

CAN YOU SEE THE BEAUTY? NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AS
COUNTER NARRATIVE IN THE LIVES OF FORMER PRISONERS

By

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Abstract

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Little is known about individuals who studied nonviolence communication and mindfulness through the Freedom Project. This study looks at the lived experiences of three men, as well as members of the Freedom Project “community circle.” A series of literary portraits was created using ethnographic data obtained through observations and in depth interviews. These portraits reveal the relationship between personal narrative and public discourse, as well as the ways that power and knowledge are produced and operate in and through both discourse of violence and discourse of nonviolence, and the discursive practices associated with dominant and resistant discourses. This research documents the process by which nonviolent communication and mindfulness became practices of freedom and facilitated a new ethic of self.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I was in the eighth grade when I read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Solzhenitsyn, 1963). In hindsight, it seems like a strange choice for a thirteen-year-old-girl; but I was fascinated with life in the Russian Gulag. This novel reached out and grabbed me. I spent months engrossed in novels and books about the harsh realities of prison life. I was fascinated by characters that were able to find joy in the most simple of pleasures: a crust of bread, a look of understanding from another inmate. I was touched by stories of individuals who maintained their own sense of humanity in spite of the cruelty of others. I suppose I was just starting to form questions about *what it means to be free*. As I looked around at the adults in my life it was clear to me that they were not free. These books offered hope. Slowly, an understanding began to emerge: freedom is not something that can be granted or denied by outside forces. Freedom is something to be claimed and nurtured by the individual who refuses to allow her life to be defined by others. So how does one live a free life in spite of confining circumstances that exist not just in the Russian Gulag but also in the mind and heart of a thirteen-year-old girl? This is the question that motivates my current research. More specifically, this project explores the lived experiences of former prisoners who received NVC and mindfulness training through the Freedom Project.

The Freedom Project

I first heard about the Freedom Project when I attended a nonviolent communication (NVC) training in my local community (Kathleen Macferran, personal communication, May 19, 2007). I had been studying and practicing NVC on my own since reading Marshall Rosenberg's *NVC : A Language of Life* (2005) a few years earlier. There were about fifteen of us who sat in a

circle in a church basement in this small town in rural Idaho, listening to our trainer, Kathleen, describe her experiences as a volunteer with the Freedom Project. She talked about going into prisons to share NVC with men and women convicted of acts judged to be not only illegal but often heinous. She explained that she had come to feel compassion for these individuals because she understood that they, like all of us, long for connection and empathy. She talked about working with sex offenders and how she came to understand that the violence they perpetrated on others was an attempt to meet their own needs for understanding. As former victims, these individuals, according to Kathleen, often only feel connected to another human being, when they look into the faces of their victims and know that they share a common bond. I had never thought about crime or the perpetrators of crime in this way. I was intrigued and inspired by what I perceived as Kathleen's fearlessness and compassion.

Kathleen told the story of one individual who was involved in the Freedom Project for a number of years. I later found out that his name was Walter. Walter attended numerous trainings inside and became a mentor to others before being released to the community. He was released from prison and continued his work as a Freedom Project volunteer. A former drug user and sex offender, Walter appeared to be transformed, something other volunteers in the community marveled at. He represented the potential for change inherent in the work of the Freedom Project. However, over time he slipped back into old behaviors and started using again. One day he attacked a female Freedom Project volunteer who had befriended him. He was arrested and charged with attempted rape. Kathleen described the day that Walter went to court to plead guilty, knowing that he would receive a life sentence given that this was his third strike. Walter's victim and his other fellow Freedom Project volunteers and friends were in attendance, an uncharacteristically large crowd for such proceedings. The judge asked those in attendance if

they wished to testify on behalf of the defendant or the prosecution. They told him that they were there for both sides. They were there to be supportive of both Walter and the victim. They were there not out of concern about his sentencing (a foregone conclusion) but because they valued both Walter and his victim. The judge acknowledged that this was not business as usual in his courtroom.

Sometime after the workshop I obtained a transcript of Walter's court proceedings (*State of Washington v. Walter Armstrong*, 2007). The victim began her address to the court by thanking all of those in attendance and saying "they're all here both to support the defendant and myself. They wanted to be witness for both. They're equally hurt and saddened by what happened on May 30th, and they both have also known, as well as the violence, that he [the defendant] has also made lots of contributions" (p. 4). The victim went on to describe her struggle to forgive Walter and free herself from her "own prison of fear and shame and feelings of powerlessness" (p. 5). Finally she made a request by saying, "I look at the prison that I've been in. What I'd like to ask the defendant is that he do the internal work that would cause him to be free, that he look with compassion within himself, in every nook and cranny of his heart and his mind, that holds any shame, anger, hurt, or powerlessness, anything that would keep him in the cycle of violence" (pp. 5 – 6). Finally she said, "I hope that we both can continue the work of the Freedom Project in our own way, learning the skills of nonviolence, which lead to the reconciliation with ourselves, our loved ones, and the community. Our work addresses the healing of relationships ruptured by violence and the forging of community founded on genuine safety through connection" (p. 6).

I was moved by this story in the way I had been moved by stories of the Russian gulags. I was reminded of the words of Viktor Frankl (1984), a concentration camp survivor, "To be

sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it *is* freedom to take a stand toward the conditions” (p. 153). Frankl proposed a radical form of personal responsibility that I saw reflected in this story: Walter’s willingness to take responsibility for the actions that brought pain to his victim and his other friends, the willingness of his victim to take responsibility for forgiving Walter, and the willingness of the Freedom Project community to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of the broader community while continuing to make a place for and love Walter in spite of his actions. My desire to learn more about the Freedom Project community did not grow out of a detached intellectual curiosity or a yearning to contribute to scientific scholarship. It grew out of a long-held, personal longing to understand freedom and the relationship between personal responsibility and liberation.

Dow Gordon (personal communication, January 24, 2008), a Freedom Project staff member, tells the story of how the Freedom Project began. Marshall Rosenberg (2005) was invited to speak to inmates at a Washington State penitentiary and share his message of NVC . At least one of the inmates made a request for more training. The Freedom Project was born out of this request. A grassroots organization in the truest sense of the word, the Freedom Project began with one volunteer. In 1998, this volunteer provided 36 days of training to inmates in a single penitentiary. In 1999, she provided 984 hours of training to 47 prisoners. A second volunteer trainer came on board in 2000 and 91 prisoners received 3,289 hours of training. The number of volunteers and prisoners involved in the program grew each year. In 2006, the Freedom Project was recognized as a nonprofit organization by the Internal Revenue Service. By 2006, the number of prisoners receiving training through the Freedom Project had grown to 160 per year (Freedom Project, n.d.).

The mission statement for the Freedom Project begins with these words: “Freedom Project strengthens our community through supporting the transformation of prisoners into peacemakers” (Freedom Project, n.d.). The vision for the project states: “We dream of communities and nations dedicated to nonviolence as a soul force for the healing of all relationships fractured by injury, violence, anger, and mistrust. The Freedom Project offers a new vision of what is possible” (Freedom Project). The Freedom Project is involved in two kinds of work aimed at fulfilling this mission and realizing this vision. The project continues to offer training focused on mindfulness as well as NVC to women at the Washington Corrections Center for Women and men at the Monroe Correctional Complex, prison facilities operated by the Washington State Department of Corrections. The “inside prison” programs include introductory workshops focused on NVC , mindfulness classes and groups, theme based workshops focused on specific topics, including anger, reconciliation and parenting, regular weekly practice sessions, and monthly trainings for inmate mentors who provide program support. The Safe Returns program provides a community-based support network for inmates returning to the community. The Freedom Project hosts a bimonthly “community circle” to bring together returnees and supportive individuals from all segments of the community, providing “an opportunity to practice NVC and mindfulness in open dialogue for returnees and community members wishing to learn from, understand, and support each other” (Freedom Project).

NVC

Rosenberg (2005) describes NVC as “...a specific approach to communicating – speaking and listening – that leads us to give from the heart, connecting us with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish” (p. 2). Rosenberg acknowledges his debt to Gandhi whom he credits for developing the term *nonviolence*. For Rosenberg,

compassion is a natural state that occurs when “violence has subsided from the heart” (p. 2).

More specifically, Rosenberg describes NVC as a language and set of skills that:

...guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others respectful and empathetic attention. (p. 3)

The NVC practitioner learns to listen for, empathetically hear and articulate his/her own needs, as well as the needs of others. Rosenberg describes this as a process that is “...simple, yet powerfully transformative” (p. 3).

According to Rosenberg (2005), the process of learning NVC for most people involves a shift from judging, criticizing, diagnosing, resisting and defending to empathic connection with self and others. The tools associated with NVC foster attentiveness, allowing the practitioner to be more fully present with themselves and others. Rosenberg says:

Although I refer to it as “a process of communication” or a “language of compassion,” NVC is more than a process or a language. On a deeper level, it is an ongoing reminder to keep attention focused on a place where we are more likely to get what we are seeking.

(p. 4)

Rosenberg teaches that we all desire on some level to give and receive empathy and to connect with each other compassionately. He advises the NVC practitioner to begin the process of empathetic and compassionate giving by using the tools associated with NVC. He says that when we “...do everything we can to let others know this is our only motive, they will join us in the process and eventually we will be able to respond compassionately to one another” (p. 5). In this

way, compassion has a ripple effect that moves out from the practitioner in a concentric pattern. Because NVC involves specific skills and processes of communication it is sometimes described as a *language*. Rosenberg also describes a particular worldview associated with NVC which he names *NVC consciousness*. NVC can also be described as a *social movement* because practitioners ultimately seek social transformation through the application of NVC strategies.

NVC as a language involves both empathetically listening to the feelings and needs of others and honestly expressing our own needs and feelings. There are four steps in Rosenberg's NVC process (Rosenberg, 2005): observation, feelings, needs, and requests. In the first step, the NVC practitioner observes what is happening, striving to develop a description free of evaluation and judgment. Next, the practitioner identifies feelings and then the needs associated with those feelings. Lastly, the practitioner articulates requests that will enrich their own lives or the lives of others. According to Rosenberg, NVC is intended to:

...establish a flow of communication, back and forth, until compassion manifests naturally: what I am observing, feeling, and needing; what I am requesting to enrich my life; what you are observing, feeling, and needing; what you are requesting to enrich your life... (p. 7)

The four steps are not intended to serve as a rigid formula for communication. Individuals are encouraged to adapt the process to meet their own needs and the context of the interaction. Rosenberg says, "The essence of NVC is to be found in our consciousness of these four components, not in the actual words that are exchanged" (p. 8).

NVC language reflects a specific set of values and beliefs, what Rosenberg (2005) often refers to as NVC consciousness. The NVC practitioner presupposes that human beings are compassionate in nature and that we share a longing to connect with one another. Rosenberg

(2005) states that we are "...meant to relate to one another" (p. 3) and that NVC is intended "...to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge" (p. 3). In NVC there is a focus on feelings. The honest expression of emotion is viewed as healthy and cathartic. For Rosenberg, unexpressed emotions contribute to suffering and alienation. Vulnerability is, therefore, considered a virtue. NVC serves as a tool for gaining emotional liberation. The NVC practitioner assumes responsibility for his or her feelings by engaging in honest self-reflection and uncovering the needs associated with feelings. Needs are at the root of all feelings, according to Rosenberg. When our needs are being satisfied we generally experience more pleasurable feelings, such as confidence, inspiration, exhilaration, gratitude, peace and joy. When our needs are not being satisfied we generally experience unpleasant emotions such as fear, anger, embarrassment, pain, sadness and tension. There are basic human needs that we all share and seek to satisfy. These include: autonomy, celebration, integrity, interdependence, play, spiritual connection and physical nurturance.

Rosenberg (2005) characterizes interaction that is not in alignment with the principles of NVC as "life-alienating communication" (p. 15). According to Rosenberg, life-alienating communication disconnects "...us from our natural state of compassion" (p. 15). Most people in the world today have adopted life-alienating communication which is characterized by judgments, blame, and denial of responsibility. Within this paradigm the use of punitive force is seen as a just response to injurious actions. Those who adopt the language and consciousness of NVC advocate for protective use of force only to the extent necessary to ensure safety. Ultimately, from the NVC perspective, life-alienating communication is associated with domination culture. Rosenberg states:

Life-alienating communication both stems from and supports hierarchical or domination societies. Where large populations are controlled by a small number of individuals for their own benefit, it would be to the interest of kings, czars, nobles, etc. that the masses be educated in a way that renders them slave-like in mentality...When we are in contact with our feelings and needs, we humans no longer make good slaves and underlings. (p. 23)

The challenge for the NVC practitioner is to disconnect from domination culture by learning to recognize and avoid life-alienating communication.

NVC is a language and a consciousness that is viewed by its adherents as revolutionary. NVC practitioners seek nothing less than social liberation through the practice of specific modes of interaction. As a result, there is a growing social movement associated with NVC. Following is a vision statement found on the website for the Center for NVC (n.d.):

The Center for NVC (CNVC) is a global organization whose vision is a world where all people are getting their needs met and resolving their conflicts peacefully. In this vision, people are using NVC (NVC) to create and participate in networks of worldwide life-serving systems in economics, education, justice, healthcare, and peace-keeping.

The CNVC exists to support the work of community-based NVC practitioners who seek personal, institutional and systemic change. CNVC is more than a training organization; it is a peacemaking organization. CNVC, through its outreach efforts and with the support of community-based trainers and supporters, sustains initiatives for social change worldwide. The work of the CNVC is at once global and grassroots. In 2000, the CNVC (n.d.) initiated the Social Change Project with the following purpose: “To contribute to a peaceful and sustainable future

by modeling and teaching connection, transparency, and compassion as the foundation of social change work.” Information on the CNVC website says this about the Social Change Project:

We are working to create and strengthen a synergy in the transformative social change movement by supporting people with specific tools and practices that help in connecting with self, each other, and those in the systems we are trying to change. The basis for this practice is the belief that all people, including those whose actions we believe to be destructive, are motivated by the same basic set of needs.

The systems most often associated with the work of the CNVC are schools and prisons, through projects like the Freedom Project. The work of the Freedom Project combines the teaching of NVC with the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness

A Google search using the word “mindfulness” reveals 2,450,000 hits. Obviously a great deal is being said today about mindfulness. The Freedom Project (n.d.) turns to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) for an answer to the question: What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which has profound relevance for our present day lives. This relevance has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Most of all, it has to do with being in touch. (p. 3)

Mindfulness is not something to acquire or obtain, rather it is something to be practiced. The practice of mindfulness fosters self-development in the sense that through practice the individual learns to reframe experiences and perceptions. Kornfield (2008) identifies this as a four stage

process of recognition, acceptance, investigation and non-identification. Kornfield describes mindfulness as “patient, receptive, non-judging awareness” (p. 99) and asserts that from the perspective of Buddhist psychology “the very foundation of well-being is a systematic training of mindfulness in the student” (p. 99). Mindfulness training attempts to reverse habits of mind that cause the individual to avoid, deny, react or judge experiences, thoughts and feelings. Through practice, the individual learns to pay attention and maintain a nonjudgmental and deferential relationship to sensory occurrences.

Meditation is a primary tool used in the cultivation of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes meditation in this way,

From a Buddhist perspective, our ordinary waking state of consciousness is seen as being severely limited and limiting, resembling in many respects an extended dream rather than wakefulness. Meditation helps us wake up from this sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness, thereby making it possible for us to live our lives with access to the full spectrum of our conscious and unconscious possibility. (p. 3)

Meditation, characterized by focused attention on the here and now, can take a variety of forms, including walking meditation or the more common sitting meditation. Kabat-Zinn refers to mindfulness as the “heart of Buddhist meditation” (p. 4).

The practices of NVC and mindfulness are complementary. NVC requires the practitioner to identify and name observations without judgment, to be aware, acknowledge and accept his / her own feelings and needs and the feelings and needs of others in the context of interpersonal interaction, and to identify and respond to requests in the present moment without becoming entangled in thoughts of the past or projections of the future. In other words, the successful NVC

practitioner must be mindful. A statement on the Freedom Project (n.d.) website identifies the relationship between NVC and mindfulness in this way:

When we know how to be still and pause with attention, we are able to touch what is alive in ourselves and then speak and listen in NVC's heart-centered way. Freedom Project trainings emphasize mindfulness in conjunction with NVC as a way of cultivating a quality of presence that allows us to free ourselves from our learned habits and mental prisons.

Both NVC and mindfulness are practices that promote individual and collective change. They are interrelated forms of peacemaking

There is a long tradition of prison-based training in mindfulness practice in the United States and elsewhere. Kornfield (2008) and Kabat-Zinn, (1994) leaders in the study of mindfulness from a Western perspective, each reflect on their own experiences teaching and supporting the practice of mindfulness in prison settings. The prison-based study and practice of mindfulness takes many forms and has been documented in a variety of ways. A notable example is the work of Bo Lozoff (1985), founder and director of both the Prison-Ashram Project and the Human Kindness Foundation. Lozoff's classic work *We're All Doing Time: A Guide to Getting Free* chronicles his own experiences as a student and teacher of mindfulness and serves as a practical guide for prisoners and other seekers. It is made available free to prisoners through the Human Kindness Foundation and is regarded by some as "the convicts' Bible" (Prison Ashram Project, n.d.). Calvin Malone (2008), an inmate incarcerated by the Washington State Department of Corrections, shares stories of his own experiences as a student and practitioner of mindfulness. Malone clearly articulates the benefits of meditation practice and the outcomes associated with mindfulness:

Meditating before my altar transforms my surroundings into something universal. I feel that I am sitting with millions of beings without the shackles of attachment, aversion, or multitudes of other afflictions. It is there where all hindrances and obstacles are dispelled and peace and freedom reigns. (p. 2)

It is this sense of interconnectedness and tranquility that is most often associated with mindfulness practice, states of awareness that are hard to come by, especially in the harsh, dirty, noisy and brutal environment of prison.

Previous Research

Mindfulness training has been shown to reduce hostility and mood disturbances as well as improve self-esteem among participants in prison-based mindfulness-based stress reduction programs (Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn & Bratt, 2007). While there are no studies that look at the impact of NVC training on inmates, there are a number of preliminary studies have explored the experiences of other NVC student / practitioner groups and reveal the process by which individuals develop empathetic understanding and a sense of interconnectedness associated with NVC consciousness (Beck, 2005; Jones, 2005). Several studies indicate that NVC may be an effective tool for facilitating therapeutic and mentoring relations in counseling and educational settings (Hulley, 2006; Cox & Dannahy, 2005). Perhaps most significantly, both Steckal (1994) and Blake (2002) found that NVC training may increase empathy and self-compassion, reduce aggression and prevent violence among training participants. While one study is currently underway that looks at recidivism among Freedom Project participants (Freedom Project, n.d.), there is currently no research documenting the experiences of participants in this project.

This project began to take shape from the moment I heard Walter's story. Soon after I decided to focus my research on the experiences of Freedom Project participants, I made a trip to Seattle, home base for the Freedom Project. Over the summer of 2008, I made several more trips and got to know many of the volunteers, staff members and other participants associated with the Freedom Project. They were, as a group, extremely hospitable and helpful, more than willing to share their experiences. One young woman stood out to me, she was pretty and blond, thoughtful and articulate. She struck me as sensitive and gentle, not the sort of person I generally associate with prison work. I asked her how she got involved in the project. Instead of telling me how, she told me why and her answer was a simple one. She attended a community workshop and met people associated with the project, some of whom were former inmates. She said, "I wanted what they had." When I heard Walter's story I was moved in much the same way. I was intrigued by the integrity and honesty and compassion that this community demonstrated. I wanted what they had. I wanted to meet the people who make up the Freedom Project community because I wanted to hear their stories and share their stories with others. The purpose of this project is to give voice to the stories that represent the lived experiences of former prisoners who have participated and continue to participate in the Freedom Project. These stories matter because they represent a discourse that has been marginalized, a discourse that has the potential to radically change the way human beings interact, a discourse that is generative of power, knowledge and beauty.

This manuscript is organized in five chapters. Chapter two explores the theoretical assumptions that guided this project. My intention is to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the theoretical lenses which characterized my view of the project, lenses colored by an eclectic brand of feminism, as well as aspects of post structuralism. Chapter three explores the methodological choices which shaped this project at every turn. I relied on a variety

of traditions associated with qualitative research, including most notably portraiture, in an effort to remain true to my purpose and honor my own instincts as a researcher. Chapter 4 is the heart of this project and includes a series of narrative portraits: one portrait of the Freedom Project community circle and three portraits of individual participants. These portraits are based on data collected through a series of interviews and observations made during the summer of 2008. The fifth and final chapter is a discussion of the major themes that emerge from these interviews and observations, as well as reflections on the findings associated with this research.

There is a single thread that serves as a unifying aspect of this research. Above all else this project speaks to the power of narrative. I was called to this project by the evocative nature of Walter's story; it challenged me to question the master narratives with which I identified. Jack Kornfield (2008) recognizes the important role that stories can play in replacing "a deluded cultural narrative or a misleading fantasy with a tale of compassion" (p. 147). That is what I have attempted to do here by sharing stories associated with the lived experiences of Freedom Project participants. In the interest of transparency, I have also attempted to honestly reveal how these stories intersect with my own. While I recognize the transformative power of narrative, I also recognize that the power lies not in stories themselves but in what they represent. It is only when we peel back the surface that we see the knowledge and beauty contained within.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

For me, this inquiry is part of an ongoing epistemological journey, a journey in search of answers to questions that have been with me for as long as I can remember. These questions center on the relationship between power and freedom, domination and resistance. My path has been more intuitive than scientific; an effort to tie personal experience to public discourse.

Michel Foucault (1969 / 1972) describes this path as,

...a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. (p. 17)

My task then is to describe the labyrinth into which I ventured, the questions and levels of inquiry that led to new insight and further inquiry. This symbolic journey was by no means linear, but characterized by metaphorical trips down theoretical rabbit holes, starts and stops, and steps that were retraced in recurring loops. I found theoretical signposts along the way, discoveries that at once satisfied my intellectual hunger and whetted my appetite for more.

