OPENING THE JAR:
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING AND DEVELOPING RESILIENCY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

Utilizing autoethnographic reflections in the forms of lyric, collage, and personal narrative, this inquiry shows how one teacher developed resiliency. That teacher is me. My early teaching experiences in an Ontario high school provide a qualitative focus of an inner, emotional journey to regaining strength and rediscovering passion after a period of burn-out. Tracing the passage from idealism to defeatism to resilience through metaphors, this arts-informed inquiry represents the inner life of a young woman and teacher.
# Table of Contents

Poems by J. Outram ........................................................................................................... v
Collages by J. Outram ....................................................................................................... vi
Images by J. Outram ......................................................................................................... viii

An Introduction to Jars .................................................................................................... 1
Collecting Stories in Jars ................................................................................................. 5
Relating to Form .............................................................................................................. 8
The Early Years of Teaching ............................................................................................ 14
The Focus ......................................................................................................................... 17

Looking through Glass Walls ......................................................................................... 22
Write What You See ....................................................................................................... 25
Who Am I? ....................................................................................................................... 29
Beginning with the World ............................................................................................... 32
Ways of Knowing and Seeing and Doing and Being ...................................................... 40

Teaching in a Bell Jar ..................................................................................................... 48
The Drama Room ........................................................................................................... 51
Anger Management ....................................................................................................... 59
I Remember ...................................................................................................................... 67
Suddenly .......................................................................................................................... 69
Influence of School Culture ........................................................................................... 88
Learning Spiral ................................................................................................................ 96

Filling the Jar .................................................................................................................. 102
Defining “Burn-In” ......................................................................................................... 106
From Blue Dot Days to Red Dot Days ........................................................................... 113
Demonstrating Resiliency .............................................................................................. 116
Once Upon a Time .......................................................................................................... 120
Italian Lessons ................................................................................................................ 123

Sunshine in a Jar ............................................................................................................. 130
Metaphor and Inquiry .................................................................................................... 132
Data Collection ................................................................................................................ 135
Storm Cloud in a Jar ....................................................................................................... 136
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine in a Jar</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking the Lid Off</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poems by J. Outram

Data collection included lyric inquiry.\(^1\) Each chapter begins with a poem that demonstrates the emotional arc.

Open the Jar 2
Trees March 23
Breathe 49
My Asphalt Tower Sank 103
Art in a Jar 131

\(^1\)“Lyric inquiry as a means of studying and communicating phenomena in social science research recognizes that the only linguistic tool we have—human language—is more than a blunt instrument with which we gather or claim or control knowledge; it is a powerful mix of art and the phenomenological, honoring not only phenomena under our gaze, but the epistemic possibilities of writing in a new key” (Neilsen L., 2008, p. 101).
Autoethnographic collages communicate my inner life through images.² Beginning with a theme I used a combination of intuition and logic to gather and arrange found images.

² “To infuse the arts into inquiry is to break out of conventional ways of researching. It is to be inspired by the arts, with regards to process and representation” (Knowles & Promislow, 2008, p. 4).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lure of the Mask</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interconnectedness</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting Data</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Images by J. Outram**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Storm Cloud in a Jar</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine in a Jar</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking the Lid Off</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You are splinters of the sun,
You are worth celebrating,
You are worth elevating,
And when you take the time
To fill your worlds within
You will join the world without.³

³ (Weller, 2006, p. 35)
Chapter One:

An Introduction to Jars

The darkness around us is deep. But our great calling, opportunity, and power as educators is to shed light in dark places. ⁴

⁴ (Palmer, 1998, p. 213)
Last night I opened the jar and it whispered to me,
“a piece of the story is missing.”
Silence.
Breath.
I wished the thought had stayed in the jar,
wished to rewind,
go back to the moment before
I released the latch and
eased the lid.

Open the jar.
Blue dot days glued to glass,
days of Sylvia’s bell jar and
cobwebs and fatigue and
frustration and sleep and
tears and
darkness.
Blue dots
drown my calendar.
Blue dots
cover my day book.
A giant blue bruise.

You should know,
I teach outside the city
in a nice suburban
community.

Open the jar.
A morning swarming at 7:45.
Two hundred teenagers
chase
a Grade 10 girl.
Angry faces push
against glass,
a call for help.

Open the jar.
Pepper spray chokes classrooms,
hallways, staircases, washrooms,
desks, chairs, basketballs, computers...
A toxic shot.
Then, a fifteen year old boy
wears handcuffs.

Open the jar.
Racism, bullying, homophobia,
iliteracy, drugs, eating disorders
spiral around the bells
marking the passing of the day,
a year. Take the lid off the subtext.

Open the jar.
A friend defines “suddenly”
when our student
dies...

Open the jar.
Julie whispers of last night’s rape
during attendance.

Open the jar.
I pass Tina her graded work and
she asks if she should visit her boyfriend,
in jail
even though
he was charged:
attempted murder.

Once upon a time I forgot the taste
of sunshine.

Once upon a time I was so tired
I longed for only sleep.
My jar was empty.
My jar was closed,
the lid twisted tight
within the glass grooves.

Now,
I gently turn the lid,
open the jar
and sometimes
I capture sunshine.

By J. Outram, 2011. 5

5 First draft 2009. The ideas expressed in this poem first appeared in a one-act play I wrote called What’s in Your Jar? The poem was inspired by my initial inquiry into the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar. I realized that my time had been spent exploring the positive connotations associated with the metaphor. I had not explored its counterpart. This marked an important turning point in the inquiry. The poem demonstrates my intention for conducting this inquiry and for sharing my story of developing resiliency.
Collecting Stories in Jars

Growing up in Southern Ontario my brother Colin and I always looked forward to the strawberry season in June. Every summer Mom made strawberry jam in glass Mason jars. I remember rows of jars lining the kitchen counter. I watched as Mom boiled the ripe berries, added the sugar, sprinkled the pectin, skimmed the foam off the top, and ladled the sweet goodness into jars before topping them with a warmed lid. Aunt Muriel used to make zucchini relish using produce from her garden in Britt, Ontario. We tried to save our jar of relish for the holidays to use as a garnish with Mom’s tourtiere, but it rarely worked out that way.

Uncle Fred spent every summer in a tiny red tar paper house with a crooked foundation, two doors down from Grandma Laura’s house in Britt. He sat in a green plaid lawn chair under an orange umbrella at the edge of his grass every morning with a beer. Whenever we drove by Dad would stop the car to say “Hello.” I remember Uncle Fred waddling into the house as we waited by the side of the road. He returned with a jar of jelly beans. The jar had the familiar label with Mom’s tidy cursive: Mo’s Strawberry Jam. Mom would never let us eat the jelly beans but I loved the way the coloured beans lit up the jar. I loved how Uncle Fred returned the jar with something inside, something for kids.

In the spring I used jars for collecting fuzzy caterpillars from their tents in the birch trees at the cottage. Pounding on a nail with Dad’s hammer I punctured the lid to make air holes. Dad used jars to organize different sized nails and nuts and screws and hooks into jars in the garage. The shelves were lined with jars collecting all sorts of unusual bits for repairs to the house or
the car or the cottage. Dad kept a jar in the kitchen in the cupboard under the sink to safely dispose of hot grease, waiting until the grease cooled and congealed, layering hot grease on cool grease until the jar was full.

Colin used jars to capture minnows by the dock at Aunt Irene’s cottage. Through the jar’s transparent walls we watched the minnows swim around in the muddy water, released the minnows back to the lake, and then scooped again.

Unused jars were neglected, dusty, relegated to dark corners of the basement at home or stacked in a white bucket in behind the steel garbage bin in the green shed at the cottage. Unused jars were without life or purpose; they were inconsequential until it became time to put something inside. For my family a jar was only as important as its contents. A jar was only saved from a trip to the dump on the chance that one day we would need the jar for something important.

We spent a lot of time in Britt at the cottage every summer. Thanksgiving weekend Colin and I helped my parents drain the water, pull the intake from the lake, remove the batteries from clocks, put up the shutters, and ensure that everything was clean and tidy. Our family often joked about scooping the fresh Georgian Bay air into a jar to bring back to Oshawa. We imagined how wonderful it would be to take the lid off the jar in January and breathe in the sweet mix of pine, spruce, and granite. Maybe a jar of air would help us miss the cottage less through the long winter.
Collage 1. Inner Child by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Relating to Form

The jar is a metaphor central to this research. Jars can be used for preserving or collecting or storing or capturing. We purchase things in jars. We give things away in jars. From holding delicacies to treasures to waste to hardware, glass jars have lingered in homes and garages and schools and workplaces since the mid-1800s.

Although the primary purpose of a jar is to collect the tangible, I like to think about how a jar might capture the intangible. How can a jar store memories? What does a jar look like when it preserves emotion? Does the lid bend if a jar catches energy?6

If I were to put my memories, emotions, and energy from my first years of teaching into jars what would they look like? Would it allow me to preserve experience? Would I be able to examine my learning through the glass walls from a different perspective? Would I choose to toss some experiences in the waste or choose to gently place others on a shelf?7 How would I feel taking the lid off?

6 Metaphors help to frame learning and to explain complex concepts. “Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories” (Bateson, 1994, p. 11).

7 In researching form I found relationships among life histories, autobiographies, narrative inquiry and autoethnography. “Through an exploration of our life history we provide the opportunity to surface those singular events, to select those powerful moments that reveal how we came to be who we are and who we are yet to become” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 28). Powerful moments and their impact on the self play a key role in this research.
Collage 2. Autoethnographic Reflections by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Jars provide form. Jars give shape to their contents. Jars organize. I imagine memories, emotions, and energy taking the form of stories whispered into jars. Jars give things a certain form the way the shape of our stories form our understanding.

Jars have their limitations too. Jars can be restrictive and confined. Jars separate and compartmentalize. Each jar has a limited capacity. Jars are fragile, chipping or shattering when dropped. The glass walls are transparent, leaving the contents vulnerable and visible.

Sylvia Plath suggested a connection between feelings and jars. A bell jar looks like a bell and sits on a base. The air is pumped out to create a vacuum. Glass bell jars allow scientists to watch what is happening as the air is removed. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath is a semi-autobiographical novel about a woman who struggles with mental wellness and may well be clinically depressed. Esther Greenwood believes she cannot breathe when she feels depressed. Plath uses the metaphor of a bell jar to express how Esther Greenwood feels trapped under a bell jar.

When I read *The Bell Jar* in 2003 I felt like I could not breathe. At times I felt too much like Esther Greenwood. So I tossed the book down the trash chute on the seventh floor of my

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8 “When we write our stories—autobiographically, ethnographically, mythopoetically, fictionally—we seek to understand our lived experiences and we seek to understand our connections in the worlds, connections to others and to the earth and even the universe” (Kirkland & Leggo, 2008, p. 255).
condo building. I was burned out, defeated. I needed to learn how to regain passion for my work. I needed to develop resiliency.

Jars symbolize the collected stories and emotions of a teacher’s inner life. By preserving memory and capturing experience in metaphorical jars, a teacher can hold a moment up to the light for a closer look through the jar’s transparent walls.
Collage 3. Insight by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
The journey from defeatism to resiliency inspired this inquiry. By engaging in writing inquiry and visual inquiry I collected feelings, memories, and experiences in metaphorical jars. They look like collages, poems, and personal narratives. Each chapter became a figurative jar of artifacts symbolizing identity, community, and moments of insight.

The framework of the experiential learning cycle shows how I learned how to overcome burn-out. I rediscovered purpose and passion within teaching. Two questions weave through this inquiry: How did I learn resiliency? How can I represent my inner life? I often consulted Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. Palmer writes about the importance of supporting the inner lives of educators within community. “Learning—learning together—is the thing for all of us.” Educators need to come out of isolation and build communities of trust. It does not come easily to share my inner life. Using the metaphor of a jar helped to extract from memory fragments of experiences and emotions.

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9 (Palmer, 1998, p. 167)
The Early Years of Teaching

I began teaching in 1999, an idealistic, energetic, hard-working, dedicated educator hoping to make a difference. It did not matter that Mike Harris’s leadership in government made it difficult to be a teacher in Ontario. It did not matter that teachers in the province were engaged in Work-to-Rule. It did not matter that I taught four English classes in one day in three separate rooms with no assigned prep time. Despite the political climate, I felt strong, capable, and unyielding in my determination to be a great teacher.

My first job was at a large high school with approximately two thousand students, forty portables, one-hundred and fifty teaching staff, two start times, and three lunch periods. And yet, of the three high schools I have worked in to date, it is the school I remember fondly as having the strongest sense of community. Teachers had bonded on the picket lines during years of political action. Staff members were generous, friendly, and empathetic. Since there were no extra-curricular activities, staff had time to play pick-up volleyball on Wednesdays or to go out to the bar after work on Fridays. The staff culture nurtured new teachers.

Mentors lined up to answer questions about classroom management, unit plans, and school procedures. The first years of teaching were not without their challenges, but I had a strong network to support me. I lived at home with my parents. I taught in a high school that was similar to the one I had attended.

In 2001, two new high schools opened in the region. Forty teachers transferred. It was exciting to be part of an inaugural school team. From touring the construction site to choosing
the literature for English courses to establishing the traditions of a new Drama department, every week was novel. The staff worked closely together to build a new community. We were part of something greater than the work we did in our classrooms.

Days after the school opened two airplanes hit the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. We did not have televisions or radios or computers hooked up in the school. The principal announced the news just before lunch and added that another airplane was on its way to Washington. Before this day I did not know of the Twin Towers. I did not know about terrorism. Like many other Canadians my understanding of the world changed on September 11th. A bell jar had been placed over me.

Around that time I started reading about the Cultural Revolution in China, poverty and inhumanity in India, the treatment of women in Iran. I was growing up and learning about horrors and injustice I could not imagine.

