trust each other.

What I've learned about anxiety and disorder. I think though that because I am aware of why I collect things and why I have anxiety about getting rid of those things that I will be able to protect myself and change these habits. I see how personality disorders have influenced and affected the people in my world and want to be able to recognize them and deal with them. In a classroom, a person may run into students with various behavioural needs or disorders. Instead of correcting these behaviours I try to educate all

my students on why they exist. I try to teach compassion and see that students are aware of the role they play as part of our classroom. Little Johnny has autism and has a meltdown... we don't ignore it. We talk about what he felt, what role everyone plays in the situation, and potential ways to prevent another meltdown. We don't ignore it, we don't sweep it under the rug, and we don't wait 30 years to talk to a counsellor about it.

What I've learned from my mom. I've learned that not only crazy people go to counselling. My mom taught me that strength is admitting when you need help. Counselling has strengthened my relationships, allowed me to express emotions, and given me more patience with those around me. I have a great mom. My mom did her best to protect me from everything and she showed me how to be adaptable and strong. She taught me determination, that I could succeed at anything and ultimately how to take care of myself. I didn't think that my childhood was any different than anyone else's. I read comics, I broke bones, and went on family holidays. My mom made me feel normal and let me be a kid. I had a great childhood. I try to be that role model for my students. I will protect them when I can, but unlike before counselling, we will talk about our stories. Counselling has allowed me to accept that I am always learning and that my role as a teacher is to learn and evolve with my students.

What I've learned from this project. I've learned that personal identity isn't a defining characteristic. Identity is a combination of experiences, stories and possibilities. I am not the same person I was yesterday and what happens to me today makes me a different person tomorrow. Writing these stories has allowed me to explore my identity and these reasons I am the way I am. I am a teacher. I've always wanted to be a teacher. I am a teacher whose experiences have provided me insight into who my students are or

where they might be coming from. These experiences have influenced my values and choices. I pride myself on my ability to create strong relationships with my students. I understand them. I value building trusting relationships as I know the disappointment of the opposite all too well. I've learned that writing down the stories about the things I have collected has given me solace. I've learned that story is a valuable form of expression.

Part of this journey was to free myself of the weight of the objects both emotionally and physically... and now I am beginning to.

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