Who am I as *author* and what role do I play in shaping this text? Belsey (1993) acknowledges that traditionally the “author-subject” has been perceived to be “the individual origin of meaning, insight and truth” (p. 551). I emphatically reject this role. Instead, I embrace the notion that “knowledge is necessarily culturally and discursively relative” (p. 555). My intent is to follow the example set by Bettie (2003) who states that we must “point to our own subjectivity, acknowledge that it undoubtedly shapes the story we tell, and - most importantly - recognize the fact of the power we wield, the power of interpretation” (p. 23).

I have always understood narrative to be an important tool in the production of knowledge. Our narratives are produced through discursive practices; likewise, discourse is shaped by lived experience. I intend to reveal the discursive streams that carried me to this study and shaped my interpretations. By revealing my own story, the narrative that led me here, I run the risk of self-indulgence. The danger is in the perception that this text is about me. Clearly it is not. However, I do wish to acknowledge that my experiences, the cultural and historical contexts in which I am immersed, gave rise to the questions that shape this research. Belsey advises, “You can tell it like you know it, in accordance with the rules of the discourse, without having to claim that you’re telling it like it (absolutely, metaphysically, incontrovertibly) *is*” (p. 556). In order to tell it like I know it, I am compelled to go back to where it began for me.

What Kind of Feminist Are You, Anyway?

I grew up in the Midwestern United States in the 1970’s. Raised by a single mother who dropped out of high school to have me at the age of sixteen, I was aware of oppression before I had a name for it. We were poor in a way that Bettie (2003) describes as “Hard-living” (p. 13). By that I mean, in spite of my mother’s hard work as a factory worker and her commitment to making a better life for herself and her children, we struggled for subsistence. Fear of not having enough was part of our daily lives. As a child I was obsessed with fairness. I was keenly aware of the injustice around me, not just in the form of poverty, but also as it related to gender and race. I was raised by women who were smart and resourceful and industrious and strong yet I knew that their prospects (and my own) were limited. I was schooled in racially and ethnically diverse (economically segregated) environments where my white privilege was apparent even to me, a child with little knowledge of the historical relevance and social significance of my

experience. I was schooled in the ways that privilege operates and it made me angry. For a very long time I didn't know what to do with my outrage.

At nineteen, I was a parent myself, living on welfare, when I enrolled at my local community college and attended my first sociology class. At last my experiences were validated. The oppression I felt and witnessed and responded to was real. It could be named and deconstructed and analyzed. Suddenly it became possible to organize in response to oppression and to create alternatives. I began to develop a rudimentary understanding of social theory and for me it represented hope and it spurred me to action around issues of social justice. I was involved in welfare and student rights organizations and later became a social worker. For me, my experiences were inextricably linked to relevant social theory which was linked in turn to community activism.

It was the early 1990's when I attended graduate school to study sociology at a small state college in the Midwest, after having worked for a few years as a social worker in a community-based organization. Some, like Camille Paglia (1990), were already declaring feminism and the women's movement dead. While I didn't set out with a specific focus on feminist theory and activism, my experiences as a graduate student convinced me that sexism was alive and well in the halls and classrooms of academia. It wasn't just that my professors were generally white and male (although I longed for more diverse perspectives), it was more the sense that my voice was marginalized. I didn't see myself and my life experiences in the theories we studied, the classic texts, and I wasn't encouraged to challenge the *masters* and articulate my own perspective. I was drawn to feminist theory out of my need to explain my own experiences.

My first year in graduate school coincided with the hearings to confirm the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by a

former employee, Anita Hill. I watched every minute of the televised hearings and like many women in this country I was outraged by the way Hill was treated and her allegations were dismissed. My outrage prompted me to join the National Organization for Women (NOW) and band with others to establish a campus chapter of NOW at my college. As a member of NOW, I was indoctrinated with a brand of liberal feminism upon which the grassroots elements of the women's movement in the U.S. were founded.

Liberal Feminism

A central precept of liberal feminism is equality. The unequal treatment of women in relation to men is identified as the core issue. Liberal feminists have historically proposed measures to address this inequality. The liberal feminist perspective can be traced to Wollstonecraft (1791 / 1967). In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft condemns cultural expectations that encourage women to sacrifice strength and usefulness for beauty and she demands equality for individuals regardless of gender. Over seventy years later, Mill (1869 / 1970) published what is considered by many to be the classic expression of liberal feminism, *The Subjection of Women*. Mill famously espoused that “the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself” and “ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality” (p. 1). I read and was inspired by these classic liberal feminist statements as well as more contemporary examples, such as Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. They challenge gender inequality as both legally unjust and morally reprehensible. It was through these works that I first came to identify myself as a feminist. Given my experiences as a female graduate student and the events that were unfolding on the national stage, I saw relevance in the arguments of liberal feminism. However, I started to question the origins of gender oppression, questions for which liberal feminism provided no answers.

I don't recall hearing or using the word *patriarchy* until I was well into adulthood. It was not part of my vocabulary until I was in graduate school. Even then, I wasn't introduced to the term and the discourse around it in the classroom. I sought the information out on my own, again, as a way to explain my experiences. The liberal feminist discourse that I was exposed to through NOW started to feel like a too-tight garment that I was ready to break free from. While it answered many of my questions and validated many of my observations about the nature of gender inequality, excited me and moved me to action, and made explicit for me the connection between the personal and the political, it also caused me to question and, ultimately, my questions led me in new directions. My questions centered around the nature of patriarchy. I turned to Marxist feminist theory in search of answers.

Marxist Feminism

I was always skeptical of what McNamee and Miller (2004) refer to as the “ideology of the American Dream” associated with the “Meritocracy Myth” which they define as “the myth that the system distributes resources—especially wealth and income—according to the merit of individuals.” Although, like every other boy and girl schooled in the United States, I was taught through various forms of the Horatio Alger story that “America is the land of opportunity.” It wasn't, however, consistent with what I observed in my neighborhood or my home; the theory and the practice were out of sync. I knew that I lived in a world defined by social class. Marxism validated many of my early observations and assumptions about class. The materialist orientation of Marxist ideology resonated with me on a personal level. It provided me with seemingly valid explanations of the mechanisms of class structure and struggle. I reveled in the Marxist sympathy for the worker and was inspired by the Marxist vision for revolutionary change. I was intrigued by Marxist feminist theory because it brings together these two streams of thought,

Marxism and feminism, which explained so much of my experience in the world. Furthermore, it provides a historical materialist perspective on the development of patriarchy.

Marxist feminist theory is most often traced to Friedrich Engels (1884 / 1972) and the publication of *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels utilized notes left by Marx at the time of his death to clarify the theoretical implications of Morgan's (1877 / 2004) *Ancient Society*. Engels focused on the differences between what he called "primitive" and "civilized" societies with particular emphasis on the nature of property and familial relations and the development of production, social class and the state. Engels argues that a patriarchal social power structure developed in relationship to civilized or state modes of production. This new social order is characterized by patrilineal descent which is supported by monogamous marriage. The sexual and reproductive role of women is controlled through monogamy, allowing for the protection of private property through undisputed paternity. In addition, this social order allows for the economic dependence of women on men and the exploitation of women as workers. Primitive communism, which preceded patriarchy according to Engels, was characterized by communal living arrangements and matrilineality, with both men and women free to exercise control over their own lives through cooperative and collective social relationships. With the decline of hunting-gathering society and increasing emphasis on private property ownership, the state emerged. Within the state, the monogamous family is the basic economic unit and the means by which men assert control over women. Engels argues that women should be granted full equity of legal rights but contends that legal equity alone is not sufficient to transform patriarchal social relations. He calls for nothing less than the abolishment of the monogamous family and private property ownership. Common ownership and cooperative modes of

production, according to Engels, would allow for the transfer of domestic and childrearing tasks to the public arena and communal responsibility for children and the home.

Marxist feminist theory gave me a whole new language. It defined patriarchy in a way that was consistent with my experience. Most importantly, it gave me a vision that was materially and historically grounded. Engels' work demonstrates that gender oppression was not predestined or foreordained or inevitable. There are alternatives to gender oppression revealed through the experiences of tribal communities who lived and worked and raised children by creating relationships that were communally-based. I studied the work of anthropologists, such as Eleanor Leacock (1954), whose ethnographic work with the Montagnais-Naskapi of western Labrador "found historical support for the existence of egalitarian society before European market forces transformed it" (McCoid, 1988). Leacock (1981) challenged more well-known anthropologists including Mead and Levi-Strauss by arguing against the view "that femaleness has always and everywhere been devalued by contrast with maleness, and that such devaluation is linked to a universal association of women with inferior 'nature' in contrast with men as superior 'culture'" (p. 241).

The work of Marxist feminists clearly indicates that men and women are not essentially different from one another. I must admit, this was a conclusion that baffled me to some extent. My own experiences revealed something quite contrary. I had very little direct experience with men. In my life, women (mother, grandmother, aunts, and female friends) served as the caretakers, the nurturers, the teachers, the providers, and the protectors. The women in my life were, for the most part, nurturing and kind and compassionate and caring. In contrast, the men I had contact with were generally in authoritarian roles: principals, doctors, police officers. I saw them only from a distance. My father, who blew in and out of my life, was an alcoholic, prone to

manipulation and occasional acts of rage. While violence was not a part of my daily life as a child, when I did witness or experience violence, it was almost always through interaction with men. Based on my experiences I had to conclude that, in fact, men and women are very different. In order to explain these differences I turned to radical feminist theory.

Gender Differences

An early and significant contribution to radical feminist thought was the work of Firestone (1970). Patriarchy, according to Firestone, is the product of sex role differentiation which results from unequal reproductive functions. While she argues that sex roles are biologically determined, she also contends that new technology in the form of birth control and artificial reproduction allow for the eradication of sexual classes which serve to oppress women. Other radical feminists (Dworkin, 1983; O'Brian, 1981; Rich, 1976) argue that the attempt to control female sexuality and reproduction, not female biology in and of itself, is the cause of female oppression. Ultimately, I found these arguments to be unfruitful. They center around the age old questions of nature versus nurture and the inevitable clash of biological versus social forces and move one in the inevitable direction of separatism – something I found at the time to be unrealistic and unconscionable as the mother of a son. However, I was still intrigued by the questions. Are men and women essentially different from one another? In what ways do men and women differ?

While it is impossible to determine if the differences between men and women are *essential* in the sense of being biologically determined, the differences between men and women can be observed and analyzed. I found work in the area of developmental psychological (sometimes characterized as cultural feminism) to be helpful in understanding these differences. My observations about the differences between men and women were confirmed by the work of

Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) who found that women generally value connection and connectedness more than men do. They taught me that while this privileging of connection over competition, objectivity, detachment and logic may not be institutionally sanctioned it is an acceptable way to be in the world and that women, like myself, can be instrumental in bringing about social change focused on connection, collaboration and community.

Is *woman* then an essential category? Are all women essentially the same? These were questions that resonated with me as a young woman. I knew that for me social class was also a defining category. I identified not just as a woman but also as a person from poverty. I also knew from my work as a political / social activist that many women of color did not feel represented by the women's movement in the United States, particularly by mainstream feminist organizations like NOW. I was interested in being involved in a more inclusive movement. I went to see a performance artist named Pearl Cleage (1990) one evening on campus. She was performing pieces from her book *Mad at Miles: A Blackwoman's Guide to Truth*. After her provocative and moving interpretations, the audience was invited to ask questions. I stood and asked her how we might involve more women of color in feminist activism on campus. Her answer was like a slap in the face. She said (and I paraphrase), "You need to learn to shut-up. White people like to talk a lot. You need to listen to what black people have to say and you need to listen until we're done saying it." As a result, I started reading what is typically referred to as black feminism and found that it moved me toward a more inclusive feminist theory.

Black Feminism

The Combahee River Collective (1984) provides a comprehensive statement of black feminist thought in their guiding principles and values. They state that black women are

inherently valuable and deserving in their own right. Class, racial and sexist oppression are interrelated and since women of color often experience all three simultaneously it is impossible to distinguish among them. Black feminists acknowledge a unity with black men in the struggle to end racial oppression and recognize the political-economic structures of capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and patriarchy as contributing to all forms of oppression. They call for a unified feminist / antiracist socialist movement aimed at destroying these systems. Collins (1991) argues that black feminist activism is characterized by negotiation and particular attention to context rather than ideology.

In one of her earliest publications, bell hooks (1984) clearly articulates her position that feminist theory in the United States was primarily produced by middle class whites and lacks adequate race and class analysis. For hooks, white and privileged women generally possess political ideologies that reflect their *central* vantage point. In contrast, black women are more inclined to recognize the theoretical implications of the lives they lead at the *margins* of society. From the margins, hooks calls for a new feminist paradigm, shifting toward recognition of the “underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression” (p. 31). She calls for a diversified and solidified movement to end *dominance*. Notably, hooks was one of the first and only feminist scholars to suggest that men should be recognized as comrades in the struggle to end oppression. As agents of sexist oppression and victims of other forms of oppression, men are essential to any successful resistance effort. Black feminist thought helped me to better understand my own sense of marginality and met my need for a theoretical perspective that was more inclusive and holistic.

I am a feminist. I see the world through a feminist lens. I relate to this project and the participants in it as a feminist. Yet I do not feel that my perspective can be sufficiently explained

by using this single word: feminist. Nor do I think that it is possible to accurately characterize myself as a liberal feminist or a Marxist feminist or a radical feminist or as someone who subscribes to black feminism. I am all of these things and more. Traditional schools of feminist thought provide theoretical tools that allow me to understand my own experiences with gender inequality, the relationship between gender, race and class as categories of oppression and how women's traditional ways of being and knowing have been marginalized. According to Weedon (1997), "Whether acknowledged or not, every form of feminist politics, and there are many, implies a particular way of understanding patriarchy and the possibilities of change" (p. 4). For me, it became impossible to separate out patriarchy from other oppressive ideologies and systems, such as capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and racism. Each school of feminist thought proposes different and varied emancipatory strategies. I began to question: Is it possible to define an emancipatory project that is inclusive and addresses oppression at all levels and in all forms?

Dominator and Partnership Cultures

The work of Riane Eisler (1987 / 1995) was instrumental in shifting my understanding from a narrow focus on patriarchy (in relation to other oppressive ideologies and systems) to a more inclusive understanding of *dominator culture* as a system within which various forms of oppression are interrelated. Eisler proposes that across time and place we can see that two basic forms of social interaction have been played out. She documents the shift from Goddess-centered culture to war-centered culture as it occurred in Western societies and contends that other non-Western societies followed similar patterns. For Eisler, the chalice is symbolic of what she refers to as partnership culture, characterized by egalitarianism, harmonious social relations and a nurturance of human life. In this type of society, men and women were not evaluated and ranked

based on gendered differences. In other words, “diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority” (p. xvii). Eisler relies on archeological data to support the argument that these societies existed in Neolithic Europe until about 5000 to 3000 BCE. These societies were conquered by invaders who brought with them a new social order. Eisler uses the symbol of the blade to characterize this social order which she refers to as dominator or domination culture. In this type of society, which continues to prevail today, war is valued as one means to establish domination. Other forms of violence are used to maintain hierarchies within which individuals are ranked on the basis of sexual orientation, ethnic and national origin, gender and class. As these societies emerged, the Goddess, the mother and giver of life, was replaced with a male God who was glorified for vengeance and the ability to suppress life.

Eisler (1987 / 1995) utilizes historical / cultural materialist analysis in the development of her Cultural Transformation Theory. As a result, her work has been criticized on this level. Concerns were raised early on about “the quality of Ms. Eisler’s historical scholarship” (New York Times, 1987). And yet her work has endured, in part because it is about more than the material aspects of culture. Eisler identifies a set of ideas (values, mores, beliefs) associated with what she calls dominator culture. For Eisler, dominator culture is represented by an ideology or set of ideas that are internalized at the individual level as a worldview that supports and breeds various forms of oppression. Eisler puts it this way: “...a dominator –dominated way of relating to other human beings is internalized from birth by every child...It is a model that has throughout history lent itself to the rationalization of all possible variations of social and economic exploitation” (p. 168).

Whereas the dominator model is associated with violence and aggression, the partnership model is associated with nurturance and connection. Eisler (1987 / 1995) clearly

advocates for a shift from the dominator model, prevalent in Western societies (and some would argue the world) today, toward a partnership model. This shift, according to Eisler, is first and foremost an ideological one. Eisler calls for an internally consistent ideology that challenges the values associated with the dominator model. Feminism, according to Eisler, should serve as a model for this new ideology. Eisler states, “Feminist philosophers and activists from all over the world have called for a new ethic for both women and men based on “feminine” values like nonviolence and caring” (p. 170). This was an ideology that I adopted as my own.

The two years I spent in graduate school while I was in my twenties were in many ways a personal renaissance. When I left, I took bell hooks and Riane Eisler and all the rest with me. I had a new job on the West Coast as a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. The night before my departure, my friends, most of whom belonged to a feminist organization we established on campus, gathered at a local bar. I remember thinking as I said good-bye, “And now I go back to the real world.” I wondered what my feminism would look like out there. Inside the walls of academe, theory exists in its most pristine form, unsoiled by the social realities of everyday life. Could I live my feminist values and still exist within organizations steeped in traditions of domination?

For the most part I stayed true to my vision: to do work that improved the lives of marginalized people. However, I can't say that I did it with much grace. I stumbled along, always questioning, always bumping up against forces I perceived to be oppressive, always pushing back. I was a fighter and I never stopped fighting. One of my strategies for survival was to never stay in one place too long. I went through a string of social work jobs, generally staying no more than three years before moving on. My departures were often preceded by conflict. I simply could not figure out how to survive for very long in hierarchically-organized institutions.

I returned to graduate school to pursue my doctorate after a departure from employment that could be described as a bitter break-up. I was 40 years old, middle-aged by some measures, and thoroughly disillusioned. I was experiencing upheaval in other areas of my life as well, with my son having just moved from home and my partner battling a serious illness. It was a time of not only change, but transition as well. Bridges (1991) distinguished change from transition by associating the former with external factors, such as the loss of the job or the end of a marriage and the later with the internal shifts that accompany change. Transition is often characterized by emotional pain and psychological dissonance, as it was for me. School for me was a retreat, a safe place in the storm. It was also a place where I hoped to find answers. More than ever I wanted to understand the nature of power and how it is manipulated in the interests of domination and freedom.

Although I struggled to even form the questions that would guide my inquiry, I was drawn to the cross-disciplinary field of cultural studies because, above all else, cultural studies is concerned with the ways that power is socially mediated and historically and politically contextualized. As Lash (2007) states, “Hegemony was the concept that de facto crystallized cultural studies as a discipline” (p. 55). I was concerned with the way power operated within and through my own life and the lives of those around me. I saw social theory as a possible source of relevant knowledge. I tried on a number of theoretical hats. None seemed to fit me as well, or answer my questions as completely, as the eclectic brand of feminism I had fashioned for myself years earlier. This theoretical framework served as a basis for my work for many years and yet, there were still more questions, chinks in the armor, if you will.

My Linguistic Turn

I had come to see patriarchy and feminism as competing ideologies. Patriarchy, within my theoretical framework, was a dominant ideology, one that operates as a false consciousness. I characterized feminism, in relationship to patriarchy, as an ideology that was *pure consciousness* or *real knowledge*. In essence, feminism, for me, represented *Truth*. I saw “ideology as the medium in which men and women fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs, meanings and representations” (Eagleton, 1991). Over time, I came to see this kind of framework as problematic on a number of levels. In turn, I became increasingly uncomfortable with my role as ideologue.

I had two primary concerns about my own use of ideology as a conceptual tool. First, ideology implies a binary that I associate with Marx’s (1932/1978) conception of consciousness, consciousness that can be either false or true. By wielding the concept of ideology in this way, the theorist is necessarily positioning herself as the arbiter of truth, the one who distinguishes distorted thought and ‘false consciousness’ from ‘real knowledge’ and ‘pure consciousness’. There are inherent dangers associated with this kind of theory of ideology in the form of potentially dogmatic theoretical tyranny. Second, it is impossible to separate the concept of ideology from that of discourse. Foucault (1969 / 1972) asserts that all knowledge is discursively produced. Ideology does not exist outside of discourse. In other words, any particular ideology, as well as the labels we associate with it (i.e. pure, real, distorted, false) is formed through discursive practice. If we accept that ideology is no more than a product of discursive practice then its usefulness is quite limited. In fact, the argument can be made that ideology is discourse. As Purvis and Hunt (1993) claim, “all knowledge is located within discourse” (p. 492).

Increasingly, I found myself in agreement with Foucault (1984b) who said in an interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino that the notion of ideology for him

was “difficult to make use of” (p. 60). He identified three specific reasons for this rejection of ideology. First, ideology “always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth” (p. 60). Second, Foucault found ideology problematic because it presupposes a *conscious subject* who is being shaped by material forces. Third, he believed that ideology “stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant” (p. 60). Foucault rejected both theoretical humanism and the binary of truth and falsity. He was interested in revealing how truth is produced within discourses. For Foucault, subjects are discursively constituted, in other words, subject positions and functions are assumed in relation to particular discourses. For Foucault there is no split between the material and the non-material. As McNay (1993) states, “Discourse or a particular discursive formation is to be understood as an amalgam of material practices and forms of knowledge linked together in non-contingent relation” (p. 27). Foucault demonstrated that “all systems of knowledge were in fact statements or discursive events” (McNay, p. 26). On a conceptual level and as a theoretical tool, discourse subsumes and surpasses ideology.

According to Purvis and Hunt (1993), “Discourse theory is one of the major consequences of the *linguistic turn*, that marks the break from action theory and focuses on the centrality of the ‘linguistic constitution’ of the social” (p. 480) They go on to say that theories of ideology and theories of discourse “are rooted in radically different epistemological strategies” (p. 480). Initially, my own linguistic turn was characterized primarily by shift in focus from “set[s] of beliefs motivated by social interests” (Eagleton, 1991) to a focus on ‘things said.’ The analysis of discourse necessarily implies a focus on ‘things said’ and the implicit rules that govern those things.