At work, in our new community, teaching became harder too. It started slowly and quietly. Then, students seemed more aggressive. Staff seemed more fragmented. The school doubled in size in less than three years. I struggled to find a mentor. I started to unravel until one day I realized that I could not remember the last time I sang along to the car radio.
Collage 4. Fear by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
The Focus

This arts-informed inquiry aims to open the jar to give air to the inner life of an educator.\(^{10}\) It shares my story of developing resiliency through autoethnographic reflections in the forms of poems, collages, and personal narratives. It explores the rewards of learning how to be strong, how to listen to an inner voice, and how to feel inspired by teaching. The metaphor Sunshine in a Jar symbolizes my journey.

Resiliency is a necessary trait for educators in the twenty-first century. Educators need to be able to respond to the challenges of everyday life in schools and in North American communities within the process of globalization. At a recent professional development day I watched an animated video narrated by Sir Ken Robinson called “Changing Education Paradigms.” Robinson asks poignant questions about how educators respond to economic, social, technological, and political changes in the classroom. He says educators will not prepare students by “trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past.” Change is happening. It is guaranteed. Educators need to change too. Educators need to be able to

\(^{10}\) “An arts-informed inquiry process requires complete immersion of the whole being: knowledges, feelings, memories, hopes, and fears” (McDermott, 2008, p. 138).
recovery quickly from set-backs. To prepare students for the future educators need to develop and model resiliency.¹¹

This inquiry focuses on my learning to become a resilient teacher. I considered interviewing other teachers about learning in their early years of teaching, but I had complicated questions. As an interviewer how do I engage participants in revealing multiple layers of consciousness? How do I accurately represent deep personal learning? I decided to model ways of articulating my inner landscape as a teacher, to share my stories, to work toward one day being able to have the tools to elicit and represent the private stories of others.

¹¹ “First, resilience as a psychological construct incorporates the study of personal factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, resourcefulness, and health, which are believed to assist individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity” (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010, p. 623).
Collage 5. How I Learn by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
The stories of my early years of teaching provide the qualitative focus of a private, emotional journey to becoming a resilient, passionate educator. Using poetry, personal narrative, and collage to represent “multiple layers of consciousness,” this work is most like autoethnography.\(^\text{12}\) It explores the self as “an extension of community.”\(^\text{13}\) Examining early drafts of the stories revealed that my learning was bound to the culture of the schools in which I worked. Rather than viewed as a simple context or setting for story, school culture served as the antagonist of the stories and the catalyst of my learning.

We research who we are. We teach who we are.\(^\text{14}\) Chapter Two focuses on identity and its relationship to my work as a researcher and an educator. Moreover, it explores how these identities overlap.

Chapter Three examines the problem of teacher burn-out, the stigma of talking about feelings among educators, and the impact that school culture can have on an educator.

\(^{12}\) Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 130).

\(^{13}\) “Autoethnography benefits greatly from the thought that self is an extension of community rather than that it is an independent, self-sufficient being, because the possibility of cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community” (Chang, 2008, p. 26).

\(^{14}\) “To teach is to be involved in lifelong reflective inquiry” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 22).
Chapter Four examines a possible resolution to overcoming teacher burn-out. It defines what it can look like when educators choose to burn-in, to access inner strength, and to develop resiliency.

This inquiry began with the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar. In 2009 I wondered why the metaphor had become important to me and thus began a quest for insight. Chapter Five examines the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar. Since it is a symbol of the journey and at the heart of the inquiry it is important to establish a clear context for its creation and its relationship to finding inner strength. How has this metaphor become a symbol of resilience? How has this metaphor informed my approach to inquiry?

The stories included in this text are impressions of real events. They have inherent bias as they were re-created, collected, preserved, selected, and stored by me. The stories about schools, staff, and students utilize composite figures and settings based on factual details to obscure the identities of staff and students. The stories are not intended to villainize schools or educators or students or school boards. The stories are intended to be saved on the shelves of my experience as artifacts of my learning and they are intended to be shared with other young teachers.

As you read this text I challenge you to consider what your jar looks like and what you keep inside it.
Chapter Two:

Looking through Glass Walls

If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) (Palmer, 1998, p. 146)
Trees March

Trees line the horizon in all directions,
Dividing body and spirit.

Deciduous marching soldiers
Chant.
Questions suffocate
as my trees march faster:
Amused by naïve attempts
To escape myself,
To avoid responsibility,
To get lost in the horizon line.

Rolling hills join the crusade,
Mantles of earth increase momentum.
Walls build higher and stronger.
Blades of grass wave mocking tips—
Arching skyward.
Checkmate, they whisper.

Cry for retreat and courage and love and happiness and clarity!

Rain pours
And Soaks my skin, my bones, my veins, my spirit.
I weep.

Just silence.
No clouds or rain or grass or hills or trees.
No neon sign.
Just silence.

Then something else,
Space, person and nature merge
into one likeness.
Unity invites us
as the vital organ of something greater.
I become energy, life, love.
With ease
I embrace
A shifting horizon line.

I weave a new perspective
and a new hope
and a new peace.
Grass, hills, trees, clouds:
I soar among them freely
To dream, move, grow, change, love and choose
With the gentle spirit of the wind.
That is my destiny.

By J. Outram, 2011.\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) First draft 2002. While working on this inquiry I decided to revisit this poem and prepare it for publication in this manuscript. The poem reveals the learning that spirals through me to this day. My learning is prompted by a moment of internal crisis. Most often I feel caught between two worlds or trapped in a monotonous cycle. Insight arrives when I least expect it and then I can see a way through the trees to resolve the problem. I feel peace for a time before I arrive back to the base of the spiral where a new crisis strikes.
Write What You See

It is July 2002. I am twenty-seven. Winding through the thick heat of summer in my first car, a gold two-door Cavalier, I travel up and down the hills of the Kawarths in Central Eastern Ontario before arriving at the Bethany Hills School for Girls. Centauri Arts organized adult “camps” in art and writing.

My assigned dorm room was in the basement. It was cool downstairs. Mildew and damp and dust lightly traced the twin bed, the white walls, the tiny desk.

After breakfast each morning, the ten of us in Beth Follett’s class retreated to a small classroom. She read to us from Rainer Marie Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet. Each word seemed a precious stone. I would close my eyes allowing the wisdom of Rilke to roll in and out of my consciousness.

This daily ritual became a meditation on life and on writing with Rilke’s wisdom shining a light on the girl inside me who was ready to embrace her destiny as a woman, as an artist.¹⁷

I wrote the first draft of “Trees March” in the afternoon, midweek. It was a class exercise using ideas about perspective from Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty

¹⁷ “I know no advice for you save this: to go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise” (Rilke, 1993, p. 20).
Edwards. Beth asked us to find a spot on the school’s property to sit and write. “Write what you see,” she said. I sat in the shade. I saw trees marching toward me. Tears seeped into the page.

In this time and place I felt compelled to choose. The early years of teaching seemed to swallow time. Hours in the evenings and on weekends were used to plan lessons, to think things through, to prepare, to mark. I was a workaholic. I struggled to imagine a life that included work AND...I always got stuck on the “and.” Teach and write and socialize and walk and cook and pay bills and clean toilets. I struggled to learn how to balance life in an adult landscape of responsibility, expectation, self-reliance. The question of how to direct my energy spun me like a twister.

Catherine began writing after her parents died. She went to Ireland and completed a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Catherine had just moved back to Ontario to begin her career as a poet and teacher. Catherine and I walked every day. She inspired me. We were both in transition. Catherine showed me it was possible to balance my teaching life and my writing life. We walked through the field by the school, down the driveway to the road, along the edge of the forest in the sticky afternoons or the smoky evenings. We talked about the past, present, future. Catherine was a kindred spirit. I learned I was at home with writers. The importance of connecting with people who see the world in similar ways was a powerful lesson.

Spending a week in community with other writers, journaling in the mornings with Beth or working on the novel in the afternoon, slowly returned balance. Toward the end of the week
I wrote a poem with a phrase that flew onto the page like a sneeze. I wrote: “Art is never-never land. It can capture sunshine in a jar.” Originally, the phrase represented the nature of creativity and its ability to embrace the seemingly impossible. Over time the phrase Sunshine in a Jar filtered through my ways of knowing, seeing, and being. The meaning of the phrase changed as I changed.
Collage 6. Meditation by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
**Who Am I?**

I remember my first year undergraduate Cultural Studies class at Trent University. The professor asked, “What is this?”

We all knew it was a chair.

“But how do you know it is a chair?” he probed. “Is this a chair just because you say it is? Who decided this was a chair? Where does the notion of chair come from? Is it possible that to someone else this could be a table?” He continued for an hour and by the end of his lecture I was not even sure of my existence, never mind the chair.

This was my first lesson in perspective. The viewer creates meaning and significance. The viewer makes connections between the self and the object or the self and the other. Perspective makes individuals unique. This lesson altered my perspective. I saw ordinary objects differently. I thought about the connections among language, sight, and insight. I began to wonder what my perspective could mean to others. The professor changed my perspective by showing the class how he looked at things and how he made meaning. I learned our perspectives change as we learn.

To better understand my sense of self over the past twelve years I reread journals looking for patterns. I noticed that the regularity of writing increased during stressful times. I rarely wrote about good times. My journals show that I use writing to understand emotion, to problem-solve. The perspective in the journals is limited. If the viewer creates meaning and
significance, then the journals and the memories and the ways I see myself at various stages in my life are understood through the lens of who I am in the moment I am viewing.

Part of this inquiry looks at a time when my perspective was clouded by pessimism and fear and doubt; however, it is written at a time when I have a strong sense of self and purpose. The ways I see the world around me and myself have changed. To help clarify my current perspective I asked questions. Who am I as an individual? How do I relate to community and to work? What is the interplay among my identities as researcher, educator, writer, woman, and Canadian? How do these roles give shape to experience and memory?¹⁸

Identity and perspective are important to understanding my choice to transform burn-out into an opportunity to become resilient. Looking through the glass walls of the jar, I see stories of growing up, becoming a teacher, and finding my sense of self.

¹⁸ I answered these questions by examining common themes in the collages and exploring life events through writing personal narratives. The questions served as touchstones to the inquiry. I returned to them as I formed each chapter and moved deeper into understanding and determining how to express my inner life.
Collage 7. Joy by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
When they were teenagers Mom and Dad lived in a small riverside town about forty-five minutes north of Parry Sound, Ontario. In the early 1970s Britt had a population of approximately five hundred.

The Lamondins and the Outrams had strong ties to the community, living and working in Britt for long before Highway 69 was built and before electricity lit up the town. Lamondins worked on the water as lighthouse keepers and fishing guides while Outrams worked along the rails between Britt and Thunder Bay for Canadian National Railway.

In the early 1970s Mom and Dad attended Sir Sanford Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario. Mom studied early childhood education. Dad studied electrical engineering. Mom was nineteen and Dad was twenty-one when they got married. General Motors hired Dad when he graduated so they moved to Oshawa. I was born in 1975. Colin was born in 1978. All four of my grandparents died in Sudbury, Ontario between 1975 and 1983.

We lived in a small apartment in south Oshawa, then a townhouse. Over the years we moved to Bowmanville and Port Perry before returning to Oshawa when I was sixteen. We lived in middle class neighbourhoods in modest homes. We had two cars. We spent weekends and summers at our family cottage in Britt. Dad continued to work at General Motors for thirty-five years. Mom worked at various daycares and schools until her knee problems began. She has had seven surgeries on her knees since she was thirty-six, including two knee replacements. Mom continues to struggle with standing and walking.
My journey to becoming an educator started in high school. On the recommendation of my teachers I applied to Concurrent Education programs in Ontario. Four years of working at day camps, kindergyms, and youth sports’ nights provided a skill set naturally suited to teaching. Mom and Dad agreed it was a good idea. I was the first in my family to earn a university degree. At Trent University I majored in English and Cultural Studies.

Focusing on Primary/Junior at the start of the Concurrent Education program my student teaching placements were in Kindergarten classes and a Grade 3/4 class. In the third year of the program my focus shifted to Intermediate/Senior qualifications in English and Dramatic Arts. Specializing in my favourite subject areas seemed like a better fit.

The first twelve years of my career teaching in the suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area included highs and lows. My roles changed from English teacher to Dramatic Arts teacher to Music teacher to Literacy Coach to Student Success Teacher. In September 2011 my role changes again, this time to Vice Principal. A love of exchanging knowledge, an inclination toward inquiry, and a hope that I can help people through my work define me as an educator.

Learning and teaching are woven into the fabric of my personality. I believe education is about social change; it is about tending to community and learning about social justice.  

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19 Myles Horton inspires me: “Go to the people. Learn from them. Live with them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But the best of leaders when the job is done, when the task is accomplished, the people will all say we have done it ourselves” (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 247-248).
I want to be a human first then an educator. I want to connect to the common humanity in learners, to engage in inquiry together in a space that allows us to do so in our own ways. I value the process of discovery. I am a teacher as facilitator. I create opportunities for critical engagement and dialectical thinking.²⁰

²⁰ Boal and Freire inspire me to facilitate for the purpose of connecting learners to the world, to each other: “For Freire, humans can lift themselves to a higher level of consciousness and become subjects to the extent of their interventions in society, their reflection on this intervention, and their commitment to this engagement in society” (Elias & Meriam, 2005, p. 154).
Collage 8. The Teacher by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
When I first started teaching I was deeply influenced by a liberal philosophy of education. For years each semester my English classes watched the movie *Dead Poets Society*. It starred Robin Williams as a private school literature teacher who challenged students to “seize the day,” release their “barbaric yawp,” and “live deliberately.”\(^{21}\) Although the film encouraged critical thinking it idealized Thoreau and Keats and Whitman and Tennyson. I wanted to be a teacher like Robin Williams’ character, Mr. Keating. I wanted to be viewed by my students as the keeper of knowledge with literary quotes rolling through my lectures with the ease of breathing.