Discourse and Power

Discourse is made up of utterances and statements, both written and spoken, as well as nonverbal gestures and signs. Cain (1993) states that, “Discourses make *statements* possible, and discursive formations are made up of groups of statements” (p. 76). Foucault (1969 / 1972) says that to “analyze a discursive formation...is to weigh the ‘value’ of statements” (p. 120). This is not to suggest that one is looking for a hidden or essential meaning in discourse. As Cain states, “a discourse is not a document, or sign of something else: it is a monument...A discourse is its surface” (p. 77). While discourses are not static or stable they do exist beyond the conceptual level, as Ransom (1993) puts it, “they have an objective actuality” (p. 131) and “present a distinct object of study” (p. 131). Ramazanoglu (1993) describes discourses as “historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth – what is possible to speak of at a given moment” (p. 19). Discursive formations are more than groups of statements. Discourse is constituted by historically specific, internal rules. The rules that govern discourse are embedded in social practices and institutions. (Foucault, 1969 / 1972).

This shift in focus from ideology to discourse brought with it a new set of assumptions about power. My previous focus on ideology was associated with the assumption that power is *possessed* by certain individuals by virtue of their class or institutional affiliations, organized in a hierarchical manner, flowing from top to bottom, inextricably linked to domination and nearly always repressive. My newly adopted discourse theory offered an alternative view of power. According to Sawicki (1991) “Foucault substitutes a relational model of power as exercised” (p. 21). The exercise of power is a function of discourse. As Ransom (1993) states, “discourses are not merely linguistic phenomena, but are always shot through with power” (p. 123). Social norms provide one example of the way in which power is discursively constituted (McLaren,

2004). For example, dominant discourses related to gender have historically defined men as logical, detached and unemotional which may limit the range of opportunity for men in terms of nurturing, caretaking and parenting.

From a Foucauldian standpoint, power is everywhere and always present, it is not static, it is continually being constituted through discourse and is therefore, limitless. Power is not something that can be imposed from above, instead it “operates from below” (Grimshaw, 1993, p. 54). Foucault provides an ascending analysis of power believing that, “power relations at the microlevel of society make possible certain global effects of domination, such as class power and patriarchy” (Sawicki, 1991, p. 23). In addition, Foucault argues that power is productive; it produces knowledge. Power, according to Ransom (1993) is “coextensive with knowledge: where there is one, there is the other” (p. 129). Since it is impossible to separate knowledge from power, knowledge is never neutral. Within this framework there is no singular truth; truth must be viewed as plural. Likewise as Ransom states, “Pluralism for Foucault actually requires that truth be seen as a thing produced and not revealed” (p. 129). Gender, for example, is not a fixed truth, but rather an idea produced through power-saturated discursive practices. There are multiple (perhaps infinite) ways to conceive of and talk about gender. What can be said about gender is limited primarily by the historical and cultural contexts of the speech, the rules of discourse.

While power, from a Foucauldian standpoint, is relational and nonsubjective, meaning that it does not belong to any one person or group, power is not accessed equally. This dissymmetry of power can be understood by distinguishing between power and domination, as McLaren (2004) states, “Whereas power is fluid and always subject to reversal, states of domination are static, ossified relations of power” (p. 220). States of domination result from

strategic manipulation of discursive practices that allow some individuals or groups to harness power while others submit. According to McLaren,

Even states of domination are subject to reversal, but this involves collective action. Relations of domination include the consolidated power of a nation-state over its people, the systematic gender imbalance of patriarchy, and the relations of colonizers over the colonized. Collective actions to change relations of domination include political action, social movements, and cultural revolution. (p. 220).

McLaren's argument, based on Foucault's later work, provides a basis for utilizing Foucault's conception of power to understand historically consistent forms of oppression, including those based on race, sex and class. Furthermore, McLaren implies that discourse theory does not infer the absence of agency and resistance.

Feminist theories and activism have largely been an effort to give voice to the experiences of women, as bell hooks (2009) says to "focus on recovering women's history and telling women's stories" (p. 172). This is challenging given the "loud and aggressive sound of the particular world view of elitist white males" (hooks, p. 171). In any society there are discourses that are dominant as well as alternative, marginal and resistant discourses. Weedon (1997) puts it this way,

Not all discourses carry equal weight or power. Some will account for and justify the appropriateness of the status quo. Others will give rise to challenge to practices from within or will contest the very basis of current organization and the selective interests which it represents. Such discourses are likely to be marginal to existing practices and dismissed by the hegemonic system of meanings and practices as irrelevant or bad. (pp. 34-35)

Feminism emerged as a marginal discourse in opposition to dominant discourses that supported male domination. Feminist discourse emerged and developed because there are those who are willing to name the previously unnamed, those who are willing to speak of things that have never been spoken of before, those who shaped discourse from the extradiscursive.

I was beginning to mold and shape a theory of discourse, based largely on the work of Foucault and feminist Foucauldian scholars, which embraced discourse as social artifact and explained power and knowledge as products of discourse. However, I continued to struggle with the notion of resistance and the role of the subject. It is around this concept of the subject that many feminists seem to take issue with Foucault. Foucault warned against the dangers of identity formation, particularly as associated with elitist fixations on *the self*. For Foucault, the human subject (with various subject positions) is discursively constituted. The human subject is not, as claimed by Enlightenment humanists, a conscious subject ruled by reason in search of *the* essential truth. The self is shaped by discourse, defined by various forms of knowledge that are produced through discursive practice. Because discourse is historically, socially and culturally contextualized, the subject is also grounded in this way. Is the human subject then a passive repository of discursively constituted knowledge? Are human subjects merely automatons acting in response to discursive scripts?

Resistance

Weedon (1987) argues that while the subject “is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices” (p. 125). For example, men may be submerged in a dominant discourse of masculinity that associates being a man with competition, aggression and domination. However, these ideas may

be challenged by alternative discourses that provide new ways of defining masculinity. Subjectivity is constantly being contested and subject positions continually shift. As Weedon (1997) states, “While a discourse will offer a preferred form of subjectivity, its very organization will imply other subject positions and the possibility of reversal” (p. 106). Foucault (1976 / 1990) writes about the “reverse discourse” of homosexuality that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in response to the hegemonic discourse that defined homosexuality as immoral and pathological, acknowledging reverse discourse as a form of resistance. McLaren (2004) argues that for Foucault, “resistance and power are co-implicated” (p. 217). Grimshaw (1993) argues “that power can never be uniform, total or smooth in its operations. It is always shifting and unstable, and it always generates resistance” (p. 54).

Weedon (1997) characterizes the process by which resistant discourses create social power through subjugated knowledges,

Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge, or, where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power...The degree to which marginal discourses can increase their social power is governed by the wider context of social interests and power within which challenges to the dominant are made...It is only by looking at a discourse *in operation*, in a specific historical context, that it is possible to see whose interests it serves at a particular moment. (pp. 107 – 108)

For example, the traditional, dominant discourse on marriage characterizes marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Gay and lesbian communities have introduced and circulated resistant discourses that redefine marriage. Individuals from these communities are creating and

expressing alternative knowledges based on their own experiences, knowledges that were previously repressed and could not be spoken.

Freedom

A touchstone throughout this transcript has been my own search for freedom. How does this theory of discourse inform my search? Sawicki (1991) defines freedom from a Foucauldian standpoint as,

Our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of domination, and to resist the ways we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses.

This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant cultures' characterizations of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures. (pp. 43 – 44).

Grimshaw (1993) is critical of Foucault's attempts in his late works to develop "practices of freedom' based on ethics of care derived from ancient Greek practices that were androcentric and elitist. However, there is an important turn here in Foucault's work that should be acknowledged (this shift is clearly outlined in an interview with Foucault (1988) conducted a few months before his death in 1984). Foucault identifies the inextricable link between practices of freedom and care of the self. According to McLaren (2004), "For Foucault self-transformation takes place through work on the self and involves what he calls techniques of the self" (p. 226). Techniques of the self include critiquing and challenging discourse, discursive practices and social norms as well as truth-telling. McLaren identifies feminist consciousness-raising as a form of truth telling, a process by which women learn to give voice to what could previously not be spoken of and to talk back to dominance. Practices of freedom are a link between the personal and the social /

political. McLaren defines freedom in this way: “Freedom is not a final state to be realized but occurs only through its exercise as reversal, resistance, and other practices of freedom” (p. 224).

While Foucault was concerned with subjugated knowledges and the role of the self in practices of freedom from which counter discourses emerge, his methodology throughout most of this career was focused on the study of elaborated, fully-constituted, institutionalized discourses that can be easily separated from authors and speakers. From this perspective, the power of discourses is not located within authors but within the discourses themselves. In presenting a methodology that dissects discourses, Foucault carefully separates the speaker from that which is said. This tendency causes concern for some feminist critics of Foucault. Ransom (1993) finds discourse analysis to be a methodology that distances the theorist from the experiences of the speaker. While it may be unwise to perceive of experience as transparent and human subjects possessed of free-will, Ransom argues that,

Feminism requires the development of a methodology which acknowledges the presence of the speaker in what is spoken. Feminism is premised on a particular sort of effort of attention to the experiences of other women, which is why it does matter ‘who is speaking’. This effort of attention to what it is we share and to the ways in which we differ, brings the speaker, her world, her knowledge and her contemporary or historical silences into connection with the theorist’s experience and knowledge production. (p. 144)

The theorist who intends to focus on the emergence of counter discourses and subjugated knowledges (whether it be women or members of other subjugated groups who are speaking) must attend not only to discursive practices but also context in terms of experience and positionality. This allows the theorist to explore the way that subjectivity is shaped by power and

provides a mechanism by which subjugated groups can challenge images of themselves shaped by dominant discourses.

Narrative

Narrative is a place where personal experience intersects with public discourse. According to Lyotard (1993) “Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (p. 75). Lyotard distinguishes scientific knowledge, which is produced through the “dialectics of research” (p. 81), from narrative knowledge which is of “the people” (p. 87). Both are forms of discourse, governed by historically, socially and culturally specific discursive rules. Narrative knowledge, unlike scientific knowledge, does not, however, “give priority to the question of its own legitimation” (p. 83). Lyotard redefines legitimacy in a postmodern sense to include forms of knowledge, including narrative, that “exercise their competence not only with respect to denotative utterances concerning what is true, but also prescriptive utterances with pretensions to justice” (p. 87). In other words, narratives, like other forms of knowledge, define “what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of the culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do” (p. 79).

On the most basic level, narrative can be defined as the stories that people tell. Just as all forms of discourse are historically, socially and culturally constituted, so is narrative. Some forms of narration have greater authority and social power than others. Andrews (2004) refers to dominant cultural narratives as *master narratives* that,

...offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience. In this way, such storylines serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well. For ultimately, the power of master narratives derives from their internalization.

Wittingly or unwittingly, we become the stories we know, and the master narrative is reproduced. (p. 1).

Resistance in response to master narratives often takes the form of *counter narrative*. Counter narratives are oppositional and / or critical in nature. Counter narratives challenge and offer alternatives to master narratives. Weedon (1997) writes about the “space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest” (p. 109). This is the space where counter narrative is produced. In other words, when master narratives prove to be inadequate to explain the experiences and perceptions of the individual there is a need for counter narrative, narrative that gives meaning to the marginal. Andrews (2004) defines counter narrative as, “the stories, or counter-stories, which members of outgroups tell to themselves and others, [that] help to document, and perhaps even validate, a ‘counter-reality’” (p. 2).

I find myself back where I began, with narrative playing a central role in my inquiry. However, I now have a new framework for understanding narrative. I now think of narrative not as isolated stories that serve to define individuals and groups, but as elements of a vast discursive network, not unlike a system of waterways. Most narratives are fed by both dominant and resistant streams of discourse. There is an ebb and flow; knowledge is always in motion. One way to understand how power operates is to examine the currents of domination and resistance revealed through narrative.

My Theoretical Framework

I have not yet revealed my theoretical framework. I have merely revealed the tools that I intend to use in crafting my theoretical framework, tools borrowed from a variety of feminist and poststructural theorists. According to Grimshaw, “Foucault sometimes saw his own writing as a ‘tool box’, from which the tools might be bent and distorted in ways not envisaged by their

creator” (p. 52). The collection of tools I acquired is unique to my journey. The framework I created and utilized in this research is my own, pieced together like a patchwork quilt.

Borrowing from Eisler’s (1987 / 1995) conception of dominator culture and partnership culture (1987 / 1995), I have identified two separate and interrelated discourses: *discourse of violence* which is closely aligned with dominator culture and *discourse of nonviolence* which is closely aligned with partnership culture. Discourse of violence serves as a conduit for various forms of domination and oppression, including those based on race, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality. It is a *dominant* discourse, with secure institutional locations. Discourse of nonviolence is a *resistant, counter discourse*, a response to discourse of domination. These two discourses are separate but interrelated discursive streams, fed by power and resistance.

Poststructural feminists, such as Weedon (1997), use the term “patriarchal discourse” to describe the statements and corresponding power / knowledge that gives rise to a social structure within which “women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men” (p. 14). This theoretical framework, however, fails to address intersectionality. As Brah and Phoenix (2004) argue, “the need for understanding complexities posed by intersections of different axis of differentiation is as pressing today as it has always been.” (p. 75). Collins (1991) describes black feminist theory as “a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression” (p. 553). What Collins names the “matrix of domination,” bell hooks (2004) refers to as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Eisler (1987 / 1995) uses the terms “dominator culture” and “domination culture” to refer to the same social phenomenon. It is important to note that what is described as the matrix of domination / white supremacist capitalist patriarchy / dominator – domination culture has both discursive and nondiscursive elements. Purvis and Hunt (1993) describe the nondiscursive as events and occurrences that happen and exist independent of

discourse. What we know about these occurrences is shaped by discursive practice. Discourse of violence gives rise to, supports and makes meaning of the social phenomenon described by Collins, hooks and Eisler.

Discourse of Violence

Discourse of violence refers to speech which characterizes power in a particular way and asserts the interests of some people over the interests of others. It serves to separate, rank and order people hierarchically. Macy and Brown (1998) speak of discourse of violence as a “power-over” paradigm.

The old concept of power, in which most of us have been socialized, originated in the worldview which assumed reality to be composed of discrete and separate entities...Power came to be seen as a property of those separate substances, inferred from the way they could appear to push each other around...It was equated with the exertion of one’s will over others, limiting their choices...To keep from being pushed around defenses are needed. Armor and rigidity make one more powerful, less likely to be influenced and changed, *i.e.* dominated by the other. (p. 52)

It provides justification for violence. Inherent within the discourse of violence is the assumption that human beings are naturally and inevitably violent. According to Boulding (2000), “Historians overwhelmingly focus on the history of violence and war [which] accounts for the widespread ignorance about nonviolence as an effective survival strategy” (p. 3). Similarly, in his history of relations between Muslims, Christians and Jews, Karabell (2007) says that both those in the Muslim world and those in the West, have been subject to “selective readings of the past” (p. 5) that focus more on conflict than on peace, leaving the impression that conflict is inevitable.

A recent example of discourse of violence in operation was in a speech given by the Barack Obama (MSNBC, n.d.), on the occasion of his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. He said:

I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism - it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason. (p. 2)

Discourse of violence labels some as evil and others as good, providing justification for domination and destruction.

Discourse of violence operates at every level. Teaching in a teacher preparation program for elementary education majors, I sometimes engaged in discussion with students around what teachers refer to as “classroom management.” These soon-to-be teachers would argue that they had to assert authority in the classroom. They expressed fear that if they were not assertive enough, if they were not able to communicate to students that they were in charge, the classroom would erupt in chaos. They were operating from a basic assumption that someone has to be in charge. This assumption supports discourse of domination.

Lash (2007) identifies two kinds of power: power-over and power within. He associates power over with the “hegemonic age” which he declares to be dead. He describes it as “power that A has over B” (p. 59). Power within correlates with Foucault’s notion of discipline: “when it begins to circulate in the capillaries of society” (p. 61). Lash suggests that “when power enters into us and constitutes us from the inside...it becomes far more difficult to unmask” (p. 61). The discourse begins to dictate the scripts that are our personal narratives, in other words, we become

the discourse. It is important to note that it is not only dominant discourses that operate in this way. Resistant counter-discourses can operate in a power within fashion.

How might we begin to unmask the dominant discourses that rule our lives? I argue that mindfulness, as practiced by participants in the Freedom Project, can be seen as a strategy for unmasking dominant discourses that operate from within. Mindfulness practice can be seen as a technique of the self, facilitating what McLaren (2004) refers to as truth telling. Mindfulness practitioners develop an awareness of the dominate discourses and how they operate in their lives. They are then positioned to develop and / or adopt and speak novel and resistant discourses. NVC can be seen as one response to the dominant discourse of domination. NVC is part of what I call discourse of nonviolence.

Discourse of Nonviolence

There are a number of key concepts and ideas that, when considered together, characterize discourse of nonviolence. The following list is in no particular order and is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather representative of some of the *things said* relevant to discourse of nonviolence.

1. *Interconnectedness* or the belief that all people and all things in the universe are inextricably connected is expressed by Thich Nhat Hanh (1993). He refers to “interbeing” as the process of being “in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms” (p. 3). He emphasizes that there is no separation between what we perceive as the “inner world of our mind and the world outside” (p. 4). According to Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeing is cultivated through mindfulness practice.
2. *Inclusion* or the belief that all participants in a relationship or members of community are entitled to be heard and participate equally. Bryson (2004), a NVC trainer, says that

“partnership is the highest form of relationship” (p. 323) and calls for “a network of communities who value consensus and a common unity, and whose ultimate goal is a world where everyone’s needs are met nonviolently” (p. 324). Human beings share in common a set of *basic human needs*. Among these is the need to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. Rosenberg (2005) says simply, “people enjoy giving to others” (p. 17). Similarly, Hawken (2007) asserts, “Being compelled to make more of ourselves is the human lot” (p. 25).

4. *Cooperation* is valued over competition, affirming a belief in abundance, as opposed to scarcity. O’Sullivan (1999) cites a wide range of evidence in support of his argument that “love, sympathy, sacrifice and cooperation play an immense part in the development of moral feelings...even contemporary thinking in biology, anthropology and paleontology follow Kropotkin rather than Herbert Spencer and T.H. Huxley in arguing for the pre-eminence of cooperation over competitiveness in the evolutionary development of life forms” (p. 121).
5. *Empathetic connection* is a path to healing for individuals, communities and for the world. Rosenberg (2005) says, “When we empathize with what’s alive in another person, it’s amazing how much healing can go on. Unfortunately, there’s a lot of healing that needs to happen in the world” (p. 83).
6. *Learning is experiential*. According to Eisler (2000),

A primary aim of partnership education is to show, not only intellectually but also experientially that partnership relations are possible....focusing primarily on how we teach rather than on what we teach, these movements promote learning experiences in

which teachers facilitate rather than control, students learn to work together, and each student is treated with empathy and respect. (p. 14)

7. *Agency* is seen as inherent to the human experience. In other words, individuals always have choices, regardless of circumstance. Bryson speaks of agency in this way, “I never want to think that the other person has the power to determine my reaction. They do not, unless I think they do and thereby let them” (p. 95).
8. *Egalitarianism*, characterized by deconstruction of rigid gender roles. Eisler and Lowe (1990) describe the “partnership model” as a system within which there is “equal valuing of the sexes as well as of “femininity” and “masculinity,” or a sexually social and ideological structure” (p. 179). On aspect of this egalitarianism is what bell hooks (2004) calls “feminist masculinity.” She says, “The core of feminist masculinity is a commitment to gender equality and mutuality as crucial to interbeing and partnership in the creating and sustaining of life. Such a commitment always privileges nonviolent action over violence, peace over war, life over death” (p. 118).
9. *Nonviolent conflict resolution* is possible and preferable. Eisler (2005) suggests that, “Nonviolent conflict resolution may be a more evolutionary advanced method of dealing with conflict than the violent tactics of warfare and other kinds of violence (such as “domestic violence”) to suppress conflict and control others” (p. 235).
10. *Voluntary simplicity* challenges the strands of discourse of violence that promote excessive consumption and consumerist ideology. O’Sullivan says: “The culture of consumption and unchallenged and unbridled capitalism that has overtaken the world at the end of the twentieth century is profoundly destructive within its own frame of reference” (p. 121). Macy (1998) adds “The voluntary simplicity movement liberates

people from patterns of consumption that do not reflect their needs, enabling them to find more frugal and satisfying ways of connecting with their world” (p. 22).

Many of these concepts and strategies are associated with discourses articulated elsewhere and otherwise named. Within my framework, they are the discursive strands that make up the matrix that I call discourse of nonviolence. Many of these concepts and strategies date back to the beginning of recorded history. That they emerge together in this particular historical context is significant, however. Macy (1998) refers to this historical moment as the Great Turning. She describes the Great Turning as a movement that “is gaining momentum today, through the choices of countless individuals and groups” and describes three associated dimensions of change: “1) actions to slow the damage to Earth and its beings; 2) analysis of structural causes and creation of structural alternatives; and 3) a fundamental shift in worldview and values” (p. 17). Similarly, Hawken (2007) identifies a movement which “expresses the needs of the majority of people on earth to sustain the environment, wage peace, democratize decision making and policy, reinvent public governance piece by piece from the bottom up, and improve their lives – women, children, and the poor” (p. 12). It is discourse of nonviolence that sustains this movement, a movement that, I argue, grows out of feminist discourse, is perhaps even a coming together and/or morphing of feminism in its various forms. I argue that discourse of nonviolence encompasses concepts and strategies that were first articulated as part of feminist discourses as they developed from the time of Wollstonecraft to the present day. Furthermore, discourse of nonviolence privileges those qualities traditionally associated with the feminine. Feminist discourses, operating in a resistant fashion, made it possible for certain objects and subjects to take on new meaning and value.

Cain (1993) argues that from the perspective of modern feminist realism “the most women can do is to reflect upon and make public the way their knowledge was made” (p. 90). That is what I have attempted to do here, to reveal a framework constructed with and from the theoretical tools I acquired along the way. It is this framework that provides the lens through which I analyze the narratives that represent the lived experiences of former prisoners who studied and practice NVC .

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

I was a reluctant researcher. My return to school at mid-life was motivated not by a desire to do research but rather by a desire to teach. As a first generation college student I had little first-hand experience with higher education in general or graduate school in particular. The people in my life did not hold graduate degrees. As a result, I did not fully understand the implications of entering a doctoral program. For me, the purpose was, in large part, vocational. My intent was to hone my skills and develop opportunities to be a more effective educator. However, I quickly learned that my program of study was embedded in a system that does not value teaching as much as it values research. The purpose of a Ph.D. program, from an institutional standpoint, is to create researchers. This was evident in the courses I was required to take, most of which focused on research methodology. It seemed that my program was designed to mold me into a researcher and I resisted.