In studying Adult Education\(^{22}\) I saw the limitations of the liberal philosophy and my practice changed. An example can be demonstrated by the course outline I created for the Grade 12 Studies in Literature course (ETS 4U1). In the first few years of the course the reading list moved chronologically from Greek Tragedy to Dante to Chaucer to Shakespeare to Golding to Atwood. Students also read independently, selecting books only on my approved list, a list that included mostly titles from the Western canon of literature. I realized that students had trouble seeing themselves in the literature. Although they delighted in being able to say they were studying Dickinson or Chaucer they struggled to think critically about the work.

The first major change I made to the course was adding critical frameworks to support students in understanding different approaches to analyzing a text. The richness of the canon

\(^{21}\) (Weir, 1989)

\(^{22}\) Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto
dissipated when we started peeling off the layers on the literature through the lenses of biographical, historical, and feminist contexts. I became bored by the similar perspectives represented in a canon of literature populated by primarily white, European, or American male voices. Then the questions started. Why was it important for students to know the canon? What connections were students able to make among the writers and the stories and the contexts and their lives? How would literary knowledge educate students? What is my purpose as an educator?

My philosophy shifted from liberal to humanistic. The Studies in Literature course shifted from being about learning a canon of literature to learning about the complex nature of humanity through the literature.

Now I define my position as an educator as humanistic-critical. I want to mobilize classrooms, schools, and communities to “begin with the world.”

I share my humanity with students. I try to embody John Cotton Dana’s wisdom: “Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” As someone who connects deeply to the natural world, sustainability and environmental responsibility weave through my teaching. I value spirituality and diversity. I feel it is my duty as an educator to help build community, to be sure

23 “To be thoroughly, humanly ‘with the world’ means that people would have developed a critical perception and would have taken collectively their environmental, social, political, and economic destiny into their own hands. To begin that struggle is to begin with the world” (Mojab, Winter 2011).
that students learn the names of other students in our class, to provide opportunities for students to celebrate individuality as well as to celebrate that which unifies us as people.
Collage 9. Wisdom by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Ways of Knowing and Seeing and Doing and Being

It is an evening in 1981. I am six years old. Wearing an old pink baby blanket around my neck and balancing a tinfoil crown on my head I clutch a plastic microphone in the downstairs hallway of our home in Bowmanville. The microphone chord dips and stretches as I dance in the dark singing “Hey Daddy there’s a dragon on the driveway....”24

When I think about how I make meaning I think of this moment. I need to try ideas on, make beliefs move around me like music, listen to opinions playing back for me in a dark, echoing hallway. As a researcher I prefer to embody inquiry, to feel my way through ideas on an emotional level, to see how the focus questions relate to my world and my work, and to listen for opportunities to synthesize ideas and experience. I prefer arts-informed methods of inquiry.25

Finding the Centre for Arts-Informed Research at OISE represents a homecoming. In the past three years I have experimented with creative nonfiction,26 lyric inquiry,27

24 This song is from Anne Murray’s album There’s a Hippo in My Tub, released in 1979. I remember singing along for hours as it played on a FisherPrice record player.

25 “The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible” (Cole & Knowles, Arts-Informed Research, 2008).

26 “In choosing to adopt a kind of binocular vision for regarding works characterized as creative nonfiction, the reader moves constantly back and forth, reverberating between the world of the text and her own fund of extra-textual ‘realities’” (Barone, 2008, p. 113).

27 (Neilsen L., 2008)
autoethnography,⁡²⁸ the photographic practice of Miksang,⁡²⁹ performance inquiry,⁡³⁰ and various approaches to artistic inquiry (including sculpture, watercolour and collage).⁡³¹ I find it difficult to choose one method of inquiry.

Throughout this inquiry I enjoyed looking for connections among the various forms as I probed deeper into my focus questions. As a result, the chapters became a blend of lyric, collage, personal narrative, and analysis. My process as a researcher is to begin the inquiry within the self through artistic means. Then, I deepen my understanding through consulting other research texts before returning to the form to represent the culmination of my findings.

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⁡²⁸ (Chang, 2008)

⁡²⁹ “The underlying assumption is that by recording on film our unrehearsed encounters with people, places, and things in our lives, we create an opportunity to speculate on their significances, and to realize the ways these significances have become inscribed beyond our awareness” (Neilsen A., 2007, p. 19).

⁡³⁰ “…theatre is not just around us, theatre is within us” (Saldana, 2008, p. 196).

⁡³¹ (Butler-Kisber, 2008)
Collage 10. Arts-Informed Inquiry by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
As a child I came to understand my world through recreating it in pictures, stories, skits, and daydreams. When I disagreed with my parents I tried to make sense of what happened in my journal. When I met a new friend I celebrated by writing a poem. When I thought about what was important to me I tried to represent it in a picture. When I wondered about who I was becoming I tried on different roles and personalities through drama. The arts give me space to synthesize, recreate, learn, and express meaning in multiple ways.

My first year of teaching was the beginning of the double-cohort in Ontario. Students entering Grade 9 would graduate in Grade 12. Students in Grades 10-12 would graduate in Grade 13, or OAC (Ontario Academic Credit year). In 2003, two groups of students graduated; Grade 12s and Grade 13s competed for spots at colleges and universities. In 1999, Grade 9 students were already panicking about university acceptances. They felt pressure for being the first group of students to experience the demands of the new curriculum. I remember listening to students express their fear for the future. I remember going home feeling overwhelmed by their concerns. To begin to make sense of my experience of high school so I could relate to my students, I wrote the students a letter, a reflexive inquiry into the personal value of high school:

Dear Students,

When I was ten I liked to play hockey in the street. I would sit on our front step and write stories. I would chase my friends through backyards playing manhunt. I’d listen to Corey Hart sing “I wear my sunglasses at night” and Madonna sing “Get into the groove” for hours. I loved people. I loved soccer. I did not have worries at school.

When I was thirteen I was boy crazy. I liked phoning my friends every night, every person in the class, in alphabetical order. Every night. I worried about my clothes. I
worried about disappointing my parents. I worried about being too smart and too stupid. I was bullied some days, I was a bully on others. In Grade 8 I had straight As.

In Grade 9, I had a 65% average. And it was not because school was hard. I got caught up in the drama, in the friends, in all the people. I did not do much homework. I rarely studied for a test or exam. I showed up and socialized.

And then one day, just before I turned 16, it occurred to me that this was my education. Going to school was a blessing. I got involved in school life. Over the years, I joined the choir, the school play, the newspaper and the environmental club. I started doing my homework and I graduated with an 89.7% average. But is high school just about getting the highest mark you can? Or joining a bunch of clubs and teams?

Now I'm your teacher. “Why does our culture value a high school diploma?” I asked you, my Grade 9 English class yesterday.

Your responses were standard: to get a job, to go to College/University, to keep teens off the streets.

You felt little hope for your future and explained how overwhelming expectations of parents, teachers and the government can be when, as teenagers, you are confused about what you want.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “How do you want to spend the next four years? What is high school?”

Here is what I have learned:

High school is meeting your best friend, or spending hours on an essay and getting the mark you wanted, seeing the results of your hard work pay off. High school is falling in love for the first time, or maybe the second time. High school is having your heart broken. High school is your being surrounded by people your own age. High school is about revealing your talents.

I believe that our mission is to discover who we are as individuals, and then to use our talents to best serve everyone.
High school prepares you for more than the real world. It prepares you to be you. High school allows you to experiment in a safe place: to try new things, think new thoughts. Never stop learning.

Why do we have to go to high school? Dear students, you are here to learn, to explore, to enrich your lives. Even though some days it feels like an uphill battle and your grades stink, or you may be bored or fed up with the routine—if you want to learn, you will.

Find ways to stay motivated. Spend time thinking about what will make your life feel complete. Decide what will maximize your high school experience. This may not make you love this English class, but strive to find the value in it—it is there. Strive to find the value in each of your classes. Personalize your education by always making choices that interest you. Know what you need as a student and make it known.

To be “good” at school, consider what subjects are hardest and why. Resist less and react more. Go with the flow instead of against it. Learning is divine, trust me.

Love Ms. Outram

We sat in a circle the next day. I slowly read the letter aloud to the students. I asked them again to think more deeply about why they went to school, about how we might spend our time together. The air in the classroom was still, the lights were low. In that moment we were connected. It was a true teaching moment. Writing inquiry helped to represent meaning in a complex situation. Arts-informed research methodologies infused my ways of knowing and

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seeing and doing and being before I formally became a researcher in a graduate program. Arts-informed inquiry honours the ways I learn and the ways I best express my learning.
Chapter Three:

Teaching in a Bell Jar

The new professional needs to know how to name and claim feelings, neither denying nor being dominated by them; discern whether and how they reflect in reality; ask if they have consequences for action; and, if so, explore them for clues to strategies for social change.\(^{33}\)

Breathe

When two elephants fight,
It is the grass that suffers most.

Proverbs order:
I am the grass,
I am the elephant.

Intoxicated by the sweet smell of green
Bleed the venom from my soul,
An elephant sits inside me: unseen.
To crush, suffocate, collapse
Squeeze purpose from my veins.

Pluck the bellowing elephant from the room,
I need peace.
Remove the elephant and I will write
I will exhale
I will be the truth.

Blast the elephant from my mind and it will happen—
Return to the blade of grass
as it winnows in the wind
inhales veritable silence
echoes the song of the rose
and the symphony of the killer bee.
Surrender the ivory and heavy trunk
For the slender simple grass.

By J. Outram, 2005

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34 This poem began as a writing exercise at Uplands Retreat in Port Perry, Ontario. The opening proverb is one I used often with my Drama students. We learned about conflict together.
Collage 12. Invisible by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
The Drama Room

It is June 2004, the last week of work before summer vacation. Exams are marked. Report cards are submitted. I have asked my teaching friends to help paint the Drama room, my classroom.

    Sam stands on a ladder. He slides the paint roller up, down, over, and back leaving a glistening trail of blue-black high gloss paint. I paint the lower trim. Don paints the upper trim. Winona and Lisa work on the west wall of the room that used to be a wall of mirrors. Scott and Jenn chat as they glide rollers across the south wall. Christina enters with a pizza. “Break time!” she shouts.

    The room was poorly designed in 2001. The cement walls were painted soul-sucking black. The walls did not reflect the light. Intended to be split into two classes the Drama room had an accordion wall that tucked into an opening in the cement walls. The accordion wall was not sound proof. The wall created two working spaces that could accommodate about ten students on each side. An average Grade 9 Drama class had 25-30 energetic students. A month after the school opened we put in a work order to remove the accordion wall. It was removed five years later.

    The wood shop class created black cubes for students to use in scene work. Usually the cubes stacked neatly against the south wall. Thirty blue plastic chairs stacked neatly against the north wall. A rack of old clothes and a box of props tucked into a corner. Today the boxes, chairs, clothes, and props are clustered in the middle of the floor.
The room has two steel doors, one on each end of the west wall. The doors lead to small rooms with cubbies for knapsacks and books and then another steel door goes to the hallway. In each of the cubby rooms there is another door leading to a small change room. Since students prefer to change into costume in the washrooms down the hall, one change room is used to store tech equipment and the other is used as my office. The room is well equipped with a sound board, microphones, CD players, portable lighting board, and headsets for stage managers.

For the first two years the Drama room did not have an intercom system to communicate with the office. When a fight broke out, and they happened nearly once a week, I would need to separate the students in the room then dash through the two doors to the hallway into a music classroom to page the office.

The room needed to be painted. I would not be able to spend another year working for six hours a day in a darkened room with soul-sucking black walls. With the approval of my department head we transformed the walls to reflect the light. To an outsider the room would look unchanged.

In twelve years of teaching I have witnessed many examples of teachers quietly supporting each other in tough times. The change in paint on the Drama room walls symbolized a change in me. I had asked for help and a team of colleagues volunteered their time to make my work environment brighter. This moment marked a turning point. Resilient teachers know when to ask for help.
The Drama room witnessed my coming of age as a teacher. When the school opened in September 2001 I was bubbling with energy and enthusiasm. It was my third year teaching. Many of my friends had transferred to the new school. Christina and I would be the first teachers to use the Drama room. I did not know that over the next two years my idealism would turn into defeatism.

Teacher burn-out does not happen overnight. It is gradual, accumulative. My teacher burn-out was not a direct result of the events of September 11, 2001 but the events hung low like a heavy smoke blanket in my consciousness. I could not see how the events fit within my rose-coloured view of the world. Since studying World War Two I had wondered when the conflict to define my lifetime would arrive. During the Gulf War, in my early teens, I moved a small television into my bedroom to watch as I fell asleep, praying it was not the start of another World War while being enthralled by the dramatic news coverage. I thought about how I would respond to extreme conflict. I thought about the bravery of Anne Frank. I thought about how my life would change if war was to come to Canada. War is my greatest fear.

After September 11, 2001 I stood at the front of the class unable to answer the students’ questions about the events. I was twenty-six years old. I remember the school made some announcements about sending our prayers to the families of the deceased and the fire fighters who worked diligently to rescue people trapped in the debris. Staff occasionally talked about bits they had heard on the news over lunch. Friends and family exchanged sad comments akin to the mechanical small talk at a funeral. After a week passed, few people talked about the events.
But students in my class had questions. Students talked about relatives in New York. Students wanted to know more about the buildings, the terrorists, the reasons why the events had taken place. Students looked to me, their teacher, for answers. I did not know how to articulate my fear and pain and frustration. I did not know how to support the students. I did not know where to find support for myself.
Collage 13. Starvation by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
The first five years of being a classroom teacher include many lessons. New teachers prepare unit plans and respond to student behavior while balancing co-curricular activities. New teachers experience, reflect, and change every day. Although learning is integral to the culture of a classroom teacher at all stages of his or her career, the first five years of teaching are paramount. New teachers learn through experience about pedagogy, curriculum, people, workplace politics, and self. Learning occurs in at least two circles: the outer circle of the self as teacher and the inner circle of the self as person. Like a Venn diagram the circles overlap.