I had come to associate research with positivistic traditions that emphasize rationality, logic and order and insist upon scientific method and empirical design. Most of what was presented to me as research in my undergraduate and early graduate school years can be characterized as quantitative. Often this research focused on norms associated with means, modes and medians. I, on the other hand, was more interested in outliers, those exceptions to the rules in terms of human experience and behavior. I was interested in the narratives that accompany these experiences, rather than what I perceived to be cold, hard, statistical data. I also recognized that positivist researchers often claim objectivity in spite of obvious, unacknowledged biases. I remember, for example, learning about Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development in a developmental psychology class as an undergraduate. My professor failed to acknowledge the inherent predisposition associated with Kohlberg's exclusive use of

male subjects in his research and the intrinsic bias of assumptions about female moral development based on his findings. I learned to approach this kind of research with a critical eye. I came to believe that social researchers (if not all researchers) leave imprints of themselves on their work. Furthermore, because social phenomena are so complex and variable it is impossible to accurately extrapolate findings based on the experiences of a few and apply them to larger populations. Many aspects of human experience cannot be measured or quantified. In this way scientific method is limited, particularly when it is applied to social phenomena. As a result, I came to believe that I could not trust work associated with positivistic traditions. I knew that if being a researcher meant that I must subscribe to these traditions, I would not be a researcher. I had to develop a research methodology that reflected my epistemological and ethical orientations. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of my methodology by answering three key questions. First, what epistemology informs this research? Second, what traditions govern the methodological choices associated with this research? And finally, what specific techniques and procedures were used in this research?

Epistemology

This research begins with the assumption that knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is socially constructed. I find two texts particularly helpful in understanding the social construction of scientific knowledge. I was exposed to the first when I was required to take a human biology class as a sophomore in college. This class, taught by a talented young professor who focused as much on humanity as biology, challenged my ideas about research. We read *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* by Thomas Kuhn (1962) which suggests that science is governed by paradigms. Kuhn associates paradigms with “normal science” which he defines as “research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements

that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice” (p. 10). The adoption of scientific achievements or paradigms associated with normal science is influenced by the scientific communities from which they emerge. These scientific communities begin as preparadigmatic groups represented by particular schools of thought; once a paradigm is created and accepted the group is transformed into a profession or a discipline. These scientific communities share norms, values, language, modes of communications and rules of initiation and membership. The research of the scientific community is guided by the prevailing paradigm(s). Normal science is “an attempt to force nature into the preformed and relatively inflexible box that the paradigm supplies” (p. 24). While innovation is not the aim of normal science and there is significant resistance toward findings inconsistent with prevailing paradigms, scientific communities are not static. New paradigms do emerge through a process that Kuhn refers to as scientific revolution: “...those noncumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or part by an incompatible new one” (p. 91). However, the emergence of a new paradigm always occurs in relation to the old competing paradigm and is governed by the rules and norms of the scientific community. In this way, paradigms are socially, culturally, historically, politically and ideologically constituted. Kuhn seems to espouse a relativist perspective when he concludes by saying: “We may...have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth” (p. 169).

A seed was planted in my mind with my reading of Kuhn. This seed was nurtured years later when I read Bruno Latour’s (1987) *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Latour contends that scientific knowledge develops through a rhetorical process and scientific authority is obtained through participation in social networks.

Latour equates the process of research and scientific authorship to a political game by saying, “the rules are simple enough: weaken your enemies, paralyze those you cannot weaken...help your allies if they are attacked, ensure safe communications with those who supply you with indisputable instruments...oblige your enemies to fight one another...if you are not sure of winning, be humble and understated” (pp. 37 – 38). Both Kuhn and Latour demystify the research process and call into question the authority of scientific knowledge by *observing* the research process or “science in action.” Taken together these texts show that the research process is governed by rules that are historically and socially contextualized and that science is a product of discourse. From a Foucauldian standpoint, science *is* a discourse, or perhaps more accurately a series of interrelated discourses separated by disciplinary boundaries and shaped by the discursive practices associated with particular research methodologies.

My intention is not to debunk scientific knowledge through the use of a social constructivist argument. Instead, I argue that if scientific knowledge is socially constructed and discursively constituted it should not be privileged above other forms of knowledge, including that which is generally referred to as common knowledge. Traditionally, scientific knowledge has been privileged both by those within and outside of scientific communities. Assumptions about objectivity have set scientific knowledge apart and allowed science to emerge as a hegemonic force. The work of Kuhn (1962) and Latour (1987) reveal these assumptions to be erroneous. If objective empirical data are a fallacy and there is no external reality or truth outside of the social, then all forms of knowledge are equal. How then can truth claims be judged and evaluated? I take a pragmatic stance. Does the knowledge provide insight into or solve a problem associated with the phenomenon under investigation? Is the knowledge useful?

This research is concerned with the lived experiences of former inmates who studied NVC in prison. The personal narratives that these men share are connected to socially constituted discourses associated with various forms of common knowledge, including discourses of violence and nonviolence. The purpose of this research is to reveal the knowledge inherent in the participants' narratives relative to understanding discourses of violence and nonviolence.

Guiding Traditions

The content associated with my research courses seemed to imply that the world of research is divided into two distinct halves: quantitative research and qualitative research (with a nod to mixed methods or research that exists between these two worlds). Fellow students would often ask various forms of the same question. Which is better? The answer that inevitably followed implied that the choice of methodology was dependent upon the nature of the research question. Simply put, quantitative methods are used to answer *why* questions, qualitative methods are more useful for answering *what* or *how* questions. This answer implies that the choice of methodology follows the identification of a research question. This was not the case for me. I was always clear that I would use qualitative methods. If I was going to be a researcher, clearly I intended to be a qualitative researcher. Given my epistemological orientation this choice seemed inevitable. As someone who is concerned with the social construction of knowledge, I am inclined to focus on context rather than cause and effect relationships. The questions that form the basis of this research are questions of context that can only be answered through qualitative inquiry.

The use of qualitative methodology allowed me to honor my own needs for authenticity, reciprocity, collaboration and connection. I attempted to act in partnership with participants in this study and to establish relationships that were equal and reciprocal. Listening to and honoring

the stories of participants denotes respect and allows for connection. Authenticity is a core value that can be honored through the use of reflexivity and dialogue within a qualitative research methodology. I have a personal interest in telling stories and in bringing stories of social significance to a wide audience. The use of qualitative methodology allowed me to engage in a narrative process. There are many traditions associated with qualitative methodology. I relied on two separate and interrelated traditions: *portraiture* and *research for social justice*. These traditions guided my selection of and relationship with participants, as well as my data collection, data analysis, and reporting.

Portraiture

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe portraiture as “a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art...a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (p. xv). The portraitist creates narrative portraits that represent participant knowledge. She approaches the task of data gathering through interviews and observations which are guided by a theoretical framework and epistemological orientation that privileges authentic voice. Furthermore, she attempts to foster empathetic connection between herself and other participants by consistently attending to relationship. Ultimately, the responsibility of the portraitist is to construct a story from the thematic strands that emerge within the context of this relationship.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) identify three kinds of voice that should be reflected in the narrative. It is the responsibility of the portraitist to insure that each is heard and illuminated in the telling of the story. The first voice is that of the researcher. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), “Voice is the research instrument, echoing the *self* (or the

soul as Oscar Wilde put it) of the portraitist” (p. 85). The researcher’s voice is ever present in portraiture. It is implicit in every theoretical assumption, question and interpretation. It is an undercurrent to the narrative. The portraitist does not apologize for or deny the presence of her own voice. The voice of the researcher may be used to reveal her perspective as an observer of other actors, or to reveal her unique history or worldview when these factors come to bear on the research. While the portraitist’s voice is never truly silent, she must first and foremost attend to the voices of other actors. The voice of the actor(s) is the second type of voice that should be revealed through the portraiture process. The portraitist, therefore, must restrain and discipline her voice so as not to eclipse the voices of actors. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis state, “This balance – between documenting the authentic portrait of others and drawing one’s self into the lines of the piece, between self-possession and disciplined other regard, between the intuitive and the counterintuitive – is the difficult, complex, nuanced work of the portraitist” (p. 86). The portraitist must become skilled at ‘listening for voice.’ Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis say, “When the portraitist listens for voice, she seeks it out, trying to capture its texture and cadence, exploring meaning and transporting its sound and message into the text through carefully selected quotations” (p. 99). Listening for voice requires the portraitist to interpret not only what is said but also gestures, body language and other non-verbal cues. The third type of voice that the portraitist must attend to is the voice that rises out of dialogue between the portraitist and actors. At times, there may be a merging of voices, requiring the portraitist to be aware of the dynamics that influence what is being expressed. The search for authentic voice for both the portraitist and other actors requires presence of mind and careful attention to the nuances of communication.

For the portraitist, successful inquiry and revealing narrative are dependent upon relationship. The portraitist strives to create, in partnership with actors, relationships that are characterized by fluidity, egalitarianism, fairness, balance, reciprocity, and authenticity. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) say, “Authentic findings will only come from authentic relationships” (p. 138). The authentic relationship is one which provides a sense of safety and trust that allows actors to share their experiences and perceptions openly. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, “Portraitists view empathy as central to relationship building in research” (p. 148). The portraitist “embraces imperfections and vulnerabilities” (p. 142), as well as strength and goodness. The portraitist acknowledges actors as bearers of knowledge and experts on their own experiences and perceptions. By facilitating critical dialogue, the portraitist can also pave the way for greater self-awareness and new insights. The relationship between portraitist and actor(s) is an intimate one within which the actor is vulnerable. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the researcher to establish and maintain clear and ethical boundaries.

Narrative is constructed from themes that emerge from the dialogue between actor(s) and researcher. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) lay out a clear pattern for recognizing and connecting emergent themes in the construction of narrative. First, the portraitist identifies refrains that are used by actors repetitively. These refrains may be expressed verbally, through gestures or through signs and symbols; they may be subtle or obvious. Next, the portraitist identifies “resonant metaphors” described as “poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the way the actors illuminate and experience their realities” (p. 193). These symbolic representations of the actor’s lifeworld are often subtle and require attentiveness and diligence on the part of the researcher. The researcher must also listen for a third type of theme represented by social rituals. These rituals generally reveal something of the actor’s cultural and/or institutional affiliations.

Emergent themes are embedded in the context of these rituals. The fourth step in identifying emergent themes, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, is triangulation which they describe this way: "...the researcher employs various strategies and tools of data collection, looking for the points of convergence among them" (p. 204). The final step in the process involves, in some cases, identifying patterns through the "convergence of perspectives" (p. 209), or in other cases, revealing a lack of consensus, represented by divergent perspectives. When no clear order emerges from the data, it is the job of the portraitist to clarify the meaning behind the divergent perspectives.

The portraitist must identify a master narrative that serves as a unifying theme for the story she wishes to tell. This master narrative must be supported by a "scaffold that structures the narrative" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 259). The "girders" that make up the scaffold are constructed from the themes that emerged through the coding process. Next, the portraitist gives form to the structure by applying anecdotes, illustrations and other imaginative elements. This process of applying aesthetic form "gives life and movement to the narrative" (p. 254). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis speak of the emergence of the "aesthetic whole" that occurs when all the parts are coherently connected and related. The aesthetic whole is accomplished "by developing narrative coherence, which includes the framing and sequencing of events and experiences and the articulation of a clear and consistent voice and perspective" (p. 256). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis offer a collection of tools that I have utilized to sculpt a narrative from the raw material of ethnographic data. Their vision for story-crafting and storytelling as research methodology and reporting inspired and informed this work.

Research for Social Justice

Griffiths (1998) identifies social justice research by three core principles. First, social justice research is more concerned with process than outcomes. Social justice research is not a search for “Truth.” The social justice paradigm recognizes multiple truths that are consistently shifting and realigning. The social justice researcher must, therefore, continually reflect and adjust. The second principle, according to Griffiths “is that each individual is valuable and recognized as an important valued part of the community as a whole” (p. 12). Community provides the context for social justice research. The researcher, therefore, must never separate the research participant from his/her communities (recognizing that most people belong to more than one community). The welfare of the individual and the good of the community are inextricably linked. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that neither is harmed. A primary aim of social justice research is to ensure the greatest good for all. The third principle associated with social justice research is a recognition that research participants come to the research project as people impacted by the social realities of race, gender, social class, (dis)ability and sexuality. As a result, there are issues of power and access that impact research participants. The researcher must be cognizant of these issues and attend to them as they intersect with/in the research milieu. Griffiths indicates that “Social justice research is concerned both with individual empowerment and also with structural injustices; that is, with questions of power and resources available to individuals and to particular communities or sectors of those communities” (p. 13).

Weis and Fine (2004) outline a “*theory of method* for conducting critical theoretical and analytic work on social (in)justice” (p. xv). They refer to “compositional studies” as research that contextualizes the lives of participants, institutions and communities in the larger social structure and reveals the dynamic interplay between the individual and society. Weis and Fine state:

In compositional studies, we take up a companion project, writing through multiple groups of this social puzzle we call America, fractured by jagged lines of power, so as to theorize carefully this relationality and, at the same time, recompose the institution, community, and nation as a series of fissures and connections. (p. xvi)

Weis and Fine assign to the researcher the task of making explicit the connections between, among and within social groups. They identify “three analytic moves” associated with compositional studies. First, while research participants may, “...speak as if they are self-consciously immune and independent, disconnected and insulated from history, the state, the economic context, and “others”” (p. xviii) the researcher must explicitly *connect the dots*. The individual must be represented in the context of the historical, social and economic realities that impact and shape perceptions, experiences, and outcomes. Second, in the practice of compositional studies, the researcher accepts categories of social identity (race, class, gender, etc.) as *more than simply social constructs*. While these categories are socially constructed they represent discourses that are shot through with power. Weis and Fine have this to say about the implications inherent in this analytical move:

...with theoretical ambivalence and political commitment, we analytically embrace these categories of identity as social, porous, flexible, and yet profoundly political ways of organizing the world. By so doing we seek to understand how individuals make sense of, resist, embrace, and embody social categories, and, as dramatically, how they situate “other” categories, in relation to themselves. This is, we argue, what demands a relational method. (p. xviii)

Third, Weis and Fine suggest the need to identify divergent perceptions of identity and experience within social categories. They encourage the researcher to avoid the single-minded

focus on finding “in-group cohesion” (p. xviii) and instead to recognize the value of perspectives represented by outliers. These three methodological strategies: contextual analysis, relational analysis and focus on variability serve as tools for the researcher who wishes to conduct research aimed at furthering the causes of social justice.

Weis and Fine (2004) identify a number of different design models that compositional studies might incorporate. Of these, the form that is most closely aligned with my own research is the design model aimed at “revealing sites of possibility” (p. xxi). Weis and Fine say, “critical researchers have an obligation not simply to dislodge the dominant discourse, but to help readers and audiences imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency, and possibility lie” (p. xxi). Weis and Fine suggest that the researcher assume responsibility for revealing the *goodness* that is inherent in individual and collective actions for social change. Although the researcher should not avoid the gritty realities of despair that often infects the lives of those living in the confines of limiting situations such as poverty or incarceration, in the interest of social justice, it is imperative that the researcher also reveal sites of hope and renewal.

Social justice research is committed to reclaiming voices that are representative of alternative, resistant and marginal discourses / knowledge. This requires a collaborative methodology. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), “Collaboration and authority ultimately speak to how a narrative is constructed and who has ownership over the narrative and how it is represented” (p. 168). Griffiths describes the role of the social justice researcher in this way, “always to work in specific circumstances *with* rather than *on* or even *for* the people who inhabit them” (p. 111). While she describes collaboration as necessary, “fun” and “satisfying” she also describes it as “difficult” and “dangerous.” Using collaboration as a research tool

requires the researcher to be cognizant of power at all levels. Griffiths states, "...collaboration can be seen as a complex intersection of powers and mobilization of powers" (p. 115).

In order to be an effective collaborator, the researcher must use reflexivity to continually moderate power. Luttrell (2000) defines reflexivity in this way:

I think of being reflexive as an exercise in sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world, and seeking compatibility, not necessarily consensus. Being reflexive means expanding rather than narrowing the psychic, social, cultural, and political fields of analysis. (p. 516)

Informed by Luttrell's (2000) thoughts on reflexivity, I see the reflexive researcher as one who is aware of and attends to the various positions and perspectives that emerge throughout the process while acknowledging that it is impossible to be aware of and attend to *all* positions and perspectives. Reflexivity and collaboration are interrelated in social justice research. It is a challenge to balance the two, requiring a level of awareness and engagement on the part of the researcher that is not customary in more traditional forms of research.

The traditions of portraiture and research for social justice provide tools that allow the researcher to examine social phenomena while attending to context. The portraitist / social justice researcher is committed to revealing sites of hope and possibility and amplifying resistant voices / discourses through the use of reflexivity and collaboration. Whether intentional or unintentional, research always tells a story. My aim is to be as explicit and transparent as possible in the telling of this story –to reveal my intentions and processes. This research began with my own interest in the corresponding discourses associated with violence and nonviolence. I was drawn to NVC as a response or alternative to dominator discourses. My interest was not purely academic; in fact, my interest was largely personal, based on a desire to disengage from

dominator discourses, and a search for alternatives that I could apply in my own life. I wanted to hear the stories of those who were attempting to navigate a marginal path. Furthermore, I wanted to share these stories with others. My hope is that these stories will prove to have pragmatic implications. The stories that ultimately emerged, emerged through a process, a process shaped by particular methodological traditions to which I attempted to remain true. The specific methodological choices I made and applied throughout this process were guided by these traditions.

Specific Methods

There were a number of key choices that I made as a researcher that ultimately shaped the findings associated with this research, including decisions related to the identification and selection of participants; data collection, data analysis and reporting; and ethics.

Participants

My initial interest was in NVC as counter narrative in lives of prisoners / former prisoners. The Freedom Project is the only prison-based NVC training program identified by the Center for NVC (n.d.). I, therefore, decided to focus my research on the experiences of individuals associated with this project. I identified a Freedom Project staff member who agreed to serve as a gatekeeper who would identify and refer potential research participants. Whereas, I initially did not intend to limit my study to those who have been released from prison, the gatekeeper informed me that it would not be possible to interview individuals who were still incarcerated – this required approval from the Department of Corrections, something that had been denied to previous researchers. This narrowed the pool of potential participants to those individuals who received training through the Freedom Project while in prison and had since been released.

The gatekeeper indicated that he would identify three to five individuals, all of whom maintained their involvement with the Freedom Project since being released from prison. It is important to note that the number of individuals who have been released from prison since receiving training from the Freedom Project and who have maintained their involvement with the project is very small. Although exact numbers are not available, of the approximately 160 individuals who receive training through the Freedom Project (n.d.) each year (some of these individuals are duplicated in the yearly count), many are still incarcerated since the project is fairly new. It began operating in 1998 with the number of participants growing each year to the current level of 160. Those participants who have been released are often unable to maintain their involvement due to work and family obligations and lack of transportation (Dow Gordon, personal communication, January 24, 2008). Furthermore, many of these individuals are released to areas outside of the Seattle metropolitan area where the project is housed.

The gatekeeper identified three individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each of these individuals received training through the Freedom Project during their incarceration and maintained their involvement through the community-based component of the Freedom Project after their release. This small sample is not intended to be representative of the entire population. I concluded through my conversations with the gatekeeper that it would not be possible to obtain a representative sample and instead opted for a purposive / convenience sample (Patton, 1990) from the very small population of potential participants.

Each of the three participants was male. Two appeared to be White and one appeared to be Black although none were specifically asked to identify by ethnicity. They ranged in age from approximately 44 to approximately 64, with one falling at the beginning of that range, one falling in the middle and one falling at the end. They each participated in Freedom Project training

while in prison and had since been released. They each maintained their involvement with the Freedom Project in some capacity.

Data Collection

I employed two primary methods of data collection in this study: observations of community-based meetings of Freedom Project participants, and interviews with project graduates who were released from prison and living in the Seattle metropolitan area. In addition, documents associated with the work of the Freedom Project, including brochures, grant proposals, press releases and web pages were collected and analyzed. These documents were used to triangulate findings from other data sources.

Observations. I attended and observed three “community circle” sessions hosted by the Freedom Project. These sessions were held at the Freedom Project office in Seattle. All Freedom Project “returnees” were invited to attend. In addition, Freedom Project volunteers and interested community members were invited to attend and participate. I acted as a participant observer during these sessions, meaning that my role as observer was secondary to my role as participant. Although I informed those present of my intention to observe and include my observations in this study, I participated in every aspect of the meeting in much the same way as the community members in attendance. Creswell (2003) indicates that there are advantages to assuming this kind of “participant as observer” (p. 186) role which allows the researcher to closely identify with the experiences of participants. Those who assume the participant-as-observer role often do so in an attempt to immerse themselves in the world of the actors they are investigating in order to gain greater insight and understanding. Assuming the participant-as-observer role is often part of a larger effort to “go native.” That was not my motivation here. My primary reason for assuming this role was to be respectful of the process. The “community circle” is intended to be a safe and

nurturing environment. Having someone observe who is not also invested as a participant can be disruptive. Therefore, I relied on the project staff and those in attendance to assist me in establishing appropriate boundaries and expectations. I refrained from taking field notes during my observations. Rather, I recorded my personal impressions after my observations. I recorded my observations in two categories, descriptive notes and reflective notes, using the protocol outlined by Creswell (1998).

Interviews. I interviewed three individuals identified by the gatekeeper utilizing the protocol outlined by Siedman (2006) for “in-depth, phenomenological interviewing” (p. 15). Consistent with this method, I used open-ended questions so that each participant could reconstruct his experiences relevant to topics under investigation. I conducted a series of three interviews. The purpose of the first interview was to acquire a relevant life history in order to contextualize participants’ experiences relevant to their NVC training and practice experience. Participants were asked to reconstruct, to the degree possible, their life experiences prior to participation in the project. The second interview focused on the lived experiences of participants relevant to their participation in NVC training and practice. Seidman says that the purpose of this interview is to “reconstruct the myriad details of our participants’ experiences in the area we are studying” (p. 18). The third and final interview was centered on reflection. Participants were asked how they assigned meaning to and made sense of their experiences with NVC training and practice. The focus here was on how participants came to frame their experiences. An interview guide was utilized and adapted as needed during the course of the interviews (see Appendix). The three interviews were conducted at the Freedom Project offices over the course of three months during the summer of 2008. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was given a copy of his interview transcripts and asked to review them to ensure

that the content was accurate and relevant. Several of the transcripts were edited at the request of one of the participants.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Consistent with the recommendations of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I identified emergent and divergent themes throughout the data collection process by reflecting on each observation and interview and recording my reflections in a research journal. Coding, in a sense, was an ongoing process that began with the first round of data collection and guided the process throughout. Once the interviews were transcribed, I continued to follow the process for identifying emergent and divergent themes outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis and discussed earlier in this chapter. From these themes, I constructed four separate narratives: one for the community circle and one for each of the three participants. These four narratives or portraits make up chapter four of this dissertation. Finally, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify similarities and differences across the four narratives. Chapter five of this dissertation is a discussion of the findings associated with this final level of analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Consistent with the practices associated with research for social justice, I met with participants prior to any observations and interviews and expressed my intention to engage in a collaborative research process. We discussed needs, expectations and commitments in an effort to establish a partnership and avoid any breach of trust. I obtained written consent from each participant prior to beginning the interview process. Every effort was made to protect the participants from harm as a result of participation in this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Early on I expressed concern that participants might be identified through their involvement with the Freedom Project. I suggested that perhaps we should not identify the

organization in reports associated with this research. However, the participants concluded, through consensus, that the organization should be identified in order to increase awareness about the work associated with the Freedom Project and that the risk of identification was small and a reasonable risk to assume.

It was my goal to respect the rights of the participants, institutions and organizations involved in this study. I drafted and utilized a set of ethical guidelines that I adhered to throughout the planning, data collection, data analysis and reporting phases of this study. The following guidelines are based on recommendations outlined by Creswell (2003):

1. I clearly articulated the purpose and procedures associated with this study in all communication with participants.
2. I did not knowingly put participants at risk.
3. I obtained informed consent from all participants. Verbal consent was obtained from those participating in events that were observed. Written consent was obtained from participants prior to interviews.
4. I honored the rights of participants to ask questions and provided timely and accurate responses to inquiries from participants. I provided a copy of the research findings and final report to participants at the completion of the study.
5. I respected research sites and minimized disruptions for participants and those around them.
6. I protected the privacy of participants by a) using pseudonyms for individuals to protect their identity and b) keeping all data with identifying information (tapes, original notes) in a locked box in my home. Tapes of interviews were destroyed immediately after they were transcribed.

7. I provided an accurate account of all interactions with participants. Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of interview data whereby participants were asked to review and make changes if necessary to interview transcripts prior to data analysis.
8. I did not engage in any deceptive practices in the course of conducting this study.
9. I used unbiased language in my report of findings.

Throughout the data collection, writing and analysis phases of this research, I often reflected on the artistic process. What is the process that one uses to create a portrait that relies on visual media? What is the relationship between the photography or painter and her subject? What does the end product tell us about the artist, about the subject, about the relationship between the two? Sousskoff (2006) identifies the dialectic process by which the portrait takes on meaning beyond an “adherence to an exterior reality” (p. 8). She goes on to discuss how the portrait can function as a window into “relationships among subjects portrayed, the viewer(s), and the artist, producing a new subject in art” (p. 12).

The portraits that emerged from the research process outlined here reveal something of the individual participants as they presented themselves to me in interviews. They also reveal much about me as a researcher and storyteller. Finally, they speak to the relationship that developed through the dialogic process I was engaged in with participants. My hope is that you, as the reader, will see yourself reflected in the portraits. Sousskoff (2006) says, “When I see another represented in the portrait I see my social context and myself, including my history” (p. 3).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PORTRAITS

Following are a series of literary portraits woven from the threads of ethnographic data gathered during the summer of 2008. The first is based on my observations as a participant in the Freedom Project Community Circle. I attended three meetings of this group and recorded my observations after each meeting. I tell what happened at these meetings from my perspective and include my personal reflections. The other three portraits convey the lived experiences of three Freedom Project participants. I asked each a series of questions about their early lives, their lives in prison and their lives since being released from prison. I recorded their stories and created a cogent narrative from the transcripts of those interviews. I tried to stay as true to their telling as possible. As I have stated elsewhere, I did not see my role as an arbiter of truth, but rather as a storyteller. In places, my own story intersects with those of the participants as I share my reflections. You may notice that I switch tense between the past and present in places. My goal was to bring the narratives to life by sharing them in first person, present tense. My reflections are in past tense as they were generally recorded after the interviews.

The Community Circle

Most people associate Seattle with rain. However, when the sun is shining in Seattle there are few places more beautiful. With its lush green terrain and sparkling views it is easy to see why Seattle is referred to as the Emerald City. I arrived in Seattle on a beautiful, sunny day in July and headed for the Alki Beach neighborhood where I was staying with friends I had made through my association with the NVC community. My host had participated in NVC training and agreed to support my research by providing a place for me to stay over the summer.

She and her family lived in a modest home in a one of the more affluent neighborhoods in Seattle. City Mayor, Greg Nickels refers to Seattle as a “city of neighborhoods” (Nickels Newsletter, 2005). Each neighborhood has its own unique character and charm. Although Alki is located in the city proper, only minutes from downtown, one blogger describes it as “somewhat like a small Northern California beach town” (DeBord, 2009). Quaint little shops and cafes, as well as a Whole Foods market and a food coop, line the main thoroughfares surrounding the residential areas that make up the neighborhood. There are walking trails and turnoffs that feature stunning views of Elliott Bay and the Seattle skyline. On this particular day, the rhododendrons were in bloom and many homes were dressed in rich hues of purple, red, yellow and orange. I got settled into my summer home, feeling fortunate to have landed in such a beautiful location, as I anticipated my first meeting with the Freedom Project community circle later that evening.

I headed out early, armed with a map that provided turn by turn instructions to lead me from here to there. The meeting was scheduled to begin at 6:30 at the Freedom Project office. The office was located in the Central District of Seattle. I had never been to the Central District. I recalled hearing about the Central District, or “CD,” from student inmates in classes I taught at the Washington State Penitentiary years before. Many of my students were from Seattle; more specifically, they were from the CD. The impression I formed based on what my students shared with me was that the CD was a dirty, impoverished, violent place. As I made my way from Alki to the CD, I saw fewer Whole Foods markets and more empty storefronts. Whereas the streets in Alki were peppered with joggers and tourists with cameras, the streets in the CD were populated with young mothers with their children waiting for buses and dark-skinned young men on street corners. The streets were in fact dirtier, a thin layer of grim seemed to coat the old commercial

structures lined the streets of the CD. But there were rhododendrons here as well, just as beautiful as those in Alki. Many people here obviously took pride in their homes and tried their best to brighten the neighborhood.

I found the address I was looking for and parked my car in front of an apartment building adjacent to the Freedom Project office. A sign posted on the front said that the apartment building was under surveillance by the police and that anyone entering would be caught on camera – just a little reminder that big brother was watching. The sign wasn't intended to engender a sense of safety. I read it as a threat and immediately felt a slight shiver of fear. In spite of the fact that I had grown up in poor neighborhoods not unlike the one I was in now and had become accustomed to living and working in places where my light skin made me an anomaly, I felt threatened. Where and why had I learned to disassociate myself with these kinds of inner city neighborhoods and the people who lived here? What was the source of my fear? These are questions that I still struggle with in spite of years spent challenging mainstream notions about race and class. For now, I tried to push the fear aside as I got out of the car. My heart was still pounding as I approached the building that housed the Freedom Project office.

The Freedom Project occupied the first floor of a small three story apartment building. The building sat near the corner of a major thoroughfare and a narrow residential street among a hodgepodge of buildings and homes. According to Henry McGee (2007), this is an area in transition, with working-class African Americans being replaced by White, Asian American and African Americans with higher incomes. McGee states,

The Central District, which took seven decades to achieve its racial identity as a predominately black area, has in the last two decades become much more racially diverse as European Americans have discovered its attributes. Yet this is not simply a story of

whites replacing blacks in a community. First, many black residents who can, stubbornly remain. There is also a growing population of other people of color, including substantial numbers of recent arrivals from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Perhaps this process of gentrification explains the discontinuity that I sensed in the neighborhood. Like many of the homes and buildings in the neighborhood, the Freedom Project building appeared to have been recently renovated. The pleasant looking triplex with beige aluminum siding sat next to a squat stucco building that likely once housed a car dealership or gas station; it now housed a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. A group of black men were congregated outside its doors. Their raucous conversation and laughter filled the neighborhood as I climbed the small flight of steps leading to the office.

I walked into the front meeting room of the Freedom Project office and was greeted by Sol, a small white man in his sixties who wore a huge, welcoming grin. Chairs were arranged in a circle around the small space originally intended to be a living room. I took a seat and observed as others began to arrive. The room took on a congenial, almost festive mood as it continued to fill, almost to capacity. Each new arrival was greeted with hugs and personal inquiries. There were 16 people there in all, an eclectic group that included former prisoners or “returnees” as well as other community members. It was impossible to tell them apart although I found myself trying to differentiate and classify. In all there were 11 men and 4 women, most appeared to be white, with the exception of three men who appeared to be black. They were all there for the same purpose, to participate in the Freedom Project community circle.

The Freedom Project Connection (2007), a monthly newsletter published by the project, describes the community circle in this way:

Community Circle participants are men and women from diverse backgrounds and races

sharing a common dream to strengthen our community by supporting the transformation of prisoners into peacemakers. They represent both victims and perpetrators of crime; our collective experience with prison spans many decades and includes both service in the correctional system as well as incarceration. These folks are committed to the practice of nonviolence in their daily lives and in all interactions. (p. 6)

It is difficult to describe this group that more than anything was marked by heterogeneity. There were young people and old people and everything in between. There were people in all modes of dress. Some were quiet and reserved and others were talkative and animated. The norms and rules, if there were any, were not immediately discernable. There was a sense of ease in the way that individuals interacted with one another.

At about 6:30, Joe, the designated facilitator, announced that it was time to begin the meeting. Everyone quickly settled and brass prayer chimes were sounded to signify the beginning of a brief group meditation. Joe guided the meditation; his words encouraged participants to relax and center themselves in order to be more present in the moment. After a few minutes of silence, the chime was sounded again signaling the end of the meditation.

Joe announced that we would now “check in” by introducing ourselves in turn and sharing what was most relevant in our lives this week. Most of the sharing at this point was fairly mundane and superficial. Trent began and set the tone by sharing what he did to celebrate the 4th of July holiday. When it was my turn, I shared a little about my research and why I was there. One young man responded by asking why I chose to focus my research on ex-prisoners. He appeared to be quite agitated when he said, “What you don’t understand is that prisoners are just like everybody else.” Several others in the group reacted in agreement. They expressed

understanding and empathy around his need, as a former prisoner, to be seen as a human being with the same needs as other human beings and not as merely a pathological perpetrator.

During my time with project staff, volunteers, and other participants, I often heard variations on this “prisoners are just like everybody else” theme. This statement goes to the very core of the NVC philosophy espoused by Marshall Rosenberg (2005). NVC incorporates tools and principles that are designed to foster human connection. Connection is thought to be strengthened by the understanding that all human beings share common feelings and needs that arise as reactions to particular circumstances. Rosenberg provides a list of “basic feelings we all have” (p. 212) which includes both feelings that arise when needs are being met, such as joy, hope and trust, and feelings that arise when needs are not being met, such as anger, sadness and disappointment. He also identifies “basic needs we all have” (p. 212) such as the need for autonomy, integrity and play. Saying that “prisoners are just like everyone else” is perhaps one way of acknowledging the common feelings and needs that are shared by those who have been in prison and those who have not. Implicit in this statement is an understanding that former prisoners often need empathy. As Bryson (2004) states, “There has never been a perpetrator that did not first see himself as a victim. Feeling victimized is a precursor to perpetration” (p. 93). The community circle provides an opportunity for returnees to experience the empathy they need to begin or continue to heal that sense of victimization.

I must admit that I experienced a certain amount of resistance in response to the statement “prisoners are just like everybody else.” I found myself engaged in an internal debate whereby I was willing to acknowledge that perhaps I share similar feelings and needs in common with those who have led lives of crime, however, I also wanted to acknowledge that we had made very different choices in terms of our behavioral responses to these feelings and needs.

From a NVC perspective, one might say that we have used different strategies to meet our needs. This brought me face to face with the issue of accountability. The next person to speak addressed this issue directly.

Sam, a young white man who looked to be no more than 25, wore a plain white t-shirt and no-label jeans, a uniform that looked much like that worn by men on the inside in the Washington State prison system. He was recently released after serving time for a sex crime. Although he took classes offered by the Freedom Project while in prison, this was his first community circle. He said that he was worried about the way that the community circle operated. More specifically, he was concerned that the Freedom Project, by emphasizing empathy rather than accountability, might enable returnees to persist in behaviors that will lead them to reoffend. Sam said that he was aware of at least one instance in which a returnee appeared to be “slipping” and was not confronted by anyone in the Freedom Project community until he did reoffend. He said that there were warning signs that Walter might reoffend and if he had been confronted perhaps it could have been prevented. At the mention of Walter’s name several of those in the circle grew noticeably tense. Sam ended by saying that as a sex offender he had come to believe that he has a “monster” inside of him. He said that he needs people to confront him if he starts to veer off course.

An angry silence seemed to descend on the group for a moment before Joe announced that we would take a 10 minute break. Some members of the group spilled outside to enjoy the sunshine and talk in pairs and small groups while others refilled their coffee cups and appeared to be lost in thought. After a few minutes Joe sounded the meditation chimes again to call the group back together.

Sam spoke once more, this time in an apologetic tone. He said that during the break someone told him that some of his comments were offensive and that they doubted his sincerity when he referred to himself as a “monster.” Several people nodded in agreement. One person said that it appeared that Sam had been “brainwashed” by the Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP) where this kind of characterization of the sex offender (SO) is commonplace. Some group members expressed frustration about how hard it is for any offender, and for sex offenders in particular, to reintegrate into society and how this kind of portrayal of the sex offender as “monster” makes it all the more difficult. Abe, a large black man, spoke with authority when he said that “offenders are expected to perform miracles when they’re released.” He talked about the daily challenges associated with getting a job and finding a place to live.

It was approaching 8:00 p.m., time for the meeting to end, when Dale, a young white man with a gentle smile spoke up. He expressed concern for Sam, indicating that the group was unfairly “jumping on” Sam for using the term “monster” to describe himself. Dale’s compassion was evident in the earnest way he looked at Sam and the tone with which he expressed his desire for Sam to feel welcome in the group. He said that he hoped that Sam would see the group as a source of support and that he would continue to come back. With this, the meeting came to an end.

As coffee cups were returned to the kitchen and individuals said their goodbyes, I found myself reflecting on what had just happened. I had studied NVC on my own and had attended community practice groups elsewhere. Therefore, I approached the group with certain preconceived notions and expectations. I expected more processing of emotion. The groups that I attended in my home community were process oriented. For example, if someone displayed anger, that feeling would be verbally acknowledged by others in the group. There was a process

of validation and support. Often the group would try to help the angry individual identify the needs associated with the anger. The process was all very explicit. It should be noted that these groups were led by a woman and attended primarily by white, middle-class women. Here, in this meeting of the community circle, however, many things were left unsaid. Interactions were not focused on identifying and processing feelings. Instead the focus was primarily on giving and receiving empathy.

I walked to my car lost in thought. If this meeting was any indication, the purpose of the community circle was clear: to empathize with offenders. I was immediately struck by the sheer audacity of such a notion. The whole idea of empathizing with the perpetrators of crime, in some cases violent crimes involving innocent victims, is, at the very least, a radical one. In fact, mainstream discourse concerning crime and criminals seldom includes talk of empathy. Empathy is only included as part of the dialogue when it is tempered with notions of accountability. Empathy is reserved for the victims. The responsible perpetrator becomes accountable by expressing empathy for those he has victimized. He is never viewed as worthy of empathy himself. Perhaps this is why Sam and I felt the need to move the dialogue from empathy, toward accountability.

Two weeks later I found myself back at the Freedom Project office for my second community circle meeting. The group was a little smaller this time, although just as diverse, with many of the same people in attendance. Several people remembered me from the last meeting and greeted me by name. Again, we sat in a small circle. Several people were passing around food that they brought to share, including fried okra, from *The Catfish House* and grapes from the farmer's market. The mood was friendly and welcoming. Perhaps it was odd, given the context of the meeting, but I was aware of how safe I felt in this place, with these people. Again,

Joe opened the meeting and announced that we would begin with a brief period of meditation. He sounded the meditation chime and we sat in silence for about 10 minutes until Joe sounded the chime again to mark the end of our meditation.

During the “check-in” period of the meeting, Henry, a large, older black man in overalls with a slight southern drawl, shared that he was planning a trip to visit family in another part of the country. This was his first visit home since being released from prison. The group listened intently as he expressed his apprehension and fear about having to reacquaint himself with the family he left behind when he went to prison.

Next, it was Frank’s turn to speak. Frank, an attractive, dark-haired white man, looked to be about 35 years old. He seemed tense, perhaps angry, as he began to share what had happened to him this week. His speech was animated, loud and difficult to follow at times as he got caught up in the details of what had transpired. He had gone to court to ask the judge to intervene on his behalf in a conflict he was having with the Department of Corrections (DOC). He believed that he was being unjustly persecuted by the DOC and recounted numerous incidents of unfair treatment. A couple sat next to him, nodding adamantly, as he recounted his victimization. They were dressed in stereotypically liberal attire, right down to the Greenpeace t-shirt for him and the long skirt and Birkenstocks for her. It seemed that Harriet and Eugene had provided a place for Frank to live since his release from prison. They appeared to be tireless supporters, there on Frank’s behalf to confirm that, in fact, he was the victim of a heartless system peopled by tyrannical bureaucrats.

One of the interesting things for me about attending a meeting where NVC is the focus is that I find that I am hyperaware of the various judgments about others that I make as a matter of course. As a professional in the field of social work, as an academic, I was schooled to be an

effective critic and judge. As I sat in this meeting, I was keenly aware of my inner critic, passing judgment on Frank, and on Harriet and Eugene by association. It was clear to me that Frank was not only a perpetual victim and chronic malcontent, refusing to accept responsibility for the consequences of his actions, he was also a con artist. Harriet and Eugene were clearly being duped. Couldn't they see through his flimsy scam, his weak attempt to gain unwarranted sympathy? I was frustrated that he was allowed to rail against the system, unabated, making us all coconspirators in his dishonesty. I wanted to call him out, making it clear that I saw him for what he was, not as the innocent victim he claimed to be. Instead, I simply watched and reflected on these judgments as they presented themselves in my consciousness.

Perhaps others in the group were aware of their own internal critics. If so, their judgments, like my own, were never verbalized. Instead, Dale, a soft-spoken ex-prisoner, expressed empathy for Frank. Many of the men in the group nodded emphatically as Dale said that he was well aware that the actions of the DOC can seem unreasonable and unfair at times. He spoke calmly about how, based on his own experience, it is important for those in community supervision to learn to work within the system to find ways to get their needs met. Several others chimed in with practical suggestions for how Frank might deal with the conflict he found himself embroiled in. Whereas my own instincts were to shut Frank down and set him straight, the group did something very different. They provided a safe space for him to vent. They allowed him to share his perspective. They didn't label it as either fact or hyperbole. First and foremost, they simply listened. Before offering any suggestions or advice, Dale made it clear that he understood Frank's pain and empathized with his struggles.

After everyone had a chance to speak, Joe suggested that we take a short break. When we reconvened 10 minutes later, Joe said that he had asked Mary, an NVC trainer, to provide a mini-

NVC workshop in the time remaining. Mary, a petite woman with pink skin and clouds of white hair, was dressed in workout gear and tennis shoes. She looked like a spunky, middle class grandmother on her way to the gym. Many of the men knew Mary from workshops that she provided for them inside prison. Mary indicated that she had been taking notes throughout the meeting and that she thought it might be helpful to go back and process some of what had been shared.

She turned to Frank and asked him how he was feeling about what happened in court this week. Earlier Frank had shared what happened and what he thought about it. Now, she was asking him to share his *feelings*. Frank looked rigid and his speech was terse when he stated that he was feeling angry. She asked him, “What else?” Frank paused, took a breath and relaxed his shoulders as he admitted that he was also feeling afraid. We all sat in silence for a moment, taking in Frank’s vulnerability and fear. Mary then asked Frank, “What are your needs?” Frank looked perplexed. After a moment, voices started to emerge from around the circle. One person said, “It sounded to me like you need freedom.” Another person chimed in with, “I thought I heard you saying that you need autonomy.”

In a few minutes time, the group generated a whole list of needs that Frank had expressed in his earlier statements, including justice, ease and fairness. Frank confirmed that these needs were behind his anger and frustration. Mary then turned to Frank and asked him to make a request of himself or someone else that might allow him to get his needs met. He said, “There’s no point in asking the DOC to meet my needs. They’re not going to.” Heads nodded in agreement. He sat in silence for a moment. Finally he took a deep breath and sighed as he said, “I guess I have to make a request of myself to stop when I am angry and take a few deep breathes

before I do anything else.” In that moment, my inner critic was silent and I saw Frank as a real person, a fellow human being.

Mary continued to move her attention around the circle, processing the various experiences that we each shared earlier during the check-in. Henry seemed to find this especially helpful. He talked about the feelings that were surfacing for him as he approached his trip back home to visit his family. Like with Frank, the group helped him to identify his needs and he was able to verbalize some requests that he could make of himself and of family members that might help him cope more effectively.

Joe announced that it was time to end the meeting at 8:00. Several people expressed appreciation to Mary for facilitating the process that we had all shared in. Heads nodded in agreement as one man indicated that for him the exercise was “enriching.” Mary appeared to be both humble and authentic in her reply. She said that she appreciated the opportunity to facilitate because it provided a way for her to meet her need to contribute. The meeting ended with a group hug and an announcement by Joe: the August 4th meeting was cancelled due to a scheduling conflict. The next meeting was scheduled for August 18th.