While a new teacher learns how to engage students and how to master curriculum in his or her outer circle, what is happening in his or her inner circle? How does he or she change through the process of learning? As I burned-out my inner landscape, my inner circle, was in trouble.

On the outside I looked like a competent teacher. I responded to classroom events following school protocol. I moved through the curriculum while balancing the diverse needs of students. I supported coworkers who were having a bad day or a bad week. I found time to direct the school play and orchestrate the tech set-up for assemblies. I managed student behavior in a Drama room with no desks. Most of the time I was content. Some days I would say to my colleagues at lunch “I love my job.”

35 “Most of [first year teachers] describe their first year of teaching as positive, reporting the experience as excellent (32 per cent) or good (47 per cent) and their professional satisfaction as excellent (28 per cent) or good (40 per cent). Similar numbers report that their confidence level is excellent (29 per cent) or good (45 per cent). Almost half (48 per cent) give an unsatisfactory rating to their job security. And yet, almost four out of five (78 per cent) say they are optimistic for their professional future” (McIntyre, 2011).
Pride and shame prevented me from reaching out as a young teacher. I did not want to appear incompetent or incapable or unsatisfactory. I pretended to know how to respond to a student who arrived to class high from smoking marijuana at lunch time. When I was asked how things were going in my class I replied “fine.” If witnessing a fight in the cafeteria while on duty bothered me I kept quiet. I showed up to work and I smiled. I tried to focus on the positive things like the talent of the students in my drama classes or the small kindesses I watched staff exchanging every day.

The more I repressed my feelings the harder it became to smile. It felt like I was taking in all the pain and sadness my students shared about their relationships, academic pressure, conflicts, and addictions. As more students reached out for help a little more air was pumped out of the bell jar. I did not know how to help the students nor protect myself from their pain. My empathetic nature internalized their sadness.

Like many young teachers work became the center of my life. I was single, living alone. My friends were other young teachers. I did not have the experience or the coping mechanisms to respond to challenges in the classroom on a personal level. I thought about work all the time. My identity and self-esteem were wrapped up in my job performance. I did not know how to manage my feelings. I wanted to know what to do with anger or frustration that arose from events in the classroom. I chose not to share with friends and colleagues when I was having a bad day. To be resilient I needed to learn how to manage emotion. As the air was being pumped out of the bell jar I did not know that I was the one who was holding the vacuum.
Collage 14. Nurture by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Anger Management

I stand along the wall by the Drama room door. It is Period Two. A Grade 12 Drama class is in progress. Dale, Tom, and Kristina rehearse a scene from Pygmalion, the one when Eliza Doolittle drops in at 33 Wimpole Street to visit Professor Higgins for the first time. I jot assessment notes on my clipboard for their files: “accents good; no props; Tom—lines, Kristina—great costume; Dale—more movement needed.”

I twist to see other bunches of students working on scenes then my gaze stops. In the center of the room John and Tyrell glare at each other. I feel the hairs on my arms stand up. The air in the room shifts. I hope I am wrong.

Tyrell sits on a red plastic chair. John stands two feet from Tyrell.

“Say it again,” John says.

Tyrell looks at me looking at him and I try to send him a message of peace with my eyes. He nods his head. I will him to stay in the chair and to resist John’s taunting.

“Come on.” John takes a step toward Tyrell. “Come on.”

Then the rehearsals around the room stop and the students watch John and Tyrell.

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36 Names, characters, places, and incidents are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental. This story captures my emotional strain when there is conflict in the classroom.
The boys lock eyes. John’s right hand shakes. Tyrell’s breath is deep and fast.

“Yeah. You think you’re so tough, Tyrell. Who’s tough now?” John takes another step forward.

“That’s enough guys. John, get back to work,” I say.

John squats to make his face level with Tyrell’s. “Come on,” he whispers.

I step toward them. “John. John. This needs to stop.”

No more than inches separate their noses. John jerks his head. John’s forehead hits Tyrell’s forehead.

“You head butt me, man?” Tyrell says. Tyrell places his hands on his knees.

“You want some more?”

In Grade 9 John punched Joel during a game of musical chairs. In Grade 10 it was John who hurled a chair at the wall of mirrors, shattering them. In Grade 11 John hit me with a chair. Accidentally.

“Don’t mess with me!” John says.

I take one step toward them. My voice is low, calm, unhurried. “John. Please listen to me. It’s Miss Outram. Let’s go for a walk. Tyrell, please stay in your chair. John. Please listen to me. John. This is not the time. John. I need you to come with me. John...”
John has been in my classes for four years. I have spoken to John’s mother twelve times and recommended him for suspension nine times. John has attended anger management classes five times. He has sold dope at the school for three years. Boys have bullied John because he is overweight for eleven years.

“You don’t get it, do you?” John says to Tyrell. “I’m a fuckin’ psycho path. I can kill you.”

“John.”

“And I can kill you.” John points at the students sitting by the door. “And I can kill you.” He points at the students by my desk. “And I can kill YOU.” He points at me. “I’m a fuckin’ psychopath and I can fuckin’ kill you all. I will fuckin’ kill you all!”

Tyrell stands. One foot separates the boys.

“John, it’s time to go,” I murmur. “I need you to come with me. It’s alright. Let’s go. It’s okay. It will be okay. Let’s go. John. Let’s go.”

Three heart beats pass.

Then John looks at me. Relief, shame, anger, and exhaustion sweep across his face.

“Let’s go,” I whisper.

Tyrell clenches his fists. His dark eyes narrow. He breathes deeply.

“Let’s go, John.”

John shuffles past me, slams the Drama room door open, and steps into the hall.
“Tyrell. Stay here. I’m proud of you. I’ll be back soon.” After asking the teacher across the hall to watch my class I walk John to the office. We walk through the halls as we have done many times before. My breath is short. I think about John. I think about Tyrell. I think about the other students in the class. I think about the need for the tension and the anger and the fear to go away. I feel that if I can just get John to the office everything will be okay. No one will be hurt.

Yesterday John and Tyrell, the two biggest guys in the school, laughed and joked in an improvisational skit. John and Tyrell have been friends for years. They play football together.

We reach the office. John sits on the bench. I step one foot into the Vice Principal’s office.

“Mr. Young, John needs to see you. He and Tyrell nearly got in a fight.” My voice wobbles. “He is very angry. There’s more but I have to check on Tyrell.” I cannot get the words out about what just happened. It is too soon.

“Okay. Send him in,” Mr. Young says.

“I’ll write up a report and return at lunch,” I say.

I pull air through my chest and return to class. Tears swell in the corners of my eyes.

When I return to class the students sit on the grey carpet, silent. Tyrell leans against the black brick wall.
“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, Miss.”

“What was all that about?”

“Dunno.”

“Level with me, Tyrell.”

“Nothing, Miss.”

“There was nearly blood all over my carpet. You’re telling me that was nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“He’s crazy. You saw him.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Nothing.” Tyrell’s hands shake. “Sorry you had to see that, Miss.”

The bell rings. The class leaves. Dale lingers by the door holding a football.

“Do you know anything about this?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“And?”
“It’s just that Tyrell’s been teasing John about his man boobs a lot lately.”

“Man boobs?”

“That’s all I know, Miss.”

Dale slips out the door as my Grade 9 students shuffle in, take off their shoes, and settle into a circle on the carpet.

I take attendance and begin the lesson. I do not have time to digest the morning’s event until I get home that evening. When I get home I choose to watch a number of episodes of “Alias” on television instead.

Two weeks later John returns to school. He has been permanently removed from Drama class. I knock on Mrs. Peter’s portable.

“Is John in class?”

A moment later, John steps into the sunlight. We stand on the small portable porch.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Outram,” he blurts.

“Me too, John.” We stand in silence looking out at the parking lot. Then I continue, “I wanted to check in with you. You really scared me a couple weeks ago. I don’t know what to do when you get so angry.”

“I’m sorry. Miss. I’m sorry.” A tear slides down John’s cheek.
We stand there a few minutes more. We talk about how John had been in my class for four years. We talk about how Drama class might not be the best fit for him until he learned how to manage his anger better. We talk about Tyrell. The boys are friends again. John says he will miss attending my class. He reminds me that we had some good times too. We say goodbye. John returns to class. I walk across the grass to the far school doors by the Drama room. Then I bite back the tears, take a deep breath, and go to class.
Collage 15. Peacebuilder by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
I Remember

I wish I remembered more of the good times from when I was burned out. I know there were parts of the job I enjoyed even when I was at my lowest. But memory is a tricky thing. I remember the struggle, the pain, the shame, and the helplessness of burning out despite my best efforts to stay positive. My energy reserves were empty and it was difficult to find the strength to complete simple tasks.

I remember in the winter of 2003 battling to wake up in the mornings, lingering in the car before entering the building, literally dragging my feet as I walked to my classroom. In the spring, I remember falling asleep during my prep time in the Music office as I clutched a purple pen in one hand and a stack of marking in the other hand. I remember channelling all of my energy to show up and to get the work done. I pushed through the exhaustion to try to be a good teacher.

At home I watched hours of television, ate cookies as though they were carrot sticks, and looked for opportunities for naps. I cancelled plans with friends. I stopped teaching night school part way through the session. I craved alone-time yet felt overwhelmed by loneliness. In 2003, after seeing a doctor and a counsellor, the pent up tears poured out on my pillow night after night for months. I cried and I cried and I cried and I felt confused as to where all this sadness was coming from. I loved my job. And yet somehow I managed to serve the students through my burn-out until summer vacation. I was lucky. I have witnessed colleagues who struggled far more.
Collage 16. Pain by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
Suddenly

For the third day this week Janine waits by the Drama room. I can see her from the other end of the hallway, sitting on her backpack, slumped up against the door, twirling her long brown hair in her fingers. I want to turn right toward the foyer and the staff room to avoid her, but she sees me and jumps to her feet. I sigh. Her brown eyes plead for attention through oversized glasses. “Hi, Miss Outram.”

“Did your bus get here early today?”

“I got dropped off.”

Juggling a marking bag, purse, and lunch, I unlock and open the door. Janine trails me.

“What are we doing in class today?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” I drop the load on the desk in my office.

Janine leans on the door frame to my office. I pretend I am busy and flip through a binder of warm-up games.

“I filled in the journal.” She passes me her notebook.

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37 Names, characters, places, and incidents are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental. This story captures the emotional impact of responding to mental health issues in schools.
I gave the notebook to Janine last week. She waited after class. “Can we talk?” she asked.

Sensing that she did not want to talk about our script-writing unit I replied, “Should we sit down?”

Janine nodded.

Taking two plastic chairs from the stacks on the side of the room, I placed them in the corner by the door. I propped open the door to the shoe room. I wanted students and teachers passing by in the hallway to be able to see us through the small window.

“How are things?”

“Bad,” Janine said.

I waited.

“I hate my parents,” Janine stared through me.

“How have you talked to anyone in Guidance lately? Or Mrs. Kirk?” Mrs. Kirk is the school’s Chaplain.

“I hate Mrs. Kirk.”

“Why?”

“She makes me tell her things. She twists it up.”
“Like what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“How can I help?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can listen, Janine.”

“I hate everyone.”

“Do you hate me?”

“No.”

“Maybe we should try to talk again tomorrow.”

“I want to die.”

I waited for Janine to continue. She looked at her fingernails. Two minutes passed. I thought I might choke on the thickening air in the room. I had learned to be patient when students talk of death. I had learned to open my heart to the student’s heart and listen without the exchange of words.

I looked at Janine and softened my expression. Then I leaned back to make more space between us, folding my hands on my lap. I imagined a string connecting my heart to hers. I prayed that I could see how to help her.
Janine focused on a spot on the carpet. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, her hands on her head. I have known Janine for about four months. She has talked to me before about her brothers and sisters, about having no friends, about cutting. I have watched Janine get chosen last for scene work. I have watched Janine lie and insult other students. I have watched her energy spin through the room like a twister and trudge through the room like an elephant.

In the first week of class in February the Guidance Counsellor had warned me to watch her. “She forms unhealthy attachments to female teachers.”

“We think she might be a lesbian,” Chris whispered in his office one afternoon a couple weeks later. He is one of our three vice principals. Students are assigned a vice principal based on the alphabet. Chris worked with students with last names A-F. I stopped by to tell him I was worried about Janine, but he said Kelly was working with her now. Kelly usually worked with G-O students.

Janine lifted her head and looked at me with sad eyes that were so exaggerated I wondered if she was acting. For a split second I wished I could go to lunch.

“Maybe it will be easier to write down your feelings. It can be hard to say things out loud,” I said.

“Okay.”
“Write down everything you want to share and then when you are finished bring it back and I will read it and we can talk. You’re not alone.”

I went into my office and found a notebook with a picture of Homer Simpson on the front. She giggled when I passed it to her. When she left I updated the vice principals, Paul, and Mrs. Kirk. Then, with five minutes left of my lunch time I sat in my office with the door locked, imagining my diet coke was a glass of red wine.

From the way the notebook bulges I can tell Janine has filled it. I flip through the pages. Loopy black letters fill the space between the blue lines. Class begins in fifteen minutes. Janine smiles and bounces, singing to herself while she watches me glance at her notes.

“Do you want me to read it now or later today?”

“You can read it later.” Janine zips her blue backpack, puts it in a cubby, and takes her spot on the carpet in the Drama room.