As I left the meeting and walked back to my car, I felt sad as I realized that the August 18th meeting would be my last. I had experienced moments of real connection in this circle. For me, this was an unusual experience. I was never a joiner; never belonged for any length of time to a church or civic organization. My family moved often when I was a child. I didn’t feel at home in any particular place or with any particular group of people. This feeling of connectedness that I associated with the community circle seemed even more amazing given how little I had in common with the others in this group. It wasn’t as if these differences went unnoticed, at least not by me. My experience in the group felt somewhat schizophrenic. One

minute I found myself enveloped by the group, overwhelmed by a sense of belonging and association. I felt fully present and connected. Then my ego would emerge as a critical voice intent on separating me from the group. I would take notice of all the ways that the others were wrong or misguided or in need of correction. In those moments I felt superior, separate and alone. This feeling was not unknown to me. It was the alternating sense of connection that was novel and unique. It was this sense of belonging that called me back to the community circle.

August 18th was an unusually warm day in Seattle. The sun was shining and a warm breeze blew through the open windows of the Freedom Project meeting room. The turnout for the meeting was small. Mary was there, along with Trent, Henry and Blake. Blake, a tall slender, young black man, was dressed stylishly in faded jeans, an oversized designer jersey and new high tops. He looked like a walking icon for the hip hop generation. As usual, the meeting began with Joe sounding the chimes to signal a meditation period. We sat in silence for several minutes. However, our tranquility was pierced by the vociferous sounds emanating from the crowd of men gathered outside of the A.A. fellowship hall next door. Smiles and laughter broke out around the circle. It was one of those shared moments of understanding as we were all reminded not to take ourselves too seriously. Without a word, Blake went to the window and pushed it closed so that we could continue in silence. We sat for several minutes before Joe sounded the chimes again to signal the end of our meditation.

As is customary in the community circle, Joe suggested that we start by “checking in.” Blake was the first to speak. Tears welled up in the eyes of this big, strong man who reeked of cool, as he explained that the last few weeks had been very difficult for him. Blake had been out of prison for less than a year after serving nearly 20 years. He moved from the Monroe Correctional Complex directly into the home of his long-time girlfriend and mother of his six

year old son. He met Janet, his girlfriend, when she came to visit her brother who was also detained. He lived with Janet, his son and her two teenage children from previous relationships. One day he was living the life of a prisoner, a predictable, regimented life that he had become accustomed to. Upon his release, he was expected not only to care for himself, but also to be a partner to Janet, a father to his son and a stepfather to Janet's teenaged son and daughter. He was struggling to adjust.

There were problems at home and Blake wasn't sure how to respond. He was concerned that his stepson was drinking and using drugs. His own drinking and drug use were at least partially responsible for the actions that led him to prison. He made a firm decision prior to leaving prison to avoid people and places associated with his previous lifestyle. Now he was concerned that his stepson was bringing drugs into their home. Beyond the temptation this situation might present, this was something that could result in a parole violation for him and land him back in prison. He found himself playing dad by trying to impose structure on his rebellious teenage stepson. The boy was predictably resistant and disrespectful.

As Blake explained it, Janet waited many years for him to be released from prison. They maintained their relationship through letters and brief, supervised visits. Now that they were together on the outside, Janet seemed possessive and demanding. She complained that Blake wasn't home often enough. He worked two jobs and was seldom home longer than it took him to transition from one to the other. She wanted him to spend time with her and with the family. Her demands for intimacy frightened Blake. He admitted that his actions were partly an effort to avoid intimacy; intimacy was something that he was "not used to." After so many years behind bars his inclination was to isolate. He found himself shutting down emotionally and verbally. His transition to life on the outside was so difficult that he found himself trying to recreate some

aspects of his life on the inside. Blake talked about how he arranged his bedroom at home to resemble the cell that he lived in for so many years. He still used the mug that he was issued in prison for his morning coffee. For Blake, life on the outside was filled with frightening possibility.

His apprehension and need for order were evident as he described the dimensions of his new life. He looked like a frightened rabbit. And yet I was struck by the courage it took to reveal these intimate details in such a raw and honest way. Blake's emotions bubbled over and he began to sob as he explained that his grandmother died a few weeks earlier. We sat with him, witnesses to his pain, as tears streamed down his face. He took a few deep breathes and when he was able to speak again he laughed through his tears and told us that he had also wrecked his car in the preceding month. This was clearly one of those ironic final straws. Blake was distraught and overwhelmed. Life on the outside, with all the pleasures of freedom, was filled with complicated twists and turns, the transition itself painful.

Mary thanked Blake for sharing so earnestly. She acknowledged his courage and wisdom in recognizing his limits and reaching out for support. She talked about her gratitude for the community circle as a place where people can get the support that they need. Again, I felt drawn in, embraced by the group. Mary was like a wise and nurturing grandmother, drawing us together and making sure that there was a place at the table for everyone. There was a brief pause as we all seemed to be basking in the glow of our shared comradery.

Henry spoke next. He said that he was nervous about his upcoming trip back home, only a few weeks away now. His apprehension seemed to have increased since our last meeting, when he first explained that this would be his first trip home since he was released from prison. Sadness and regret were etched across his face as he explained that both his mother and his

grandmother passed away while he was incarcerated. He was not allowed to attend their funerals. This would be his first visit to their grave sites. He said that he was struggling with depression, a demon that he was obviously familiar with. He thought that the trip might allow him some closure.

Henry smiled as he shared a bit of good news. He was planning to vote in the primary election scheduled for the next day. He had not voted in eighteen years. He talked briefly about how difficult it had been for him, as an ex-felon, to get his voting rights back. I hadn't noticed until now that he was wearing a Barack Obama button pinned to the front of his overalls. I could only imagine what it might mean to a black man from the south, old enough to have survived segregation and the civil rights movement, to vote in this historical election after having fought so hard to regain his rights as a citizen. I was touched by the poignancy of the moment.

It was my turn to speak next. I was at a loss for words. I could feel a huge lump in my throat and I didn't hold back my tears as I told them all how touched I was by their stories, by their honesty, by their courage. I told them how sad I was that this was my last meeting. My tears were met with a warm and nurturing silence.

The group turned to Mary next. She spoke about her own recent experiences with a grandson who had a drinking problem. She talked about her desire for him to make changes in his life and how she felt powerless to affect the situation. I was struck by the equality and reciprocity that was so evident in this group. Mary was willing to reveal herself in much the same way that both Blake and Henry had earlier. She wasn't there as an expert, beyond reproach, without vulnerabilities and weaknesses, with special authority, as teachers and other professionals so often are. And yet she was respected for her knowledge as a teacher. This was

evident in the attentiveness with which others listened to what she had to share, particularly around the special knowledge that she had as a NVC trainer.

When she was done sharing the details of her personal experiences with her grandson, Joe asked Mary to share a handout that she brought for the group. She seamlessly moved from participant to teacher as she passed around copies of her handout. For her, it was clear there was no division; she was both participant and teacher, as were we all. She simply made a slight adjustment in terms of her function. Power was not part of the equation. The handout was entitled “Guidelines for Living Life to the Fullest.” I couldn’t help but think, as we took turns reading parts of it aloud, that the moments I shared with these individuals in the community circle were among the fullest that I could recall.

Blake

The first time I saw Blake he was stepping out of a sleek, grey sedan. It was a late model luxury car, the kind you might expect a banker to drive. He was tall and lean, dressed in an oversized jersey and pressed stonewashed jeans with unscathed leather sneakers, very urban GQ. He looked youthful and energetic, with a charismatic smile. He didn’t fit my image of an ex-convict, much less one who was only recently released after serving the biggest part of a 20 year sentence. Blake led a life that is seemingly full of contradictions and incongruity. During my time with him, I found many of my assumptions and stereotypes called into question.

Blake’s friends call him Chi, short for Chicago. He grew up there on the south side, in and around Cabrini Green, also known as “Little Hell” (Seligman, 2005). His dialect gives this away. He is a “fast talker.” At times his words tumble out so quickly they collide and are difficult to untangle. Despite the notoriety of his boyhood home, the word Blake uses most often to describe his upbringing is “fun.” He grins and rubs his chin as he tells of his community, a

place where “respect” and “integrity” were paramount. There was a community philosophy that he describes as “each one, teach one.” Describing his relationship with the adults in his life he says, “There were things they wouldn’t allow us to see.” He goes on, “When I was growing up, when adults was having card parties and drinks was out, we couldn’t even come in the room, you know, you wasn’t allowed.” He says this was “the community showing they care.”

Blake describes his family as “close knit.” He says that he was “raised by women,” most notably his mother, grandmother and aunt. He would move among their respective homes as he wished. He says,

I could do a school year at my grandmothers and then say: I wanna stay at my mom’s for the summer...or I might stay with my aunty for the whole summer and just hang out with my cousins... because my aunt’s kids, my cousins...were my brothers and sisters in my world because I don’t have brothers and sisters.

Blake’s father was absent from his life and he acknowledges: “I don’t know what the outcome could have been had my dad been there...he wasn’t.” He says, “I had my stepdad and my granddad, and then some of the older gentlemen in the neighborhood.” He credits these men, as well as the women in his life, with teaching him “to respect people, give people their respect.”

For Blake, there were clear expectations for behavior. He says,

You did your house chores as little boys...you mopped the floor, you take out the garbage, you cut the grass, you do yard work... bed had to be made every morning, and it wasn’t like a boot camp type setting, it was [to] teach me how to be responsible...you took pride in cleaning the house, because it’s the way you’re raised.

Responsibility was a major theme in Blake's young life, a "really important value." At the same time, he says that there "was no pointing finger, blame." This explains Blake's perspective on "the law."

It does happen but it's rare that people get framed. In most cases, 99% of the time, in some form or fashion you've broken the law, in order to be put in that situation, well you had yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time...so it's being accountable, that's what I learned at a young age growing up and that's why I accept accountability now for whatever I do.

Blake says that he was not raised to be a criminal, "that was not instilled in us... certain things you just weren't allowed to do." He jokingly says, "We were not allowed to watch *Benny Hill*... I mean this was how disciplined my household was."

Blake's world extended beyond his family and neighborhood to include a church community. He says, "We went to church on Sunday...Baptist church," something he attributes to his family's southern roots. He goes on, "We were originally from Mississippi...in a lot of southern houses...you grew up in...the church and so that's just a part of your learning," He says he "read the Bible, [was] baptized and the whole nine yards. It isn't something that was forced on you, but...you're in church every Sunday and so that was a part of my world growing up." Blake describes himself as a person of "faith." Perhaps this explains this undaunted optimism. He describes how even when he found himself "in the most dark place" he believed that his situation could "turn for the better." He says, "I feel blessed to this day, I feel blessed." I found this remarkable, given the twists and turns his life has taken.

I asked Blake what he learned about white people growing up. He says that there weren't any "bitter feelings...hatred wasn't taught in my house." And yet Blake wasn't blind to racial inequality. He says,

Chicago was just a segregated city and that was the harsh reality of it...there's black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, Puerto Rican neighborhoods...just because I've been chased by white dudes, you know, with bats and everything...being chased because you're black, you know, so even with that, even with going through those experiences it was still, I was still educated on why this is happening, just because those dudes was chasing you or just because this white person might use racial slurs or whatever that don't mean all white people are like that.

Blake says that growing up he learned to "be open minded." He says that this tendency to reserve judgment allows him to "get along with everybody."

Blake clearly was not a deprived child. In fact, he says, "I didn't want for anything, uh, I didn't want for nothing, I've always had any and everything I wanted." He describes himself as "a spoiled child." A smile erupts across his face when I ask: "How would other people have described you?" He says:

People would say: [Blake's] outgoing, he get along with everybody, keeps a smile on his face...it would be all good things that they would say about [Blake], even to this day...even the administration in the prison system...would have nothing but good things to say about me...it goes back to the way I was raised, though, to respect people, give people their respect.

Blake goes on to describe himself as a "peaceful" person. He says: "I've been in fights, growing up, but someone would have to really go out of their way to get me to that point, because I'm

more of a peacemaker you know.” Blake says that he always had the desire to help others: “I used to help the women in the neighborhood, I’d help people in the neighborhood, that desire’s always been there, my whole life.”

Blake fidgets and squirms in his seat as we talked. I suspected, at times, that he wants to escape the confined space and my probing questions. He doesn’t appear to be evasive, merely restless and impatient. His behavior is much like the children I have worked with and diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). I ask if he is familiar with the disorder. He is. He says, “ADHD, yeah, I probably had it.” He says that he always had a lot of energy and was easily distracted. He tells me that he read his first book in prison in 2006. He didn’t read books as a child because: “I would lose interest.” He enjoyed hands-on, physical activities.

He was also a bit of a risk-taker. He says, “I took risks in life...do a lot of crazy stuff, to me it was having fun.” He recalls “hoppin” the L train with his female cousin. He says:

I climbed up to get to the top rail and climbed through the tracks to get up on the platform to ride the L for free when I actually had the bus fare in my pocket...that excitement, that risk taking, to climb that far from the ground to get up in the air and to say I did that, to climb in through the window ten stories up in the air, climbing from window to window, me and my little cousin and to look down, ten stories down...that was fun...it was scary, too.

He recalls, with a laugh, the times they jumped on the back of public transit buses and rode for blocks as the buses careened through the city while they clung to the exterior surfaces. These are fond memories for Blake, ones he enjoys telling. All of these stories involve his “little cousin.”

He recalls:

One night we decided to see what the socket would do...So I said ok, you stick the screw driver in the socket and I'll hold your hand, so if anything happen we're together. We were living in the projects then, in Cabrini Green, and she stuck that screw driver in the socket and of course it went straight through her, straight through me...my aunt put me in the bathtub with ice and frozen hot dogs, my whole right side of my arm turned black, we were just blessed that we didn't die from that.

While these stories do demonstrate a propensity for risky behavior, they are hardly indicative of criminal tendencies.

Blake did have a couple of brushes with the law in his youth, however, he never faced criminal prosecution and was never incarcerated. He shares an incident that happened when he was in high school:

A dope dealer came through and got pulled over in our neighborhood and he was driving a fancy car and they took him to jail and the car sat there and that night some of the older guys in the neighborhood went and started stripping the car. So me and a buddy of mine took the opera lights off the car, all right, well I took them off, put them on my car.

He sat in the precinct jail waiting for his mother to get off work and ride the bus across town to get him. He says: "I got in big trouble for that." On another occasion, he was stopped in his neighborhood, searched and found to be in possession of seven marijuana joints. Again his mother had to retrieve him from the precinct, but he avoided formal charges. In spite of where he grew up, Blake had little to no familiarity with the criminal justice system. He says: "Most American families have somebody in their family that's been in prison, that's incarcerated or been incarcerated, but we didn't experience that in our family."

There were “gangs” in Blake’s neighborhood, however, he says, “the gangs were different then.” He was involved with a neighborhood group called the *Wood Raiders*. He describes it this way: “it was older guys mentoring young guys.” He describes the kids in his gang as “little soldiers,” however, he says, “we weren’t even exposed to guns...they weren’t even a part of our whole program.” He goes on, “we didn’t sell dope, certain things you just weren’t allowed to do.” He says that there was a certain “territorial” aspect to the group, it was like a “community center without the center.”

I must admit, I was a little confused by Blake’s description of his neighborhood “gang.” I had come to associate gangs with criminal activity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe the *Wood Raiders* as a *neighborhood youth group* or *corner group*. According to Salagaev, Shashkin, Sherbakova, & Touriyanskiy (2005), “The functional characteristic of a neighborhood youth group is the tendency to engage in joint leisure activities; the comparable characteristic of juvenile gangs is a proclivity for illegal activity” (p. 174). Certainly there is a relationship between corner groups and gangs, with one sometimes morphing into the other. But I think it is safe to say the Blake was by no means a ‘gang banger’ in the sense that we have come to understand that term today.

As a teenager, Blake spent a lot of time with his girlfriend. He says, “We became girlfriend and boyfriend when we were 13...everywhere I went she went, we was together all day.” This relationship continued through high school and into adulthood, until Blake moved from Chicago at the age of 24. It is clear that school did not hold much interest for Blake. He says his teachers told his mom: “He’s respectful but won’t stop talking...and he want to keep everybody in the class laughing.” He wasn’t involved in school activities. He says, “I played no sports, none...cars, that was my sport.” Cars are the love of Blake’s life. He describes this

interest, bordering on obsession, as a “passion” that was ignited in his youth. Blake says that he spent most of his time as a boy “down there in the alley working on a car.” He describes his experience this way,

In Chicago, we’d have a lot of auto mechanics, we called them grease monkeys, alley mechanic grease monkey...so as a young kid I stood around and watched them work on cars or watch them work on big trucks, watch them do brake jobs, tire and then a couple of other guys in the community used to let me come help them out so...they might be changing flats so I’m running and get the tire out or the jack iron or put the tire on and tighten them up and so I started picking up, catching on like that there, every day go and hang out with them...

Finally, school had something to offer Blake. He says, “When I got to high school I immediately signed up for automotive and that took it to another level and then it was just more and more, it was all about cars, cars, cars, cars, all about cars.” Blake’s eyes light up as he talks about his first car, “a 1972 Chevy Impala my granddad gave to me,” and how he used to pull it into the shop at school every day “just to check everything because cars is like my first true, true passion.” Blake had dreams of a career in the automotive field. He talks about visiting colleges with his mom “out to the suburbs, outside Chicago” and how, based on assessments, they were told, “[Blake’s] gonna do great in automotive, this guy knows cars like the back of his hand, sign [Blake] up for this college and in four years [Blake] will come out and design automobiles for the likes of General Motors and Lexus.”

Blake’s passion, however, wasn’t enough to keep him in school. He was often late for first period his senior year. He says, “If I was late I wouldn’t wanta go to the class. I walked to the class, look at everybody in class [through the window in the door]...I wouldn’t go in because

I knew that I was going to be put on the spot. I did this many, many, many days throughout the year.” After many absences his teacher called him and said, “If you miss one more day, you will not graduate, you’ve missed entirely too many days this year.” Blake did miss one more day, but says that the response from school officials were far from uncaring. An assistant principle who Blake describes as “real nice” met with Blake and his mother to discuss alternatives. Ultimately, Blake was enrolled in a “trade school” on the other side of the city, in “a white area of town.” Blake says, “I didn’t give it a chance because I didn’t like the environment that the trade school was sitting in...Chicago was very segregated and back then if you get caught in the wrong neighborhood it could cost you your life.”

Blake’s life continued to revolve around cars to a large extent. He says: “After the high school thing and trade school situation that didn’t quite fare out, I continued on with life, with just working on cars, drinking beer and smoking weed and just hanging out in the hood.” Blake worked a variety of jobs, including jobs in fast food and manufacturing. He has fond memories of this time, just after high school. He remembers, “spending time with family, having barbecues...and playing spades, the weekend we’d just play spades, play cards all weekend or pinochle...it would be a lot of family time.”

Blake also remembers changes in his neighborhood, many of which he associates with increasing poverty and a growing drug trade. He says,

Everyone’s struggling, it’s like one big piece of meat sitting in the middle of the road and everybody’s trying to get a piece of it...’87, ’88, ’89 is when things started really getting bad because that big piece of meat sitting in the middle of the road was getting smaller and smaller, so that means like survival of the fittest.

He describes this period as a time when “the drug war was in full effect so we had more people being turned out onto heavy drugs.” As a young man in this environment, Blake remembers feeling that “it’s every man for himself because now no one can be trusted” a situation he describes as “a war amongst yourselves.” With many of his childhood friends succumbing to addiction and violence, and his own drug use on the rise, Blake was urged by his family to “leave Chicago.”

Blake had a cousin who had recently relocated to Seattle. She wrote to the family, singing the praises of Seattle and asking Blake to make the trip with her daughter, who was too young to travel alone by bus. He says: “My grandmother and my mom was like, ‘why don’t you go up to Seattle, take your little cousin up to Seattle to her mom, see if you like Seattle’ ... so me and her daughter got on the Greyhound and we rode three days.”

Blake immediately began working in Seattle. He “got two jobs...cooking at Kentucky Fried Chicken and washing dishes in Denny’s, back to back, 16 hours a day.” Although he found it relatively easy to find work, there were some aspects of his adjustment that Blake found more challenging. For Blake, life in Seattle was “a major culture shock.” He remembers asking his cousin and her husband: “Where are the black people?” He was staying with his cousin’s family in the “north end,” an area that was, at that time, predominately white. He says: “I’m kind of lost here...I’m going home every day and every morning, saying to my cousin, ‘Why are these white people so friendly? They’re like ‘Hi [Blake].’ I’m like, ‘Are they trying to set me up?’ Something ain’t right, you know?” Blake was in search of more familiar surroundings. He goes on, “then they tell me about this CD...that’s where all the black people are, so I knew...I need an automobile.” Acquiring a vehicle would be the beginning of a long and difficult odyssey that Blake could scarcely anticipate at the age of 24.

It all began with a bet. Blake observed that it was not uncommon in Seattle for people to leave their cars running, keys in the ignition, while they ran into stores. Blake says, “You didn’t see this in Chicago.” He goes on,

It was a bet between me and my cousin, we was high...we had been drinking all night and I said the next car we see running...the next drinks on me if you jump in and take off and meet me at the house. He said, ‘I’m not.’ I said, ‘ah, you coward.’ He said, ‘Well you do it.’ I said, ‘Not a problem.’

In spite of the fact that Blake was working and had plans to buy a car that he had already picked out, he made a decision to steal a vehicle, on a lark. This was undoubtedly the most consequential decision of his young life and yet Blake shares what happened next without much flourish. He says, “...so the next car we seen running I took the ladies truck, maybe four or five blocks to the house, I said, ‘OK the drinks on you.’”

Blake didn’t behave like a fugitive on the run. In fact, he says,

I get in the truck and go right back up on the same street where I took it from. But I’m so intoxicated I don’t see the police car, but he see me, they see the truck, yeah, he’s just sitting there, just waiting and I drive past him and go right in the grocery store, get the drink, the drink was a dollar and some change and I thought, ‘There’s a lot of change in the ashtray in the truck,’ so I come back out of the store, totally intoxicated, I walked to the truck, opened the door, when I stick my head in the [truck] I feel the cold rod hit me right here in the neck. I knew then it was the police because no one knew me up here, wasn’t nobody playing with me. He pulled me back, ‘Freeze! You’re under arrest!’