I feel ashamed I do not remember the name of the first student who told me she wanted to die. She had shoulder length brown hair and freckles. She had a way of making herself invisible in a room. She wrote about suicide in a story for my Grade 10 English class my first year teaching. Somehow I knew she was describing herself. I ran to Guidance and to talk to
her counsellor. My heart pounded and tears trickled down my face. I struggled to get the words out. We called her out of Geography class, asked her about the story, called her mother.

Later that night I was with my friend Bob. I sat in the recliner in the corner of the living room. He sat on the couch. *Batman Returns* flashed on the muted television.

“It might just be a story,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Can I do anything?”

“I’m fine. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” The trauma of the day swirled around in me and I could not stop thinking about her, imagining her going home and hurting herself, imagining her crumpled up in a heap crying on her bathroom floor. I felt like I had been shaken like a rattle all day and the beans still bounced around from the momentum.

I went home from Bob’s early. I tried to go to bed but stared at the ceiling for hours thinking about her and watching the red numbers on the clock flicker minute to minute.

*Cocooned in my apartment, in my bed under the heavy duvet, swallowed by the darkness, her story haunted me. I wanted to put my arms around her, hold her tight, tell her that things should get better. I wanted to understand what made her feel so low that she saw death as the only way out and I wondered when the rock in my stomach would soften and what to say if she came to class and where to find the strength to get up in the morning and teach for another day.*
The morning Janine gives me her notebook I hear her humming happily in the empty Drama room as I review my day plan. I massage my eyes and breathe deeply, filling my lower abdomen, my stomach and my chest, letting the air escape through my lips. I am tired. Classes begin in ten minutes so I tuck Janine’s notebook in my desk drawer to read at lunch. Then my friend Scott drops by to tell me the office forgot to book an assembly on drunk driving this morning and full tech support is needed. I grab my keys and follow him to the theatre, grateful he is helping even though it is my job. Janine sits alone waiting for class to begin.

In September the board psychologist, Mr. Addler, came to the school to tell us about mental health. “Stay away from words like depression and suicidal. You are not qualified to use these words,” he said. I agreed. I wished we had more experts in the school. This was the first time in my career that mental health was talked about in schools. Mr. Addler talked about the signs that a student is feeling “blue.” He told us to report our concerns to a school administrator or guidance counselor. He did not tell us how to compartmentalize our emotions or how to protect our spirits or how to avoid feeling suffocated by empathy.

One of our Grade 12 students died suddenly last year in June. I wondered what that meant. Scott told me that suddenly often meant suicide. Trevor had stepped in front of a train on the tracks in the valley beyond the arena. The principal came on the announcements the
next morning after “O Canada” and said: “Please keep Trevor King in your prayers today. He passed yesterday—suddenly.” The students in my class moved in slow motion, shaking hands to open mouths, tears filled eyes. Horrified glances were passed around the room like a despondent energy ball. Groupings of students emerged. Close friends, party friends, acquaintances, others. Whispers travelled through the room. I caught pieces of “alcohol,” “kicked out,” “he stayed at my house last week,” “but I saw him yesterday,” and “I need to leave.”

“Should we move the chairs into a circle?” I asked the class. “Do you want to talk? Do you have questions?” I wished there had been a meeting or classroom visit or something. I did not have answers or information or a strategy for supporting the students in their grief.

A group of Trevor’s closest friends left trembling in a huddle to go to the Chapel. The rest of the class settled into hushed groups around the room. I sat at my desk watching the students like a mother cub, wondering when to sit near them, when to give them space, what to say about the loss of their friend, how to manage my own sadness, hurt and loss.

Staff talked about Trevor in hushed tones at lunch or between classes. Staff exchanged fragments of information. Staff expressed concern in whispers. Words seemed hard to find. Teachers supported each other through the ways they looked at each other or through quietly sitting together during prep time. I wanted to talk to someone about how I was feeling, but I felt embarrassed that I needed help making sense of the tragedy.
Two months after Dr. Addler’s session at our Professional Development Day on mental health, while the community still mourned for Trevor, Stephanie died suddenly after swallowing too many pills in her bedroom on a Wednesday night. She was in my friend Scott’s Grade 11 class. She was a quiet “A” student and was in the yearbook club and on the chaplaincy team. Smart, kind, sweet, generous, hard-working, dependable, friendly—a flurry of descriptions flowed from our shocked lips. I have learned that the hardest moments of being a teacher are when a student in the school community dies.

As Scott and I finish setting up microphones, LCD projector, and lighting in the theatre I think about Janine’s journal. I wonder how I might help her. Then I rush into my Grade 9 Drama class on the final “thee” of “O Canada.” They stand in a circle on the steel blue carpet, accustomed to my last minute tech set-ups and hurried entrances.

After attendance is taken we play frozen tag to get the energy flowing in the room. Then I assign scene work using story prompts from fairy tales. The students rush off into groups to plan their skits. Janine, alone in the center of the room, stares at her feet.

“Why don’t you work with Michelle?” I say to Janine.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Christine?”

“Nope.”
“Sam?”

“I don’t want to work.”

“It’s your choice, Janine.” I gather a fur coat, a mirror, a large felt rose, and a silver serving tray to distribute to the groups.

Janine sits on the carpet, pouts, and stares at me.

By the door, Matt uses the rose as a sword and jabs it into Sheldon’s side. “Please don’t hurt the rose!” I shout. Moving around the room, offering suggestions and redirecting focus, I wonder how long Janine will play this game today.

Ten minutes later Janine stands at my desk. “I’d like to work with Michelle.”

“Excellent choice!” I smile.

Sometimes Janine reminds me of Melissa, not in personality, but in the ways Melissa needed me. In Grade 9, Melissa had purple hair and wore colourful plastic bracelets from her wrist to her elbow. The bracelets hid the cutting.

“I don’t know what to do this summer,” Melissa said. “My mom wants me to go to Whitby for a while.”

I continued to stack text books. “What’s in Whitby?”

“A program...”
“What about summer school?”

“She thinks this program could help me.”

Placing the last text book on the shelf I turned to Melissa. Six months of talks after class or after rehearsal or on lunch snaked around and through the space between us. “Then you should go.”

She nodded and smiled and skipped out the door.

In Grade 10, Melissa bubbled and popped and sparkled with cheer. Her outgoing, charismatic nature drew people to her. I thought she had healed, had moved past the cutting, the experimental sex and drugs, had learned how to love herself.

In Grade 11, she would say she was having a heart attack or that she could not breathe or that she wanted to die or that she had a terminal illness or that she had been attacked and that she needed an ambulance and, oh yeah, “please do not call home” she begged. She lost the privilege of calling 911; emergency services, her mother, and the office agreed. Melissa started passing out in class.

In Grade 12, her bracelets returned. She flipped between intense relationships with girlfriends and boyfriends, with threesomes. She had colourful dreadlocks that fanned her face like a rainbow. She was on student council and the dance team and the choir and the improv team and in the school play every year. The office staff relented and allowed her a few pick-ups from the ambulance, but mostly they called her mom.
Then she graduated. I did not hear anymore. I still think about Melissa.

I still think about Danielle too. On a Sunday night just before dinner Scott called.

“Hi, Jessica,” he said. “I have bad news. It’s Dan.”

“What happened?” I had just talked to Danielle two days ago in the staff room.

“She...uh...well, she nearly died tonight.”

“What?”

“Overdose.”

“Omigod.”

“And she’s okay now?”

“Barely. We won’t know anything for sure until tomorrow.”

The next day at work, the principal said Danielle was going to be okay. It was a miracle.

Perhaps suddenly spread through our drinking water at the school. Sometimes when I looked at Janine, I saw my own pain reflecting in her brown eyes. Suddenly slipped into my consciousness like falling in love, slow and silent and barely visible until you realize you are in too deep. The year I directed Romeo and Juliet, the year Melissa was in Grade 12, the year
Trevor and Stephanie died, the year before Dan nearly died, and the year before I met Janine, my spirit was engulfed in a fifty ton, jet black cloud.

For months, I imagined my car crashing into the guardrails on Highway 401. I saw in vivid detail the deformed hood, the shattered glass, my body propelled through the air. I did not know how to stop imagining death. I did not want to die.

And, I did not tell anyone.  

When the first bell rings to signal lunch is over, I remember Janine’s notebook. The day has gotten away on me. Walking down the hallway from the lunchroom to the Drama room I decide to look at the notebook right away.

Shannon Kirk bolts by shouting, “Jessica! We have to run!”

“Where?”

“Janine!”

I follow Shannon. We swerve through the hall in the Tech wing and out the back door. Paul jogs up beside me.

38 “Over half of employees (54 per cent) fear that if management was aware they had experienced a mental health issue, their opportunities for promotion would be negatively affected—and 38 per cent feel it would hamper their success” (Thorpe & Chenier, 2011, p. 7).
Janine sprints across the grass. “Janine!” we call.

She turns. She looks different than this morning. She jolts toward the outside door by the Drama wing.

“She said she’s going to hurt herself!” Shannon wheezes from running.

I open up into my fastest run. I chase Janine back into the school through the crowded hall by the gym. Students part the way as I shout, “coming through!”

I chase her out the back door again. We have gone in a circle. My breathing is tight. I notice it is just Janine and I. Shannon and Paul have disappeared in the crowd behind us. I think about us, a chaplain, a guidance counsellor, and a teacher running through the school, trying to catch up with an unfit fourteen year old, in hallways thick with hundreds of students, of not knowing what is going on and why Janine changed since this morning, or why I did not read her journal when she handed it to me.

“Janine! Let’s talk!” I shout.

We run back into the school. The groups of students blur into the background as I focus on keeping up with Janine.

She runs into the Girls’ Change Room. She locks herself in a stall.

I stand at the door. I plan to pin the door if she tries to escape. We need to wait for help to arrive. There will be no more running through the school. But I hope someone noticed us run in here.
“What’s this all about?”

“Go away!”

“I want to help.”

“I hate you!”

“Let’s talk.”

“I want to die!”

Kelly arrives in the Girls’ Change Room. “Janine, let me in.” She gently knocks with one hand and messages the other vice principals in the office that Janine is okay with the walkie talkie in her other hand.

Click. The lock turns. Kelly slips in the stall. I hold the door.

“Tell me about what happened,” Kelly says.

“No.” Janine attempts to squish herself out the door. I press it closed.

“Let me out!”

“We just want to talk.”

“Let me out!”

“Why do you want to die?”
“I just do. Let me out!” Janine bangs on the door.

A police officer arrives. I breathe relief and step aside.

When Janine sees Officer Ken the wildness fades from her. Her breathing slows. She calmly walks out of the stall.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Janine. Do you want to come out and have a chat?”

“Only if Miss Outram stays.”

“Sure.”

We sit on the bench in the Girls’ Change Room. School uniforms, backpacks, and shoes pile in a mess around us. Kelly and Shannon and Paul leave to call Janine’s parents, inform the gym teachers that the change room is unavailable, to get the principal.

“What’s going on Janine?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“What’s your favourite subject in school?”

“Drama.”

“What else can you tell me about yourself?”
Officer Ken and Janine chat about nothing for twenty minutes. Janine smiles and giggles and bats her eyelashes. Resting into the brick wall I feel my heart rate slow down and my breathing steady. My face is hot and I bite back tears, unable to process what they are saying, just that the ordeal is over.

Janine slides into the back of Officer Ken’s cruiser. Kelly, Shannon, Paul and I wave as it pulls out of the parking lot, smiling at Janine, wishing her well.

“She will be admitted to the hospital for at least a week. You should make arrangements for her to miss class,” Kelly says to me.

The next morning Janine waits by the door to the Drama room. At first I thought she was a ghost.

“I thought you were going to take a little break.”

“Nope,” she twirls her hair in her left hand. “I didn’t really want to die, silly.”

A week later I sit beside Janine in Shannon Kirk’s office. Janine requested a meeting. She reported that her parents hurt her. She is allowed to bring one person to be with her during the report, and asked if I could come.

Max, a social worker sits across from us.
“Tell me again about what’s happening at home,” Max says to Janine.

“My parents are mean.”

“Explain.”

“They just are.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Forget about it.”

Janine looks at her fingernails. I look at Janine and imagine I am beaming her with confidence and peace like a Care Bear.

“Who watches you when your parents are at work?”

“My older sister.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty.”

At the end of the interview Max asks Janine to return to Math class. He closes the door.

“She’s making it all up. I’ve checked in with the siblings. I’ve stopped by the house. There is no truth to her reports. This case is closed.”

Five years later I still think about Janine.
Collage 17. Lure of the Mask by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Influence of School Culture

Factors contributing to my burn-out were the culture and the traditions of social relations within the school community. Being a high school teacher in the suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area was the centre of my identity and my social circle. I wonder if I would have experienced burn-out if I had not transferred to the new school in 2001? How did the school culture and community influence my identity and moral purpose? Did the new school lack the community and traditions of a more established school? How did school culture and community contribute to the feeling that I was trapped in a bell jar?

I remember going through periods of loneliness. Teachers work in isolation from their colleagues. My cousin works for a non-profit agency. When I told her of loneliness she could not understand. She said she spent more time with her coworkers than her husband and daughter. When I taught English there were a dozen teachers I could consult about classroom issues whereas when I taught Drama there was only one other Drama teacher.

Teachers have time to connect with each other before school, at lunch, during prep time, and after school. I have always worked in large high schools with 150 staff members. Due to my extra-curricular activities before and after school times were booked. Lunches were the best time to connect with each other but they were too short for developing friendships.

It can take years to get to know the staff of a large high school. It can be slow, tedious work like piecing together a mosaic vase using fragments of glass and tile. I needed to learn how to develop relationships with colleagues to feel a sense of belonging and trust. When the
community was united I felt a great sense of belonging. When the community became fragmented I felt lost. It works this way in the classroom too. When the class was united and focused on a task I felt like a wonderful teacher. When the class was fragmented and embroiled in conflict I felt like I was failing the students. The stability of the school community and the health of the classroom community impact the inner life of an educator.