Throw me on the ground, scratched my face all up and what have you, cuffed me up, then some more guys grabbed me by the cuffs, the cuffs and the back of my pants, just lift me

up in the air, pretty big, obviously pretty strong. I can see the lady sitting in the back of this police car. I can see her head shake and I got arrested.

Blake was taken to the King County jail where he slept off his drug induced fog. After he emerged, he asked to make a phone call and was told, "Well you can make a phone call but...you're not gonna get bail tonight." Blake would soon learn that he was being charged not only with auto theft, but also with "second degree robbery and first degree kidnap." His response, "Who'd I kidnap?"

He was soon taken to an interrogation room where a detective: "slide me a newspaper article, 'Black Male Doing Robberies Downtown Seattle'... So I read the newspaper article, slide it back and say, 'It's not me.'" Blake was understandably nervous. He says, "I get nervous when I get around police officers, so I, I had a habit of moving." This would be used against him later when the officers would, "swear up and down because I was rocking my leg I was nervous, but this has been a habit all my life." Nevertheless, this observation was used as an implication of guilt. Blake was Mirandized and asked to initial forms indicating that he understood his rights, he says, "I had no idea what they are." He says, "I waved all my rights," something he describes as a "mistake." Before Blake ever saw an attorney, he was put in a lineup. He remembers looking out at the audience, a large group and thinking, "I don't know who these people are." The only recognizable face was that of the "lady" from whom he "took the truck." Afterwards he asked the detective, "How many picked me?" The detective said, "'All 13 picked you.' So I laughed...He said, '[Blake], serious, 13 people out there, 13 people picked you and all of them said you the man that robbed them, they said you the one that did the robberies.'" Blake goes on, "They charged me with, let's see, 6, 7, 8...8 counts of robbery, 2 counts of first degree kidnap."

Blake would later learn that individuals were held captive in some of the robberies he was charged with. He wasn't, however, privy to these details at the time he was charged.

Still confused, Blake attended his first hearing, "I know I stole the truck, I can't figure out the kidnapping, you know? So we go to the hearing and they set bail at \$250,000, clearly I can't make that bail." Blake pled "not guilty" and began his wait for trial. Blake now had a public defender who tried to have testimony from the detectives, as well as the evidence obtained through the lineup, suppressed. The detectives claimed that not only did Blake appear to be nervous ("his leg was shaking and twitching"), he also confessed to the robberies. However, their accounts of the confession differed. The judge refused to suppress any of the evidence. Blake was offered a plea bargain in exchange for a guilty plea. He told his attorney,

I didn't do it, I stole the truck, I'll plead guilty to the truck, I'm not pleading guilty to the rest of that...I don't know anything about the criminal justice system or the law, but I watched enough TV to know that if I plead guilty to something I can't fight it, so I'm not taking a plea bargain.

His attorney warned that if they went to trial, "The prosecutor's gonna be mad and...they've already said they're gonna ask for 40 to 80 years." Contrary to his attorney's advice, Blake refused to take the plea bargain. He said, "If it's meant for me to do 40 to 80 years in prison I'm gonna do it, but I'm not pleading guilty to that, that's what I'm not doing."

In the mean time, the prosecution continued to build its case. Blake says, "They went and searched my cousin's house...looking for the clothing that this guy, the robber, was wearing, the Members Only coat, the Oakland As hat, you know, so they don't find none." They did, however, have fingerprints from the crime scenes. The fingerprints were entered into evidence at trial. Blake says,

So I turned to my attorney and said: ‘Object to that, those are not my fingerprints. I know they’re not my fingerprints.’ He said, ‘Your honor I object, my client says those are not his fingerprints.’ So the judge asked the prosecuting attorney, ‘Are those the defendant’s fingerprints?’ The prosecutor said, ‘Actually, your honor they’re not his fingerprints.’ So why did you even make the jury think they were my fingerprints?

Blake was getting a quick education in the workings of the criminal justice system. He says, “Had I been sitting there and said nothing, they [the jury] really would have thought they were my fingerprints.”

Blake’s trial lasted four days. He was found guilty on all charges, except two, “six robberies and two first degree kidnappings.” Blake was never charged with anything in regard to the stolen vehicle, the only crime he claims he committed. When Blake got to the sentencing phase of his trial, there was some confusion over new sentencing guidelines that were imposed that year. Blake was one of the first to be sentenced under these new guidelines and the judge admitted that he didn’t know how to “figure the points” to determine the length of the sentence. There was considerable discussion and debate between the judge and prosecution. Blake says, “This is my life we’re talking about...I mean they’re sitting there guessing...just guessing now on my livelihood, so the guessing game went on for an hour, when they were done I was to receive...a total of 239 months, which was 30 days short of 20 years.” Blake’s public defender argued that “the time that you’re sentencing my client to today, you’ve had guys come before you faced with multiple sex convictions...and [they] still didn’t receive this amount of time that my client received and he’s fairly young, he’s only 24 years old.” The judge wasn’t swayed. He turned to Blake and asked if he had anything to say. Blake recalls saying, “Well I want to thank you and the prosecuting attorney and my attorney, you guys feel you did your job, thank you and

may God bless you and I'm ready." The judge left him with this bit of advice, "[Blake] I just gave you a significant amount of time, I recommend that you take advantage of the Department of Corrections."

I was stunned by Blake's story. First, I had to ask: Was Blake telling me the truth? I saw no reason for him to lie. The events that he recalled happened nearly 20 years ago. Furthermore, while he did claim to be innocent of the crimes he was convicted of, he admitted to another serious crime. Of course, I know that people are convicted everyday in this country for crimes they didn't commit and that men of color are far more likely to be incarcerated. But Blake was not a statistic in my Sociology 101 textbook or a talking head on television. He was a real human being who was just released after spending most of his adult life in prison. I didn't really want to face the anger and sadness that rose up in me at the thought of this injustice. I can only imagine the pain and anger that Blake must endure. I ask him about this. Blake says,

I'm not mad... it was meant to be... I think everything happens for a reason. For me to experience that prison sentence...there was something there for me from the people that I met, the people that met me, the people that have influence in my life and maybe I'm having influence in their lives...it all happened for a reason.

Blake clearly accepts responsibility for the crime he did commit and recognizes that had he never done that crime he would not have ended up in prison. There is some justice in this fact for him. And while in many ways Blake was powerless over his situation, he decided to seize the little power he had access to in prison, the power to change himself.

Blake knew that prison can, "break you down psychologically." Hunger was a problem for Blake in prison, he says: "Your stomach is just talking to you." Although he was hungry and scared, Blake reached out early and often. He says, "I took every program they offered me in the

prison system. I wanted to take control of my life.” He learned to use computers and studied for his GED. Blake took classes on anger management, victim awareness and substance abuse. In fact, he repeated the substance abuse class three times and participated in Alcoholics Anonymous while he was incarcerated. He remembers watching films that depicted addiction. He says, “I sat there and watched it and say, ‘Wow, that was me right there, you know, that’s how I looked, wow that’s sad.’” Blake claims that he has not used alcohol or any other drug since he was arrested in 1990. He says that the “urge” to drink or use “died when I woke up in that holding cell.” He goes on, “If you took someone’s property under the influence you have abused that right to have a drink.”

Life, for Blake, didn’t stop the day he was incarcerated. It is clear that Blake made a life for himself behind bars. Blake got married in prison when he was 31. He met his wife when she came to the prison with her sister to visit the father of her sister’s son, who was also Blake’s friend. He says,

She just took a liking to me...and we just went from there. At the time I told her: let’s just be friends. I have 13 years left...so I can’t do anything for you, I can write you letters, that’s it. She says no. She wanted to pursue it, so we pursued it.

His wife helped him fight his conviction. He says, “My ex-wife paid an attorney \$150 an hour. We fought it...I seen that the attorney was pretty much doing everything that the [jailhouse lawyers] in prison did for me, so I said forget it. I’ll finish the time. I don’t want you wasting the money...I’m all right.” The marriage lasted four years until Blake’s wife got pregnant by someone on the outside, something he asked her not to do.

Blake found a vocation, of sorts, for himself in prison. He found himself “educating people” about what was needed to survive on the outside. He was motivated to develop certain

skills himself because, “I seen people that were coming and going...a guy got out today and came back next week.” He made himself “aware of what was going on in the communities so I knew what I was going to be walking into...because I saw too many people come back.” This was knowledge he shared with this fellow inmates. He learned and taught how to complete job applications, write resumes and conduct successful job interviews.

He developed another sort of expertise, as well. He became quite adept at understanding and advocating for the rights of those he was incarcerated with. He says he was, “...just learning the system so that you keep it fair.” He would often help guys challenge infractions when the infractions were not supported by the rules. He describes how he would sometimes get involved if “a guy had problems with his counselor.” They would “read the policy and challenge them on the policy.” He says that he was “respectful to authority, but when we have someone in authority that it goes against the grain, so to speak, I would challenge it and just take it to their superiors and in most cases the superiors say, ‘You know, you guys are right.’” This propensity to advocate for others eventually got Blake in trouble. He was “kicked out of Monroe in 2000 for having too much influence on people, it’s the term they used because I [was] educating people.” Blake’s transfer from Monroe came after he was accused of organizing a “hunger strike,” something he denies.

This was not Blake’s only brush with trouble in prison. He was put in segregation once because his “cellmate felt threatened.” His cellmate was sick with what Blake understood to be TB and hepatitis C and had habits that Blake feared would spread the illnesses to him. Blake himself was experiencing unexplained symptoms and was afraid that he might have already contracted something from his cellmate. The tensions continued to build in the tiny cell until Blake says, “I lost my cool...I flipped my wig on this guy...I just snapped.” Although the

altercation was “all verbal, nothing physical,” Blake received an infraction. He doesn’t deny his culpability in this incident.

On another occasion, Blake did feel threatened in prison and prepared himself for a fight. Another inmate, the ex-husband of a woman Blake was involved with, threatened Blake. This threat he says, took him “back to the streets of Chicago.” He goes on “He took me so far with the threat, because I am a fearful person. When you scare me, you take me to where I got to, by all means necessary, protect myself... We was getting ready for a big heavyweight, HBO title night fight and somebody’s not gonna be standing up at the end of the fight and I didn’t intend on it being me.” In the end, there wasn’t a fight. When the two met face to face, Blake says, “He changed his mind about a lot of things, he didn’t want to [fight], he apologized.”

The woman over which the conflict erupted was Kim. Blake met Kim not long after he was incarcerated. They corresponded and visited over the years. Blake says that their relationship began in 1992 and was “off and on” over the years. They conceived a child together in 2000. I ask Blake how this happened since the two of them were never married and were, therefore, not eligible for “extended family visits.” Blake appears somewhat evasive when he says, “

This was one of those circumstances where, uh, this opportunity, a golden opportunity... presented itself, one that comes far and few between, it presented itself, it was like, uh, wow... the overseers, the watchers, they... supported it, I seen the opportunity... and somehow we connected somehow and they pretty much allowed it... I knew they did because it was mentioned after the fact.

So Blake became a father while in prison. His son was born in 2001. Kim and Blake, however, lost contact with one another until 2005 when they resumed their relationship.

After they resumed their relationship, Blake “prayed” that he would be sent back to Monroe, “...because that put me 45 minutes from [Kim] and put me back on this side of the mountains where they’re more liberal over here than they are on the other side of the mountains...that is the best place to do time.” Knowing that he had already been kicked out of Monroe and that “it’s hard to get to Monroe, a lot of people trying to get to Monroe,” Blake made a request to be transferred to another, less desirable, facility on the west side of the state. Blake’s request was denied. Instead he was transferred to Monroe. He says, “I thank God because my prayers were answered...I was on my way back to Monroe. I was 45 minutes from seeing [Kim] and the kids.”

There are at least two other factors that distinguish Monroe from other facilities in the state. First, Monroe houses a substantial number of sex offenders. I ask Blake how he felt about living and working with sex offenders. He says,

I don’t hold it against them because I know they have a...I know it’s something mentally, it’s something that’s bothering them and it’s a control thing. It’s a feeling that sometimes they maybe can’t control. Does that make them a monster? No. Is it wrong? Yes. Do they hurt people? Yes, but when they’re pushed away and pushed away all you do is push them into doing it again. I mean you push them until they get self-pity and then they get mad and they get irritated and frustrated and then their mind gonna wonder.

He goes on, “I got buddies that are sex offenders.” He talks about one person in particular who, “is like a son to me. When I met [him] he was a lost kid and a sex offender...I didn’t judge him.” Perhaps one of the most important lessons that Blake has learned along the way is something he shares with the other inmates, “You’re not your crime, you made some poor decisions at the time

you made them, but don't wrap yourself in negativity, accept it for what it's worth, accept responsibility and move on with life and know that no one's perfect."

Monroe is also one of the only prisons in the state where inmates can learn NVC in workshops and classes offered by the Freedom Project. Blake describes these classes and workshops as a "blessing in disguise." He recalls how he got involved, "I get to Monroe and the week I get there...my buddy...come to me and said, 'Hey man, I want to introduce you to this guy named [Sol]. Saturday we got a meeting so you can get involved in this NVC.'" Blake went to his first workshop that Saturday and was immediately recruited to be an inside mentor for the Freedom Project.

Blake was quickly impressed with Sol, a former prisoner who worked for the Freedom Project. Blake says, "He was the only person that did NVC training that was an ex-felon." Blake says that Sol was often "the talk" among his fellow inmates, "[Sol] would be an inspiration. He did time...and then he comes back in." He talks about his respect and admiration for Sol and how he would and his fellow inmates would,

...celebrate the fact that [Sol], being an ex-felon, has turned his life around. He's living a normal life and people...would envy that, in a good way...He used to be in those very units and he goes home every day...and eat what he want to eat, and go where he want to go.

Blake observed that, in many ways, Sol was a more effective trainer than other prison volunteers, in part because of his status as a former inmate. He says that Sol would,

...undoubtedly get more of a response [from participants]. When there is an ex-felon sitting there facilitating something [participants are] going to tune in. This guy could tell

me something, give me some news I can use, because he's walked in my shoes and he's successful. He's got a successful life, so whatever he's doing I wanta do.

He says that his experiences with Sol and NVC gave him a "sense of hope."

Blake says that when Sol came into the prison to conduct a workshop or class, "He always brought someone in with him, another volunteer." Blake says he "thought highly" of these volunteers. He goes on,

[It] takes a lot for a person that's in the community, that's...living a normal everyday life, to come up and sit in a prison for 2 days, drive home the one night and then drive back up the next day, all in the name of volunteering, to give back, to help teach and facilitate and share the concepts and knowledge of NVC [and] mindfulness.

Blake saw himself as a volunteer on the inside, so he says, "I had a good outlook or perspective on what a volunteer was and what a volunteer do." I share with Blake my observation that most people involved in teaching and learning NVC were white. I ask if this was true of the Freedom Project volunteers that he encountered. He says, "Clearly, very much so; the entire population was aware of it." He doesn't elaborate.

Blake had already been a prisoner for well over a decade when he was sent to Monroe. However, he had never encountered anything like NVC before. Blake says, "My first impression of NVC was, it was something that's been needed in the Department of Corrections for years, and not only in the Department of Corrections, but something that's needed in the community." According to Blake,

NVC teaches you how to communicate...how to deal with self, and communicate whether it's with your spouse or your kids, your mother, your brother, your boss, the

metro driver...I found NVC to be a remarkable tool to use in my life...I think you can use the steps of NVC to diffuse a situation so easy...I have applied it.

More specifically, Blake says that he learned about “needs and observations. So now you’re able to observe what’s really going on and know your need.” He also learned to distinguish “the difference between a need and a want.” Blake talks about how he would practice NVC in his encounters with staff at the prison,

You will approach your counselor in a whole different manner, just by some of the things you learn in NVC....I just learned about needs, oh, my counselor has a need, the counselor has a need for me to stay in programming, now that I know that there I’m able to share my needs with my counselor in a respectful way. I’ve been trying to do this for years but I just didn’t know how to do it.

Blake describes it as “a different way to approach things in life,” an approach that leads to a “much more peace in the households” and “much more peace in the world.”

Perhaps this is why Blake decided to share what he learned with Kim, even before he was released from prison. Kim attended a couples’ workshop that was conducted inside the prison by the Freedom Project. He says, “That bonded us because that’s the first time we were sitting in a room together, without sitting in a visiting room with hard tables. We had from eight o’clock all the way to four o’clock and it was nice.”

When Blake left prison in 2008, it was with the intention that he and Kim would live together with their seven year old son and her two children from previous relationships. Although Blake’s original transition plan was to “get my own apartment because I had the money...come out and report to my probation officer...get me a job, get me a car, enjoy life and do community organizing and be involved in the community,” he decided a few months before

his release to try to make a family and a life with “the unofficial wife and three kids.” Kim’s children were 13 and 17 and Blake says, “I told her: me and the kids are gonna have issues.” There have been conflicts. At the time of our interview, Blake had been out of prison less than a year and he was struggling to forge relationships with the children. Kim’s 17 year old son presents a particular challenge. At times, NVC has helped to bridge the gap between the two of them. He shares this story,

A violent incident occurred at the house with him...he’s a big, big boy...he scared his mother...He ran out the house, he stormed out and said, ‘You guys are not my family.’ And I was like, ‘Ok, well, you’re out of here buddy, you can’t stay here anymore, you are out of here, and so don’t ever knock on the door again.’ And at this point...I think to myself, ‘You know, this is a 17 year old and he’s going through some things and something’s wrong’ and I told [Kim]...‘We gonna apply NVC. We’ve tried everything to communicate for all this summer, let’s try NVC.’ I applied NVC steps with [Carl] and you would be amazed at the results we got...We shared our needs and it brought out things that he had been wanting to say, how he was feeling and things that we, [Kim] and I, weren’t seeing. We applied so much pressure on them guys, him and his sister, about keeping their rooms clean, cleaning the dishes up and this and that. He said, ‘You guys don’t care about me, you guys do everything for [the other kids]’...[Carl’s] dad is in prison...and when he said, ‘You guys don’t care about me,’ I knew it was a problem. It hadn’t dawned on me that...he needed a bed...I hadn’t bought him shoes since January. So when he shared that day, everything went well and that’s the power and the effect of NVC.

As a result of their discussion, Blake bought Carl the things he needed, but more importantly he heard how Carl not having the things he needed made him feel that he was not cared for or valued as a member of the family.

The transition to life on the outside has been challenging for Blake in many ways. He admits that he has been “institutionalized.” He says,

You learn certain habits, get accustomed to certain things. So one has to allow himself to transition back into a life of freedom in every aspect, a freedom of people walking around the house, a freedom of hearing footsteps, because so many hours and minutes and seconds you don't hear that, You don't be around intimacy, you don't be around company, the only thing you're hugging is a pillow and nothing is, absolutely nothing is, hugging you back, so you become cold to the slightest touch. You don't wanta be touched.

Intimacy is a particular challenge for Blake. Life on the inside was safe for him in many ways. Ironically, for Blake, the fact that he couldn't get out also meant that no one was getting in. He says,

With 30 ought sixes, nobody could get over the wall, nobody could get through the gate...you could go to bed at night and watch the cell door lock, you can lay down and be comfortable and not think about nothing, cause you know the only thing gonna come through that door are the police officers. There is no burglaries, nothing like that.

He says that he learned to find solace in the fact that everything on the inside was “very controlled.” Blake became so accustomed to this controlled environment that he has, in some ways, tried to recreate it on the outside. He still has all the things he brought with him from prison: his prison issued uniform and jacket, the radio/TV he had in his cell and his prison ID

badge. He even has his bedroom arranged in much the same way as the cell he left eight months ago. Blake says he will, “never forget about prison.” For Blake, the constant reminders of where he has been help to ensure that he will never go back.

Much of Blake’s life today is focused on his work. When Blake was released he got a warehouse job. He was a forklift driver and he was “miserable” because, as he says, “It was unfair the way they was treating me.” Perhaps because he was a former prisoner on probation, he did not receive the same pay or raises as other workers. He was offered a job with the Freedom Project a few months after his release and he took it in spite of a pay cut. This job offers Blake benefits that are hard to come by as a convicted felon. He feels appreciated and says, “I get to do what I love to do...help people.”

Blake does community-based work for the Freedom Project. Work that he says is important because upon release most inmates are,

...placed on a Greyhound and sent back to the city that you were arrested in. In most cities, most Greyhound stations is just a cesspool of drug activity and alcohol. So a lot of guys don’t even get a chance. They don’t even make it from Greyhound to get to the probation office.

He hopes that by connecting them with Freedom Project volunteers on the outside, inmates will have the support they need to make it in the community. The community program is new, but Blake is hopeful. He says, “We’re gonna connect them 6 months in and 6 months out to try to change the cycle.” So far the Freedom Project serves a very small number of former inmates in the community. I ask Blake why inmates are reluctant to get involved. He says, “Most guys come out and don’t have anywhere to go and...they would be quick to say, ‘I don’t have time

right now. I have to get myself together, then I'll come and be involved' ...I think the basic needs interfere...it's about survival."

Blake also works for a church affiliated, nonprofit organization that teaches inmates "how to get housing, how to be successful, how to stay in recovery, how to be supported in the community, how to get your voting rights back, how to be a productive member of society." Through this organization Blake and another former inmate "put together a curriculum for a program for guys on the other side." Blake says that his mentor, whom he describes as "a very kind, generous, thoughtful man," told him,

I'm gonna petition and see if we can make this a reality and you guys are gonna go in and teach it. I said, 'They're not going to go for that. I'm on supervision. DOC policy doesn't allow that.' He said, 'It's God's work.' One day I went to see my parole officer. She said, 'If you guys want to go in and try to help the guys in there, I think that that's a genius idea because the guys will relate to you guys.' So I went to the [DOC] public relations training. I never thought in my wildest imagination that I would be sitting in this training with officers. To this day it still amazes me.

Less than a year after his release, Blake now goes back to the prison five days a week to provide training for inmate. He says that it was "weird" to go "back inside of the very facility that I was just released from, to walk on the very same concrete I walked on for a lot of months." He says, "One day I was sitting in the day room [before teaching class]. I said, 'I sat in this very same day room at the same time in the evening [as an inmate]'...and then it just came over me that this was therapy for me... this is helping me heal." He says that while "the majority of the administration supports it whole hearted...some officers look down on it because, you know, 'He's an ex-felon on supervision.' But I don't pay 'em no mind."