Learning how to build a sense of community in my classroom became my mission. I have learned that the best remedy for a fragmented community is communication. If teachers were guided by school administration to talk about how to respond to the events of September 11, 2001, they would have felt more prepared to communicate with their students. If teachers were provided with time to talk about best practices around self-care and stress management during a crisis, then they would expand their toolboxes. If teachers had more support or options for referring students in distress, then they may not be overwhelmed by helplessness and empathy.
Collage 18. Communication by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
The high school I worked at from 2001-2006 comprised many students with complex needs. To become resilient I needed to learn how to emotionally process the environment, relationships, decisions, and events of my workplace.

The high school had a diverse population, students had cultural ties to well over one hundred nations. Students had different histories with schools, authority figures, white teachers, and/or female teachers. For the first time I was a minority. I had to learn how to relate and respond to students in new ways. I had limited experience with racism.

One day my Grade 11 Drama class worked cooperatively on skits. The next day students hurled insults at each other. Within three days the class became so divided that no one would work. I did not understand.

In my first year of teaching I took the Fred Jones course called Positive Classroom Discipline. I remembered the mantra “discipline before instruction.” So I invited one of our vice principal’s to sit in on the class. I had an idea, but I was not sure how it would turn out so I wanted another adult in the room. When the students arrived to class they gathered in a circle. It was already part of their daily routine, but rather than begin a drama warm-up, we talked. We engaged in authentic dialogue.

After sharing with students how I felt about our classroom dynamics and social relations I passed a stick around, asking each student to share thoughts and feelings about the state of our class community. By the end of the period we discovered that there was a conflict that began with three boys and a girl. The girl thought the boys had used racist language. The boys
thought the girl had used racist language. The class came together and talked through the conflict until we had agreed on ways to forgive and to rebuild our community. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was engaging in restorative justice, a practice now popular in schools. Communication helped our community reunite.

Prejudice hovered in the subtext of our school’s culture. I needed resources to respond to prejudice in my classroom. Like emotions, prejudice was rarely talked about among staff. I needed to learn how to process my identity in a multicultural school, how to examine my prejudices and biases, how to best support students, how to nurture classroom communities of love and respect.

Violence always surprised me. Before becoming a high school teacher I had never witnessed a fight. I had to learn how to intervene during a conflict, how to settle bystanders, how to protect myself from being hurt. I did not know how to process the emotional impact of witnessing students (especially students from/in my classes) engaged in physical altercations.

As professionals, teachers somehow figure out a way to respond to prejudice and violence in the classroom. Teachers work hard to build healthy communities in classrooms and in schools. But teachers rarely talk about emotion. If teachers are focused on helping a community to heal who is helping the teachers to heal? Teachers do the work that needs to be done often at a great personal cost. The more emotional an issue becomes the quieter and the more isolated the teacher becomes.
A series of small events can have as much impact as a large event. Teachers can internalize frustration and anger over students missing deadlines, perceived lack of support from administration, student plagiarism, parent complaints, turnaround times for grading, teaching assignments, room assignments, insufficient resources, and top down change that is implemented too quickly. Teachers are more likely to talk about small events in the staff room with great emotional affect. Then a culture of pessimism breeds. The workplace becomes clouded by complaint. So teachers feel united by adversity. I needed to learn how to process and respond to small events, to workplace negativity, to a lack of control over certain aspects of the job.

Like many young teachers I thought I could do everything, so I said “yes” a lot. In my first five years of teaching I taught fifteen courses in three subject areas: Grade 9-12 English, Grade 9-12 Drama, Grade 9-12 Vocal Music, Grade 11 Musical Theatre, Grade 12 Exploring the Arts and Grade 12 Writer’s Craft. After school I conducted the school choir, directed major school musicals, sat on various committees, sang in a band on weekends, acted in community theatre, and one year I even worked at a local bookstore part-time. I talked about work-life balance to convince myself my schedule was normal, dynamic, full, and rewarding.

Young teachers need to learn how to balance their schedules and their lives. Burn-out can result from exhaustion and a lack of balance. Burn-out can result from disillusionment and disappointment. Burn-out can result from regular feelings of incompetency, helplessness, or stagnation.
My burn-out escalated to the point where I felt defeated. I could not comprehend how I would be able to serve the students. I wanted to quit teaching. When my resources were depleted, I had to ask for help or risk being consumed by fear, pain, negativity, and repressed emotion. The moment I admitted defeat is the moment I began to heal. As I regained my strength I wanted to transform burn-out into a learning opportunity.
Collage 19. Interconnectedness by J. Outram, 8x5 in.
Learning Spiral

David Kolb’s experiential learning cycle includes experiencing, reflecting, theorizing, and applying. I experienced burn-out. Through the healing process I reflected on what made me feel defeated in an attempt to make meaning out of the experience. Then I consulted doctors, counsellors, friends, and books to extend my understanding of burn-out. Finally, I created and implemented a plan for change. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle provides a framework for demonstrating how I learned to turn defeatism into resilience.

Mary Catherine Bateson describes learning as a spiral. Placing this idea alongside Kolb’s learning theory I can see how similar cycles and spirals can be. Kolb’s theory spirals through my relationships, career decisions, and self-awareness. It spirals through the events that taught me how to become resilient. Cole and Knowles explain the experiential learning cycle/spiral: “Experience or practice provides the basis for reflection and analysis, which in turn informs future action.” I imagine the spiral starting somewhere in the middle of my mind, going up, down, this way or that way. There is a light moving through the spiral itself like a dancing ball in a tube to show me where I have been, where I am at now, and where I am going. There are warm and cool spots, clear and foggy spots. What surprises me most is that

39 “Lessons too complex to grasp in a single occurrence spiral past again and again, small examples gradually revealing greater and greater implications” (Bateson, 1994, p. 30).

40 (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 94)
everything is connected in the spiral; everything is a part of everything else. Even in Kolb’s learning cycle all of the learning is informed by prior learning, everything is connected.

Marilyn Taylor’s model of the learning cycle suggests that learners begin with a disorientation phase or destabilizing experience. When I began my career I enjoyed teaching. I became disoriented when teaching became difficult and I lacked the inner strength to cope. Subsequently, I reached my saturation point and burned out. After asking for help and beginning the healing process, I had arrived at the Reorientation phase of Taylor’s cycle.

As I write this chapter it seems too tidy to fit my learning and life experiences into the theories of cycles and spirals. It may suggest that it was an easy process. Learning is change. Change is difficult. Learning how to overcome burn-out and develop resiliency was hard and slow. It took three years from realizing I needed help to regaining my zest for work and my confidence in responding to conflict.

Through journals that date as far back as 1988 there are patterns of reflective inquiry and problem-solving. Generally, when I explore an issue through writing I see it differently when I read my words from the page. From this new perspective I approach the issue with logic and often develop an action plan to initiate the change. Once I have a plan in place, I use the

41 “If the change is experienced as disconfirming, that is, one that disconfirms one’s self-system or personal model of reality, then the individual is thrown into a disorientation phase in which confusion, anxiety, and tension increase and the learner experiences a crisis of self-confidence” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 64).
plan as a touchstone when I find myself moving back into my old ways. My journals reveal my interest in analysis, goal setting, questioning, and planning—particularly in times of great distress.

Through the time of my burn-out and subsequent process of overcoming it I wrote extensively in journals. When I examined old journals for this inquiry I was surprised to discover two journal entries from 2004 that identify the problem and my solution.42

Journal Entry from July 16, 2004:

I’m so glad to have a summer to devote to finding myself again—or maybe even for the first time. The last six months have been hell. I burned out. I became depressed. I stopped caring. I stopped doing. I’m still quite fragile. I’ve been on medication since early June to help me cope. The doctor says I need it for a year. It feels like my health is deteriorating.

Being a high school teacher is not for me. I take my job too personally. I rely on the students and staff to fulfill my needs as a human being. I know this is my weakness. Perhaps high school is not the best environment for me. I’m reminded daily of the pressures of being a teenager. Although I’m ten years older now, I don’t have fond memories of high school.

Apathy disturbs me. The marking nags at me. The play steals so much of time and energy. My coworkers drain me. A couple coworkers are fabulous, but too many are trying to put an “I” into “team.”

42 The second journal showing my solution is in Chapter Four.
I’ve already started having some bad dreams about returning to work in September. I feel anxiety when I think about it. Why doesn’t this job work?

The school has a beautiful theatre. I have a dream timetable. The staff and students respect me. My classroom is fabulous. I work with a couple of my friends. It’s everything I wanted out of teaching high school. Why does none of it satisfy me? Why do I dread going to work? Why, even now, is my breath short and my stomach churning?

What do I need?

2. Late Start. An 8:00 am start is too early.
3. Time off. I need to unwind in the evenings and on weekends, not continue to work.
4. Enthusiasm. I work best when those around me are energetic and positive. It inspires me.
5. Creativity. I need to put my creativity to use in many different ways and work with others on creative projects.

Perhaps changing my environment is what I need to fire-up my teaching career. It is time to devote myself to my health, to do what I can to heal and prevent burn-out from consuming me again!

Through journaling, I named the problem and began to ask questions. I re-established contact with my inner self and recognized that the challenge in finding fulfillment in my job was in having a distorted perspective of the environment. Overcoming burn-out was not as difficult as accepting that I was burned-out. It was not as difficult as deciding that I wanted to change. This journal entry marks my turning point. In June 2004 my doctor had given me medication to
clear the fog. I started seeing a counsellor through the Employee Assistance Program. Our sessions focused on how I could support students without taking on their emotions. The hardest part of overcoming burn-out was having the patience to let the healing run its course over the next two years.

As Taylor’s cycle suggests I recognized that “the learner is where the learning happens and the learner’s own views and judgments are centrally involved.” To move into the next phase I needed to better understand how my perspective of the teaching environment became distorted, gain insight on how the pattern played out in my life, and apply the new perspective.

If we layer Taylor’s more emotional cycle over Kolb’s experiential learning cycle it is clear that learning was happening on many levels. As Taylor’s cycle indicates I had the experience of burning out. For two years I reflected on what upset the balance in my life and began to ask questions about how I could develop inner strength. I began to make meaning and conceptualize what was happening. To shift my perspective I needed a catalyst.

When I learned how to trust my community of friends, family, and colleagues, my engagement in teaching could feel reborn. Both Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and Taylor’s

43 (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 67)
learning cycle fit naturally with learning that occurred before I knew of their cycles. Learning processes were at work in my life even when I was not aware.
Chapter Four:

Filling the Jar

Our students need to see how we, their elders, deal with these vagaries of fate while refusing to sell out either our professions or our own identity and integrity. And they need to see how, when we fail and fall down, as everyone does, we manage to get up again.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{44} (Palmer, 1998, p. 211)
My Asphalt Tower Sank

My asphalt tower sank,
My rock is before me.
Choking on green, yellow, blue—
I cry for feeling to strike.
Slow.
They whisper my name—
Luring me to the rock.
Highway 169 North
To complete—
To memory—
To me.

Free like a bicycle on country roads,
I drive to yesterday.
Soaring above pavement
Beyond merging traffic
--into Truth.

Faster now—you are almost there.
Smell sun on granite.
The warmth of family waits
In the smile of the
Inukshuk.

You pass Grandma’s spunk, Aunt Muriel’s laughter,
Grandpa’s kindness, and Uncle Fred’s jar of jellybeans.
Colours soak you in their glory.
The wind sings to you a homecoming.

Your heart breaks open and
Shatters
Everything that should not be upon the rock.
Your rock.
You made it.
You can see lovely for the first time since the first snowflake.
You are home.
I sit with you, on this rock
And recount the wings of birds—
Recall the buds on branches—
Relive the birth of water—
And sing.

By J. Outram, 2005

45 This poem was one of the first things I wrote when my creative energy returned. It is about a moment in the summer of 2004 when I drove to the cottage in Britt, Ontario and felt connected to my inner self. At this time I realized the healing had run its course and I was whole again.
Collage 20. Healing by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Defining “Burn-In”

Audrey taught English. She was hard-working and kind. Audrey was a single mother of two teenagers. We began teaching for the school board around the same time. She was in her fifties. One September I asked Audrey how she spent her summer vacation.

She said, “I slept and read and sat around until I felt like getting up. Then in August I cleaned.”

In the summer of 2004 I gave myself permission to sleep and read and sit around. I went to the family cottage in Britt on my own for a week to sit in the quiet. I packed a turquoise spiral bound notebook and some pens. I packed a stack of books about becoming inspired, recovering the artist’s spirit, healing my life, finding passion, building self-esteem, and healthy living. I was determined to turn burn-out into a learning opportunity. I wanted to reflect on the experience. I needed to learn how to feel better again, how to prevent depression from reoccurring, how to express and cope with emotion in healthy ways, how to safeguard myself from the negative energy of others, how to find a reasonable work/life balance and how to return to work in September feeling more like myself.

46 Leslie Godwin suggests North American culture supports “upward mobility” rather than “inward mobility.” She writes: “The busier you are addressing outside commitments, the less of an internal life you allow yourself” (Godwin, 2004).

47 As listed in a journal entry from July 2004.
Each day I wrote morning pages. When I was twelve I wrote in a journal every day too. Mr. Smith, my Grade 8 teacher said that I would pose a problem on one page and then solve it four pages later before he had a chance to respond. Through writing I have learned to solve problems, to change thought patterns, to see various sides of myself. It is like taking a moment and putting it in a jar, holding the jar up to the light and examining it, seeing how it can be changed when different elements are added or taken away.

I learned how to listen to my inner voice, how to forgive, how to understand emotion, how to let go of perfection, how to be resilient. For two years I worked on finding balance and finding a way back to loving my job. The learning happened on the inside. Through introspection and honest reflection and contemplating change I learned how to burn-in and become a resilient teacher. To burn-in is to look inside oneself for wisdom, for direction, for strength. To burn-in is to connect to the fire in one’s belly that motivates and inspires. Engaged in a continuous cycle of praxis, reflection and action, my inner world indeed changed.

48 Julia Cameron prescribes morning pages as a tool for creative awakening: “What are morning pages? Put simply, the morning pages are three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness” (Cameron, 2002, pp. 9-10).

49 “Through the reconstructed articulation of prior and current life experiences, teachers have opportunities to pull out narrative threads that hold together the interwoven fabric of their past, present, and future lives and their personal and professional selves” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 15).
Toward the end of the summer of 2004 I had developed an action plan:

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**Journal Entry August 28, 2004**

1. **How to prevent burn-out from reoccurring:**
   
   i. Take time to “check-in” regularly

   ii. Acknowledge feelings (get to the root)

   iii. Work to fulfill my creative goals

   iv. Eat well and exercise

   v. Allow myself time to do nothing (do not overbook)

   vi. Remember balance.

2. **How to express and cope with emotion in healthy ways:**

   i. Meditate; figure out what and why I am feeling this way

   ii. Seek solutions to problems

   iii. Let go of emotions that have nothing to do with me

   iv. Write (there is no shame in journal-venting)

3. **How to safeguard myself from the negative energy of others:**

   i. Acknowledge feelings as theirs, not mine

   ii. Avoid negative people and conversations

   iii. Gossip always makes me feel bad; be allergic to gossip

   iv. Focus on the good in people

   v. Stay connected to the positive in me

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Although I have written many action plans for initiating change in my life I was surprised to find this one. It fits too nicely with the inquiry. I considered not including it, fearing that readers would think the journal entry was fabricated. I considered scanning the journal into an image. I decided to type the journal as it was in my notebook. I have been recording and analyzing my inner life informally for decades. It is a passion and a hobby. It is part of what led me to pursue this inquiry.
vi. Take some deep breaths and remind myself: “This has nothing to do with me”

vii. Be more assertive

4. How to find a reasonable balance without over committing:
   i. Do not answer “yes” right away
   ii. Review available time when considering a request
   iii. Make choices based on both what I can give and what I can receive from the activity
   iv. Put time limits on some activities
   v. Consider what I need and what I already have

5. How to return to work next week:
   i. Remember it is my choice to continue with teaching and return to work
   ii. Leave school at school
   iii. Be more assertive about what I think
   iv. Be friendlier and more inviting to colleagues
   v. Organize classroom and lessons to maintain a consistent pace
   vi. Wake-up earlier in the morning so I have “me” time before I get to work; go to bed earlier
   vii. Write concerns down (attempt to solve them or let them go—no holding on)
   viii. Find ways to love the work
   ix. Take note of what I do not enjoy and initiate change

6. How to stay in touch with myself:
   i. Peaceful evenings
   ii. Morning pages
   iii. On difficult days allow nap time
   iv. Turn off the TV
   v. Listen to music
Looking back on the journals, seven years later, it is clear that even through burn-out I was an over-achiever. I will admit I wanted to be good at healing. I pushed myself to break patterns, change habits, move through challenges. I am lucky to be able to organize my thinking and set specific goals in this way. When I returned to work in September I felt like I knew what to do. I put time aside every Sunday for the next two years to sit down with this list and journal about my progress. Each month I selected four to eight specific goals on which to focus. I noted the focus for each week on my calendar.51

Consulting experts, researching mental wellness, finding an identity outside of the workplace, pursuing creative projects, and forcing myself to be still were some of the ways I healed. Like the Chinese practice of Feng Shui, each area of my life deserved attention to detail, not just my career. I was desperate to want what I had, to feel satisfied.

Developing resiliency and optimism required patience. There were many more challenges in the classroom for the next two years including conflict with a colleague, a school evacuation due to pepper spray in the ventilation system, and a police presence in the school. Through the stress and the fear and the pain, committing to the plan worked. Self-awareness

51 As a teenager I read Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Covey’s approach to time management and priority management was already a part of my routine.
and time healed. By the summer of 2005, I felt whole again. Teaching filled me with joy.

Balance had returned.
From Blue Dot Days to Red Dot Days

In May 2005, Lindsay taught Drama across the hall. She had taught Grade 5 for three years before transferring to our school. It was her first year teaching high school.

“What can I do, Jess? This can’t continue.” For the sixth day this month Lindsay was having a meltdown. She came to my classroom door crying. She said she was unable to teach. The tears would not stop. We had three minutes to put a lesson together that would keep her Grade 9 Drama students engaged. I gave Lindsay a box of scene cards. Students could use the prompts on the cards to create a skit. To extend the lesson, they could prepare the same scene in multiple genres and then perform it for the class. Lindsay could put her energy into supervision rather than the intensity of a teacher-led lesson.

Lindsay stopped by after school to return the box of scene cards. She made it through the day. “Thanks, Jess.”

“Did it work?”

“They were good.” Lindsay sat down on a black cube by the north wall of the Drama room. “It turned out to be an okay day in the end.”

“Are you set for tomorrow?”
“I’m going to stay late and plan something. Maybe they can do something with the scenes from today. I’m so tired. It’s been such a tough year for me. The last couple weeks have been brutal.”

“You might have to make up lesson plans for bad days, sort of like emergency lesson plans. Then you will have them on hand when the tears come.”

“That could work. Arghh! I can’t do this anymore. It’s getting worse, isn’t it?”

“Have you talked to anyone?”

“Yeah.”

“Hold on. I have an idea!” I dashed into my office. I grabbed a calendar and a handful of coloured dot stickers. I passed Lindsay the stickers.

“What are these for?”

“It’s been a tough term for me too. I thought the bad days would never end. So I started tracking good days and bad days. Three bad days in a row can feel like a month of bad days.”

“I know what you mean.”

I opened the calendar to the month at a glance section. Blue or red dots sit on every day of April. There are more red dots than blue dots. “See. Even though in the second week of April every day has a blue dot, the rest of the month is mostly red. Blue dots are for bad days. Red dots are for good days.”
“I could do this.”

We flipped through the pages of the calendar. “In March there are less red dots. In February the page is nearly all blue. This way I can see that things are getting better. It’s worked really well for me.”

Lindsay left with a handful of stickers and a half smile. She had a plan. A few weeks later she had to take an extended leave until the end of the school year. I continued to track my days with blue and red dots until there were only two or three blue dots a month.
Demonstrating Resiliency

Using a problem-solving approach to challenges at work, I gained a sense of control. In the fall of 2009, students in my Grade 12 class said there was a “race war” in the school. Their language was dramatic and exaggerated. It intensified the racial conflict. There was tension in the building between groups of students. There had been fights at school and at student parties. Students felt unsafe. They felt torn between their groups of friends. I felt sadness, anger, frustration, helplessness, and detachment from the events. When students first described their feelings of hurt and anger, tears swelled.

The next day, I told the class how the events had made me feel. I invited students to share their thoughts and feelings. No one responded. I needed a different approach. I created a more private space for students to talk about what they were going through. Students worked on independent writing projects. I sat with small groups of students, asking them about their work and the school climate. By talking with two or three students at a time I was able to truly listen to the students. Likewise, students felt more comfortable opening up among their friends. We engaged in authentic dialogue. I asked students to describe what was happening and to propose possible solutions. For the first time in my career I resisted giving students advice. My goal was to facilitate communication.

After the experience of listening to students describe the problem of racial tension in the school and facilitating them through reflecting on the issue by asking questions, I began to research. The school community was becoming more diverse, much like downtown Toronto.
schools had become fifteen years earlier. Neighbouring school boards had created wonderful resources for anti-racism education to support students and teachers. On the recommendation of a friend I contacted George Dei, a leading researcher in this area at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Next, I shared my findings with teachers and administrators. This sparked professional dialogue and a community approach to developing a plan. The Safe Schools Committee decided to bring in an organization to work directly with students on the theme of harmony. Guest speakers for school assemblies were booked. A colleague and I signed up to plan the festivities for Black History month. I supported another colleague in starting a Multicultural Night at the school. Then, I worked with interested students in creating an after school group that discussed equity issues in our school community. By the end of the second term students reported that things were better, they felt safer.

Resilient teachers have a sense of self-efficacy and ignite a sense of efficacy in others. Rather than feeling defeated by the big issues in the classroom, I employed the experiential learning cycle to develop a plan. Resilient teachers may talk about the problems in the classroom, but when the conversations end they begin the work to make a change. They believe educators can mobilize change.

52 “Resilience, defined as the capacity to continue to ‘bounce back,’ to recover strengths or spirit quickly and efficiently in the face of adversity, is closely allied to a strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy and motivation to teach which are fundamental to a concern for promoting achievement in all aspects of students’ lives” (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1302).
My choice to support students was values driven. Since I felt motivated by a higher purpose the work felt easy. I did not wallow in negative emotions about the state of the community or the lack of diversity initiatives in the school. I decided to become part of the solution because I value equity and diversity. This created a shift in my approach to volunteering for extra-curricular activities. My choices to participate became grounded in my values rather than my interests. My values were fuelled by feelings and principles. Resilient educators take risks and support change when it is connected to their values and beliefs.

When an educator acknowledges her inner life and draws on her inner strength in times of difficulty her perspective can change. In the past, when challenges had arisen in the classroom I blamed the school and the students. Negativity and pessimism clouded my ability to see that my role as an educator is to shed light on the darker moments. Resilient educators feel comfortable with not knowing all the answers. They have realized that it is the questions that hold the most importance. Questions are the best entry point to a shift in perspective. To burn-in, teachers need to ask questions and listen to their inner voices for answers.
Collage 22. Confidence by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
“Once Upon a Time”

A teacher gets a first job. He has always wanted to be a teacher. She is thrilled. He works hard. She loves her work. He says yes to supervise dances, attend parent nights, coach basketball, moderate the Eco Club, and run the school’s recycling program. Life is good.

One day she gets tired but she does not take time to rest. He adds more supervising and coaching and moderating to his schedule. She thinks about her students when she is at work and when she is at home. His life becomes his work. Then she burns out. He feels defeated. She prays for strength. He starts to resent the time he spends at school. She responds in cranky tones when students ask for help. He carries the weight of his work on his back and does not even stop to use his health benefits for a massage.

She finds a pamphlet in her mailbox at work about the employee assistance program. He talks about how tired he is and how hard it is to say no. She wishes she worked at the bank. Now he also moderates the school’s breakfast program. Her work and life are out of balance. With the help of his friends, his family, and his bulldog named Lucy he makes changes. The changes are small at first.

“Most of our life we’re put in a cage, where we sing the same song day in and day out. But life is not about being caged, life is about flying” (Heward & Bacon, 2006, p. 132).
She goes for walks every morning. He goes to bed earlier so he can read his favourite Canadian authors like Joseph Boyden and Yann Martel and Alice Munro. She takes a break from coaching. He declines hosting the department party. She needs space, just for a year. He needs to get the house ready for when his baby is born. She joins recreational volleyball in the evenings. He learns how to landscape. She has movie night with the girls. He has Saturday morning coffee with the guys.

Then, like magic, she likes teaching Business Studies again. He laughs with the students every day. She wakes up before the alarm clock. He looks forward to marking because he is curious to know if the students are learning. She is proud to be a teacher. He applies for a job as department head. And they lived happily ever after....

The story does not end here. Our lives do not follow a three act structure. The end of burn-out does not guarantee everlasting happiness and peace and passion. Likewise, every story is as unique as each individual teacher. After a teacher experiences burn-out she may choose to make changes and choose to heal. If the teacher is a reflective practitioner, he may use the experience as a learning opportunity. Healing after burn-out can take weeks or months or years.

When the healing is done and balance is restored, then the teacher can choose to burn-in. Burning-in is about finding a mind, body, ground, sky connection. It is about listening to an inner voice, living in the present, being aware of intention, and finding passion in work. It is about dreaming and creating and listening and giving and feeling. Through burning-in I gained a
deeper understanding of self, affirmed my calling as an educator, and developed resiliency to cope when the work became challenging again.
My cousin Chantell and I went to Italy the summer of 2006. Toward the end of the trip, as we walked through the streets of Rome one last time we talked about going home.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we felt like this all the time?” Chantell asked.

I tilted my head back to let the sun soak into my face. “I guess that’s why they call this a vacation.”

“I’m serious. I feel so connected, so in the moment.”

“And so fit! If I had time to walk for miles every day at home I bet I’d lose sixty pounds.”

“We’d eat fresh caprese salads and—”

“—And gelato twice a day!”

“I wonder where I can get gelato in Toronto?”

“I know what you mean. Our lifestyle is so fast at home. So much more complicated.”

“Let’s try to keep this feeling when we get home, okay?”

On vacation I naturally take time to burn-in, to be reflective, to walk, to notice details, to enjoy meals, to meet new people, to feel the moment, and to put values before
commitments.\textsuperscript{54} The section that follows explores this metaphor by drawing parallels between the traits of a tourist in Italy to the traits of a resilient educator.

It is 11:00 pm in Leonardo da Vinci airport in Rome. Chantell and I stand at the luggage belt saying “Hail Mary’s.” We flew from Toronto to Paris to Munich to Rome in two days, on air miles.

Thirty minutes later we sit in a white taxi van with a couple from Poland. Our luggage bulges over the top of the back seat. The taxi strike in Rome started two days ago, but a burly man in his forties with thick black hair and a wide moustache promises to take us to our hotels.

The van speeds and twirls and jolts and yelps for thirty-five kilometres to the city. The driver drops us off in a dim alley with our luggage. He points at a set of ten foot brown doors and says, “Hotel Navona.”

Chantell rings the buzzer. We wait. In the alley a bald thirty-something man walks by wearing a baby blue t-shirt and sneakers, nothing else. His bare bottom glows white in the darkness as he struts along. Across from me, under a window with shutters and a cross hatch of wire, on the crumbling orange brick, in black spray painted capital letters is the word “Merde.” Chantell giggles.

\textsuperscript{54} “A large part of self-understanding,” says Lakoff, “is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives.’ The more we understand metaphor, the more we understand ourselves” (Pink, 2006, p. 140).
Resilient teachers are prepared and flexible. They understand that they cannot always be in control. They put their trust in others, including students, colleagues, administrators, and their personal circles of influence. They trust their intuition. Resilient teachers may be afraid, but they do not let fear prevent them from doing what needs to be done. Resilient teachers show up, they open the door even though the writing on the wall does not match their expectations.

It is 9:00 am in Campo de’ Fiori in Rome. I stroll through the crowd of white umbrellas. The dry heat burns. The shade cools. I walk from vendor to vendor, shade to sun to shade. I take pictures of flowers: sunflowers, lilies, wild flowers, roses, daisies, gardenias. I spy on young men in fitted blue uniforms, fresh haircuts, and ripe lips. I chuckle at aprons pretending to be bodies in white or black lace lingerie, or chiseled abs with tight navy boxers, or Michelangelo’s sculpture of David.

I buy a warm, luscious peach. I buy a bag of sundried tomatoes, a bag of pistachios, a bag of mixed Italian spices to bring home. At the spice vendor I let the crimson words typed on yellow cards whisper in my mind, pesto, ginger, boscaiola, cerfoglio, terribili, carote, minestrone, riso.

By the produce a white haired man with a gold watch demonstrates how to prepare a potato for a carrot. He hollows out the center of the potato with a special tool, inserts the
carrot and slices them to look like cookies, white edges with an orange center. Italian words I have never heard shoot out of him with vitality and influence.

On the charcoal cobblestone an African man in a red baseball cap unfolds a white sheet covered with a rainbow of Prada purses.

“You like?” he asks.

I smile. I pick up a lime purse with a brown strap, then a white purse with a delicate wild flower print, then a red faux leather purse.

“Forty Euros,” he says. “For you.” His liquorice skin shimmers in the sun. His eyes dance like patent leather shoes.

I smile. I pick up a black Prada bag with a long shoulder strap. I look in the pockets. I try it on.

“Thirty Euros,” he says, “special price for a special lady.”

“Grazia.” I slowly shake my head, smile again, and walk over to a table covered with jewellery.

Resilient teachers understand the rewards of being still, of careful observation, and of curiosity. They try to live in the moment. The past does not define the future. Rather, the past and future inform the present. Resilient teachers seek learning opportunities in large and small
events. They understand that inner strength develops within community. Teaching and learning is limited in isolation. Subject and relationship inform the lessons of a resilient teacher.

Resilient teachers take risks.

It is 3:45 pm in Vatican City. Chantell and I sit on a red velvet bench along the wall in the Sistine Chapel. Crowds of tourists swell in the center. Heads tilt back. Eyes scan Michelangelo’s ceiling, the scenes of the Separation of Light from Darkness, the Creation of the Sun and Moon and the plants, the Creation of Eve, the Creation of Adam, the drunkenness of Noah, the Deluge, the Punishment of Haman. I get lost in story over story and image over image and shape over shape, an elaborate moving balance of light and colour.

By the altar a guard takes a camera from a teenager; The Last Judgement provides an ominous backdrop. I look for Michelangelo’s self-portrait, a sad shell of lifeless skin, his colour and his soul sucked empty.

I close my eyes and open them to feast on the spirit of the Chapel. I hear Michelangelo whisper gently, so close his breath warms my right ear, “What will your ceiling be?”

Resilient teachers listen to their inner voice. They are reflective practitioners. They recognize moments of insight. Resilient teachers make decisions rooted in purpose, passion, and integrity. They respond to the world around them. They understand interconnectedness,
cause and effect, and the greater good. Resilient teachers choose to turn adversity into opportunity.
Collage 23. Resiliency by J. Outram, 5x8 in.
Chapter Five:

Sunshine in a Jar

How do I stay close to the passions and commitments that took me into this work, challenging myself and the institution I work in to keep faith with this profession’s deepest values?  

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55 (Palmer, 1998, p. 211)
Art in a Jar

Art is never-never land—
It can capture sunshine in a jar.

Touch air.
See music.
Smell colour.
Hear hunger.
Taste trees.

Van Gogh meets Beethoven at Walden, in the woods—
Where sunshine escapes the jar each time.
What is the meaning of life?
Polkaroo.

Boiling desire cools loneliness. The lid lifts.
“Mange ta main et prenez l’autre pour demain,”
The clever cat of liberty calls as
I eat the fire of the dragon.

O—to drive the clouds on country roads—
That bird delights in the unknown.
Tomorrow she will understand today’s dumb poetry blooms.
Sleeping fish have no quarrel with horny tigers.

“Je t’aime,” declares her creation
And the jar captures a rainbow.

By J. Outram, 2002.56

56 This poem is important to this inquiry because it is the first time I used the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar.
Metaphor and Inquiry

Sunshine in a Jar is a symbol to represent my inner life. It is an ideal state of being. It represents creativity and spirit and passion and resiliency and interconnectedness and love. This metaphor served as the entry point to my inquiry. I had many questions. How does Sunshine in a Jar connect to my identity and perspective? How does the metaphor connect to and reveal my inner life? Could metaphor be used as a tool for gaining a greater understanding of self? What is the value of a personal metaphor? What are the stories or events in my life that demonstrate the significance of Sunshine in a Jar?

The use of arts-informed inquiry opened up and represented my inner life in ways that surprised me. It gave me access to memory and emotion. As the work evolved, a definition of Sunshine in a Jar surfaced as a symbol of resilience and passion. I wondered how I could use my story of developing resiliency and rediscovering a love of teaching after a period of burn-out to support other young teachers. I wondered if by sharing my journey, by articulating inner learning, I could share possibilities with other teachers experiencing burn-out. Arts-informed inquiry could accomplish two things: represent the inner life of an educator and appeal to a wide audience.

When I think of Sunshine in a Jar I think about light, creativity, enthusiasm, insight, vocation, and love. The image embodies my understanding of resiliency. The glass jar is the form, the container that permits me to capture things or ideas that seem impossible, and to carry them wherever I choose. The glass jar can also preserve brightness and strength. I can
take the lid off whenever I want to let life, people or feeling into the jar or out of the jar. It is a personal metaphor to describe my inner life. Its meaning can change as I change.

Autoethnographic reflections gave me the space to explore my life experiences within the context of school culture. Key questions guided the writing inquiry: Which of my experiences might resonate with others I have witnessed in the teaching community? How did the communities I worked in affect my decisions and perspective?

Many teachers experience burn-out. Many teachers have developed resiliency as a result. I wanted teachers to see themselves in my stories, to consider how they may have responded to a situation, to understand the power of perspective, to contemplate how the culture of silence and isolation affects their inner lives. The importance of the inquiry was not just about telling a story of burn-out and resiliency. Rather, it was an opportunity to learn how to articulate the experience in order to share it with other teachers. How do I represent this story from the inside-out? How do I explore the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar in way that will prompt readers to consider what role metaphors play in their inner journeys?

In earlier drafts, the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar had a more prominent position in each of the chapters. Although metaphor was at the heart of this inquiry I did not want readers struggling to understand a metaphor that may not connect with them. Emily Dickinson writes “Tell the truth but tell it slant.” In many ways this is a story of Sunshine in a Jar told slant. The metaphor became the cultural context of my inner life. Using elements of autoethnography allowed me to explore the external communities and social relations in schools as well the internal truths that define my values, beliefs, and philosophies.
Heewon Chang proposes that autoethnographers can develop their own style. Since the inquiry into the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar included multiple forms of representation, it made sense to create a multi-form research text. By using a combination of poetry, collage, and personal narrative I could represent multiple layers of an event including action, emotion, and subconscious perspectives.

57 “Autoethnographers commonly mix different writing styles in one text” (Chang, 2008, p. 149).

58 “Autoethnographers showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self consciousness. These features appear as relational and institutional stories affected by histories and social structures that are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language” (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 130).
Data Collection

Data collection included various forms of writing inquiry and visual inquiry. While developing data and representing it in the final text I was aware of aesthetic quality. Artistic forms of representation were used to make meaning but they also needed to contain “artfulness.” I began by using watercolour paints to explore what Sunshine in a Jar might look like. This led to a discovery that the ideas of Sunshine in a Jar do not exist in isolation. Consequently, I created three paintings to show what the jar might look like in various phases. Then, I used the paintings to generate a list of questions to drive the writing inquiry.

59 “I understood arts-informed research as having three parts: to be provoked by something artful, which sparks the research; to gather the data in an innovative way; and to represent the research in such a way that it ignites further inquiry (or action)” (Sameshima & Knowles, 2008, p. 116).
**Storm Cloud in a Jar**

Contained fear and sadness whirl around in a closed jar as the lid bends with the pressure. This painting represents the distress and anxiety of a teacher in the early stages of burn-out and the negative energy that consumes teachers who have lost their light.

Have I ever felt afraid to go to work? What happens when the needs of the students become greater than my capacity to give? When was the last time I prepared a new lesson just for fun? How do I cope with balancing my personal life and professional life? Do I worry about the impact of asking colleagues for help?
Sunshine in a Jar

Imagination, love, happiness, passion, strength, and life swirl with light in a closed jar. It can represent joy and creativity, an inspired teacher’s spirit. It can represent resiliency.

How do I feel about my job? How do I renew energy after a difficult day? Why did I decide to become a teacher? What is my favourite subject to teach? Am I open to learning from students? What do they teach me? How did I learn to become resilient?
The jar opens to spread energy and share passion. It represents the radiance of a teacher who employs resiliency and embraces vocation.

How do colleagues describe me? How do students describe me? In what ways do I share what I know? When are students most engaged? How do I inspire students to set and achieve their goals? What is my mission as a teacher? How do I maintain focus? How do I respond to adversity?
**Methodology**

This inquiry explores the inner life of an educator through a commitment to academic and artistic processes. The watercolour paintings ignited questions to begin the inquiry. From writing poetry to personal narratives to a one act play, I explored the themes connected to Sunshine in a Jar. Since the use of visual inquiry sparked the quest to explore metaphor, I decided to use collage as another form of data collection. I was curious to see what the themes would look like in images versus words. Then I organized the work to represent my journey from idealism to defeatism to resilience.

In the final text, I wanted a holistic quality. It was important that the overall arc of the work included emotional, intellectual, and spiritual embodiment of the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar. The poems, collages, and personal narratives needed to work together to share a story. I wanted to move beyond the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar and weave other less prevalent personal metaphors through the work. Metaphors opened up various ways of presenting and representing the qualitative data. Metaphors helped the work explore deeper levels of self-understanding and communicate complex personal moments.

The primary intention of this inquiry was to connect to an audience of teachers. My vision for its communicability can also be represented by the metaphor Sunshine in a Jar. One of the first works I created to explore the metaphor was a sculpture of what it could look like. The sculpture demonstrates the relationship between what I am researching and how I am researching it.
Each component of the sculpture connects to the ways in which the form of this research aspires to inform an audience of educators. The gold metallic ball shines and reflects light. This inquiry aims to bring light to dark moments in teaching. It reflects inner wisdom and asks the reader to contemplate his or her own development of resilience. The gold pipe cleaner suggests creativity and the ways that creativity can influence reflexive inquiry. The ribbons spilling out of the jar represent the energy of the inquiry and how it uses the arts to access, share, and preserve energy from experience. The ribbons winding around the ball show movement. The research is alive and interpretations are mobile, flexible.

The red ribbon symbolizes love. The inquiry intends to connect people and to help educators better serve students and to facilitate or spark self-care within the reader. The rays of the sun suggest the need for the inquiry to interact with individuals and school communities. It aims to linger in the hearts and minds of readers, to touch upon the need for educators to step into the community to support young teachers as they develop resilience. The orange sparkly ribbon represents passion and purpose overflowing from the core of an inspired educator.

The jar is open. The lid is gone. Sunshine and love and purpose emerge, spilling over the rim with their abundance. The jar represents the self as a vessel of knowledge and our ability as humans to make meaning from our experiences. This inquiry is an example and an expression of inner knowing.

The metaphor Sunshine in a Jar is a lens for assessing resilience. Sunshine is strong, effervescent, and influential. Sunshine in a Jar is a model of optimism and flexibility and light.
This inquiry could be used, in part or whole, as an entry point to engaging teachers in defining what resiliency looks like to them. It could also serve as an example of how personal metaphors influence ways of knowing and being. A possible extension of the research could include designing a series of workshops that utilize the arts to help educators excavate their inner lives for truths. How can school culture shift to include professional dialogue about a teacher’s inner life? Will there be a need for boundaries? How can trust be fostered? Now that I have learned methods of sharing my inner life as a teacher, I would like to learn how to facilitate others in sharing their inner lives.
Conclusion

Like a child who enters the backyard on a beautiful day with an empty jar and a curious mind, this inquiry welcomed surprise.

Open the jar.

A resilient teacher valued community.

Open the jar.

A resilient teacher valued insight.

Open the jar.

A resilient teacher valued inquiry.

Open the jar.

I have opened the jar and shared my inner life as an educator. I have described what my jar looks like and what I keep inside the glass walls. I have collected stories of when my jar was empty and when my jar was full. What does your jar look like? What do you keep inside?
Bibliography


http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/march_2011/features/T2T.aspx