Amazingly, in many ways Blake still appears to the happy-go-lucky kid who hopped the L train in Chicago. He says, “Peace is key in life, it’s having peace. Being a peaceful person means you have peace within yourself...Like with this tight schedule today, I don’t stress about it.” He still maintains his passion for cars and refers to his new car, the beautiful grey sedan, as his “baby.” At 42 this was the first time he “bought a car off a lot.” He remembers all the years he sat behind bars dreaming of driving such a car. Now so many of his dreams seem to be coming true. And yet there is just a hint of fear as he says that he recognizes that he has taken on “a lot of responsibility” with the family, the car and the job. Blake sees himself as a role model and wants “to show other guys who come out of the system that anything you want you can have.” But the fear is there as well. This fear showed through at the community circle meeting and again during our final interview. With family stresses mounting at home, Blake says, “I’m totally exhausted, physically I’m tired and this is why I say I need [to] lay down and just lock the door and cut the phones off and just sleep.” Blake clearly acknowledges that life on the outside isn’t all “peaches and cream.”

I ask Blake where he sees himself in five years. His response is,

I see myself in five years to be comfortable and content and through my transition phase of being back free in society. I see myself owning my own home in five years. I see myself in five years having my own business. Not one but two, a janitorial service and a food service business. I see myself happy...I see myself successfully running two businesses, working for myself, have my home and providing for my son and enjoying life...In five years I’ll be 47 and I plan to be relaxed and still doing community work, volunteer work in the community...but I can do it even more so when I get my own

business...because it gives me even more free time, you know, so that's where I see myself in five years, yeah.

Blake's dreams have not been diminished as a result of his incarceration, however, many new barriers have been imposed. Blake now faces life as a convicted felon, not an easy road. Given all the twists and turns that Blake's life has taken so far, it is hard to anticipate where the road ahead might lead.

Trent

Years ago, I had a friend who worked in a psychiatric hospital with adults who were chronically mentally ill. It was not uncommon for him to share stories about the patients he encountered at work. One day he was telling me about a man who was admitted with paranoid delusions involving the FBI and secret brain implants. It turned out that the man really did work for the FBI at one time and possibly had access to top secret information. My friend said, "Well, it just goes to show you, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

I was reminded of this story when I met Trent. I wouldn't exactly describe Trent as paranoid, but he certainly appeared to be suspicious, mistrustful, and hyper-vigilant. In my notes about our first meeting, I described Trent as "defended." Trent was quick to identify himself as a sex offender. I had the distinct impression that he was scrutinizing my reaction to this information. During the course of our interviews, Trent sometimes became agitated with me and accused me of asking "leading questions." It was clear that he was suspicious of my motives and protective of his interests. Over time, I came to see that this behavior was not so much pathological, as it was necessary for survival as a registered sex offender, because as a registered sex offender, it is reasonable to assume that they are "out to get you." Hyper-vigilance is a basic survival strategy.

For Trent, I suspected that this tendency to be *on the alert* started long before he became a registered sex offender. Trent was born into a large family in the early 1950's. He describes his childhood as "not that different from a lot of people in the 50's and 60's." His parents were living in Canada when they met. They later immigrated to the United States. Trent's father went to work for his maternal grandfather on the family farm. Trent, the youngest child, was born on the farm and raised in a small farming community. The other children were grown and out of the house by the time Trent was nine.

By this time, Trent's father was working as a warehouseman. Trent describes his father as "very blue collar." He says,

Growing up, my father was the head of household and a bit of an authoritarian...[he would] come home from work, plant himself in the recliner in the front room, turn on the TV and watch the news and read the newspaper and fill the house with cigarette smoke while Mom fixed supper.

As a young child, Trent didn't have much interaction with his father, except "when it was time to dole out discipline."

Trent's mother was a homemaker. In Canada she had been a teacher, something she hoped to return to someday in the states. Trent's mother was active in the community, in local politics, the church and civic organizations. Trent remembers his mother hosting get-togethers for members of these various groups. He says, "While they were having their meetings I would be in the kitchen or out in the backyard playing...taking care of myself or babysitting who had come along with whoever came."

Trent describes his childhood as "lonely." With his siblings nearly grown or grown and gone, Trent was alone much of the time. He describes his home life as "austere" and "quiet." He

says, "I never saw my mom and dad fight." He also never saw them express affection toward one another. Nor did they express affection toward their children. Trent says, "...there wasn't a whole lot of hugging of the kids."

Trent attended public school where he struggled with reading, something he describes as a "reading mechanical problem," perhaps undiagnosed dyslexia. His reading problems led to him being teased by the other kids, although he is quick to note that this teasing never escalated to the level of bullying. He compensated for his problems with reading by being "the kid who would always speak up during classroom discussion." He says, "The way I learned things was by interacting with the teachers and arguing and discussing whatever topic they had...that's the way I made up for not being able to read the text or read the assignments as thoroughly as the other kids." As a result, the other kids thought of Trent as a "know it all." Trent is quick to minimize his struggles at school by saying, "I had the typical problems at school, in elementary school, that most kids have." And yet, he also says, "I didn't have a good friend at school until I was in the seventh grade."

About midway through our first interview I began to sense that Trent was becoming more comfortable with me, the process or both. At this point, I ask Trent to tell me some stories from his childhood that would give me insight into who he is. The first childhood experience that Trent recounted was something that happened to him when he was very young, before he "could tell time." It involved a neighborhood boy who was older. This older boy said to Trent, "You want to go fishing?" When Trent said that he did, the boy said, "Let's see what kind of fishing pole and weights you have." The boy then "groped" Trent.

Trent connected this incident to several other incidents that happened around the same time. Trent was playing in a yard of another older neighborhood boy, waiting for his turn to slide

down the slide. This boy suddenly pulled out a knife and threatened him. Trent says, “It scared me a lot.” He ran home to his mother who didn’t take the incident seriously. He even tried to report what happened to the mother of the boy who threatened him. According to Trent, “She called me a liar and told me that her son wouldn’t do that and that I was to leave their property and never come back again.” Perhaps this is why Trent was reluctant to tell anyone about a later incident involving the same boy. Trent says,

Later on that same boy was over at my house with other kids in the neighborhood. We had built a tent in the backyard, just hanging blankets on the clothesline...He said “Well, let’s make a club.” In order to get into this club you had to pull down your pants and show everybody what you had. It was a little more than ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.’ It was more than that. Um, and so this club was started. And later on I can remember this same kid...had me lay down on the bench and while he fondled me he inserted a pencil into my rectum.

The “club” that Trent refers to played a significant, formative role in his childhood. He describes the club as “sexually oriented,” something that was “ongoing” involving numerous boys from his neighborhood, “some of them older and some of them my age.”

Trent says that, although he was afraid of the older boy who initiated him in the “club,” he did not feel that he was being victimized. To the contrary, he felt a sense of connection and belonging. He says, “I felt like I’m making some connection with these kids. That’s where I got a feeling of intimacy I guess— where I wasn’t getting that with my parents. I wasn’t getting that at school. There was a feeling that I could do something that they valued.” Even now as he reflects on the experience, he says, “The kid that molested me when I was a kid, he was only a kid...he was just a kid doing what he was taught to do. It is what it is.”

Trent is not prone to analysis. In fact, he changes the subject when I ask how these experiences with the “club” shaped him and his life. He shuts a door on this subject for the time being by saying, “Let’s go on to a different topic.” The different topic that we move on to is no less difficult. Trent begins by saying, “When I was in the fourth grade, my mom went into the hospital for a procedure.” He goes on to recall the day, not long after, when he heard his dad say to someone on the other end of the telephone that Trent’s mom had cancer. He says, “That was the first time I heard that word...from that time on it was a constant barrage of her going in and out of the hospital.” When Trent was twelve, his mother sat him down on the couch and told him that “she was dying.”

Trent took on a lot of responsibility for caring for his mother. His father worked swing shift so he was home with her until just before Trent came home from school. In the evenings Trent took over. He says, “She progressively got worse and I did a lot more of the care for her until she died when I was in the eighth grade, so it was about four years.” Trent recalls the day that his mother died by saying, “We knew it was coming...we simply watched her die in bed.”

Trent says that after his mother died, “the household changed. She was gone and I was home with my father.” His father continued to work swing shift and they passed briefly each day. Trent prepared meals that they “ate in silence.” Trent says emphatically, “I didn’t miss him. I didn’t like my father.” He recalls an incident that happened when he was about eight or nine, around the time his mother got sick. He says, “I walked in on him butchering a calf and ever since that time, I saw him as an uncaring son of a bitch.” Trent describes his father through vignettes; obscure, disconnected scenes from his childhood. I comment that he doesn’t seem to know his father well, to which Trent replies, “I have more information about my father than I really want to have.” Some of what he learned about his father wasn’t revealed until Trent was

well into adulthood. He remembers a time when he was very young and his father was away from home for several nights. Before he returned, Trent's sister moved out of the house. He says, "My father had been molesting my sister for a long time. So she married this other man...to get out of the house and get away from my father."

Trent's father didn't wait long after his mother's death to remarry. The new wife was more housekeeper and caretaker, than wife and mother. Trent refers to her as "hired help." Trent avoided her and home as much as possible. Trent was now 14 or 15 and the club had evolved into what he calls "sex parties." These sex parties were held in the homes of different neighborhood boys, "...wherever it was safe - someone's house where the parents weren't home, someone where the parents hadn't come from work yet, someone's house where the parents left them alone, a single parent house where they were at work."

It was during this time that Trent started to identify himself as "queer." Trent says that in his family "homosexuality didn't exist...if it was brought up, it was ignored." He learned to "cover up." He learned "how to hide." Trent talks about the duality of his life in high school. On one hand, he played football and hockey. He says, "You learn how to swagger, you learn how to spit and learn how to swear." At the same time, he was "labeled as different by the other kids." As a result, Trent went out of his way to "do things that sounded macho," a pattern that would continue for many years. He says, "I was trying to fly under the radar."

As Trent moved into high school, many of his friends outgrew the sex parties, some moved on to girls. For them the sex parties were merely part of a stage of experimentation. Trent, however, "wasn't interested in girls." At this point, he says, "I would have a relationship with one particular boy or another." Trent talks about one boy who was especially important to him. Tragically, when Trent was a senior in high school, they were in a car accident together and this

boy was killed. He says, “I had more grief over him than I did losing my mother...I had lost someone I loved very dearly.”

Trent graduated during the Vietnam War. With a low draft number and few real opportunities in his hometown, he decided that his best option was to enlist in the Navy. He says, “At the time you were either a hippy or you were in the military or you were rich enough to go to school...I didn’t want to be on the ground in Vietnam. I’d rather be at sea.” When he enlisted, Trent was asked one question in regard to his sexuality: “Do you masturbate?” He says, “I knew to lie.” He goes on,

I was a homosexual trying to prove that I was a straight in the Navy... So I did the things that guys were supposed to do. I learned how to get drunk. I learned how to get falling-down drunk, black-out drunk. I learned how to sleep with whores. I learned how to swagger, how be macho, that sort of thing.

Much of Trent’s life in the military revolved around keeping “the secret.”

During one period, Trent’s unit had four months of down time in Los Angeles. Trent started frequenting gay bars. He was 20 or 21 when he met a man in his 50s; they would “go bar hopping, go to bars, drink a lot, then go home and have sex...he would invite other people home to have sex with us...we had group sex.” This man also introduced Trent to the bath house scene in Los Angeles. Trent was leading a double life because, as he says, “If I had been found out, I would have been kicked out of the Navy.”

Trent served three years active duty. He says, “I was in the Gulf of Tonkin when they quote / unquote stopped hostilities.” Trent was released from active duty not long after. He went back to the small town where he grew up. He worked part-time and went to school on his G.I. Bill. He also tried to hook up with some of the people he had known before the military. He says,

When I came back from Vietnam I tried to strike up a relationship with some of the people that I had had sex with. And while I was gone I had noticed that there had been a big change in those guys. They had, uh, they seemed to have really low self-esteem. They really seemed to be disconnected from the rest of society. They had some drug problems. So, uh, nothing ever really connected there.

Frustrated with the limited opportunities in his hometown, he decided to move to a large metropolitan area. He applied for a civil service job in the city and was hired.

He met his future wife while he was doing volunteer work at a charitable organization in the city. He says,

At the time that I went to work for the city, you could not be, it was looked down upon to be homosexual...Not that I was using my wife as a cover. After I got married I consciously made a decision to try to go straight...We moved to the suburbs and had four kids...I was trying to be faithful and, uh, heterosexual...I was trying to be normal.

Trent describes his relationship with his wife as “strained.” They both “wanted to be taken care of.” Trent took on the role of caretaker, denying his own needs. He worked split shifts and had a lot of time at home. He mostly led a life of domesticity: cooking, cleaning, getting the kids off to school. He says about his children, “I loved them. I loved them dearly. I tried to do my best for them.” And yet he also admits, “I had a tendency to be a lot like my dad ...I tried to be loving and caring, and um, towards the end of it, it was more being a disciplinarian.”

Trent’s life as a husband and father centered, to a large extent, on material success. Trent says,

I got caught up in the idea of outdoing the Jones next door, in materialism and in living from paycheck to paycheck to pay off the material things that I was told by the television set that I had to live with or I was not living up to the standards of the world.

His relationships centered on establishing and maintaining his place in the “pecking order.”

Trent describes the way that his wife “gradually withdrew” from him and their life together. As I heard Trent describe their life together, the word “monotony” came to mind. They were going through the motions, because, as Trent says, “That’s what you’re supposed to do. You’re not supposed to go around and have sex with other men.” As he talks about this time in his life, I ask Trent, “Did you have desires to be with men?” At first he indicated that he didn’t want to answer that question. Later when he read the transcript from our interview, he wrote “yes” next to my question.

As Trent’s children got older, like most dads, Trent took them to the park and supervised when their friends came over to play. He doesn’t go into detail about the events that led to his arrest except to say,

Ultimately, it came down to the point where I focused on one of my kids’ classmates, who was a boy, and groomed him to the point where I could take advantage of him. I was convicted of, I pled guilty to, one count of rape of a child in the first degree, which means the child was under the age of twelve, and one count of child molestation.

Trent’s life as a husband and father ended abruptly the day he was arrested. He has not seen or spoken to his wife or children since. He says, “All I know about what happened to my kids and what happened to my wife was what I heard from the court documents because they sent me the court documents and the divorce papers to me in prison.” Trent admits that his emotions are still “raw” when it comes to his family. This is the part of his life that he seems

most reluctant to talk about. He is cautious and insists, “I’m not giving you permission to talk to my wife or my children.” He does share this much,

It was very traumatic for me and even more so for my family...My wife got a no contact order against me. My children chose to see me as being dead. They want nothing to do with me...It was so traumatic for them...I felt for my children. However, everything that I said or tried to do was always taken in a negative context...because I was a convicted felon...I am a child molester. I’m a child rapist.

Trent describes the way he felt about himself after the arrest and conviction as “something other than human.”

As we came to the end of our first interview; we were at the lowest point in Trent’s life. I was amazed at how much Trent had been willing to share with me, particularly given my first impression of him. I still saw him as someone who consistently maintained a protective, defensive stance. He reminded me of a boy that I worked with once. He was about six or seven. I would go to his school and play with him in a special playroom; we engaged in a kind of play therapy. We met several times a week for over a year. He liked all sorts of action figures and every time we were together he would create the same play scenario. There was a “fort” that was being guarded by his “guys.” I was never allowed to go inside the fort. One day, I asked him, “What’s inside.” He looked me straight in the eye and in a whisper he said, “Oh, Debbie, it’s really bad.” I had the same feeling about Trent, that there was still something he was guarding, protecting, defending. I had the impression that Trent was consistently laying down boundaries, testing me to see if I would cross those boundaries.

As I reflected on what Trent had shared with me so far, the boundaries began to come into focus. He had shared the events; the circumstances; the cold, hard facts. What he hadn’t

shared were his feelings. In fact, I was astounded by how unemotional Trent appeared to be throughout most of our interview. Trent had what might be described as a flat affect. At the same time, I sensed in Trent a deep and pervasive sadness. Perhaps I was just projecting my own feelings onto Trent. In fact, I felt extremely sad as I listened to the painful events of his life. I wanted to reach out to him and wrap him in a motherly embrace. However, I knew that I had to maintain professional standards and show respect for Trent's boundaries, so instead, toward the end of our interview, I expressed empathy for Trent around his need to be nurtured. It was my way of acknowledging that lonely little boy he had just introduced me to, a little boy who had lost so much.

I immediately feel that I have overstepped my bounds when Trent says, "Don't go talking me into being a helpless child."

"Isn't that part of who you are?" I ask.

"Well, that's part of my history, yeah. I'm not trying to say that I was a poor little kid that needed to be hugged some more. I mean, I was simply trying to get along. I was trying to get through the day...I'm not asking for sympathy."

Trent ended our first interview by saying,

I'm telling you what I see, as close to the truth as I can remember it. I'm not perfect by any means and there are times that I don't remember things perfectly. I'm trying to do the best that I can and be as honest as I can...Right now, I'm at the point that I try to be... transparent. I'm trying not to live a double life.

In spite of years of training and indoctrination about the manipulative nature of criminal offenders and the need to remain skeptical, I believed him.

Trent spent over eight years locked up, an inmate of the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC). Our next interview focused on those years. Trent says, "I didn't expect to survive my time in incarceration. I didn't. I thought I would be killed." Survival became Trent's first priority. Before Trent was transferred from county jail to state prison, he heard stories about how sex offenders were preyed upon by other inmates,

It's a badge of courage so to speak to beat up a sex offender there... That's the thinking, the feeling, in that they are ridding society, ridding the prison of, of something that is more heinous than they are... So there is a lot of trying to figure out who are sex offenders and who aren't sex offenders.

Every inmate has paperwork that follows him from jail to prison. This paperwork, which indicates the nature of an inmate's crime, is the primary way that other inmates identify a sex offender. Trent says, "If you are a sex offender, you have to get rid of that paperwork because it is dangerous for you to have...there are times when one inmate will go through another inmate's paperwork just simply to see if they can find his sentencing paperwork." Clearly Trent started to learn the ropes before he was even transferred to state custody. He recalls an incident that occurred when he went to court for sentencing,

There was about fifteen of us herded into this very small room, nothing more than a closet actually. We were all chained up...we were left there, just...people who were going to be sentenced. Nobody knew who anybody else was. But then we all filed into court and our crimes were read so that everybody could hear. Then we were all filed back into that little room and it was dangerous in that room. As soon as we got back into the van going back to county jail there were words said, threats made. And the guard sat in the front seat, just drove.

Imagining what it would be like for a forty-something, middle-class, white man from the suburbs to suddenly find himself in this situation, I say, “So you must have been terrified.” Trent replies, “I was depressed. There was a lot of fear at the beginning.”

Trent was motivated to make changes in his life; to change the behavior that led him to prison. His motivation stemmed not so much from fear but from a genuine desire to stop hurting others. He says,

My main motivation was that when I was in high school I saw how my activity had affected some of the boys as they grew up and became teenagers and they, these were boys that I cared about. They were people to me. What I saw happening to them was a line of depression, a whole lot of drug use, heavy duty alcoholism and when they were still fairly young, still teenagers, older teenagers. I didn't want to do that anymore. But I didn't know how to stop either.

Trent began searching for resources to help him stop. While still at the DOC induction center, awaiting his transfer to a long-term facility, he requested that he be placed in a prison facility that provides treatment for sex offenders in-house. He was placed in that facility (the only one of its kind in the State of Washington at the time) but was not allowed to participate in the Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP) until he was eighteen months out from his early release date. For Trent, that would be another seven years.

The component of the program that takes place inside prison lasts about one year. Offenders are required to wait to participate so that they are “fresh out of SOTP when [they] get out of prison.” They continue their involvement in SOTP for several months after their release from prison, while they are still in community supervision or “on paper.” Trent describes SOTP

as a voluntary program, but concedes that there “are a lot of consequences if you don’t take the program.”

SOTP involves both individual and group therapy, offered daily on alternating days. Trent says, “The one-on-one therapy was the only place in the therapy where issues of my personal healing may have been discussed.” The group sessions were about showing the participants “the errors of their ways.” Trent says that “they were of the opinion that you might be able to fool the therapist but you are not going to fool another sex offender in your motivation and in the mechanics of what you did to get what you wanted.” Education, focusing on “offense cycles” and the connection between “violence and sexual release,” was a significant component of group. “Disclosure” was another important aspect. Trent says, “Disclosures were intense, sometimes they took three or four days, sometimes they took a week or two. Um, going into great detail of the offense and having other people question you, give you questions.” I ask Trent if it was safe for participants to fully disclose in group. He says, “It is difficult for me as a sex offender to go through that therapy and be as open as I would like to be because there is always the fear of civil commitment.” As a result, participants avoid “names, dates and places” and any information that could lead to being “charged with another crime.” In spite of its limitations, Trent credits SOTP with allowing him “to see that what I was doing was damaging to other people, to my victims. I was hurting other people and changing their lives unalterably.”

I found it interesting that when asked about his own experiences with the older neighborhood boy and the “club” he was initiated into, Trent clearly does not identify himself as a *victim*. And yet he is able to see those he perpetrated against as *victims*. I ask Trent about this apparent contradiction. He hesitates; his response seems uncertain. After a moment he says:

I was still trying to get my own needs met and I didn't know how to do it. Every time I tried to express myself in a way that was halfway acceptable by society it was met with a rejection or a blank wall or, mainly rejection and more loneliness. The only place that I really felt accepted was with, uh, other individuals.

Later Trent describes his vantage point this way: "...as a child I was a being sexually abused and I didn't know what intimacy was then." From this experience, Trent learned to get his needs met through sexual contact. Trent describes the process, but never goes so far as to express empathy for himself as a victim of sexual abuse. SOTP is clearly not designed to connect participants with the pain of their own abuse experiences.

For the first few years of his incarceration, before he qualified for SOTP, Trent went to an "open group" that was offered at the prison for a couple of hours, two days a week. He says this was a place where "you could go in and discuss your issues and try to understand how it would be beneficial for you to drop your victim stance and be proactive with therapy." He also sent away for self-help literature and workbooks for sex offenders which he worked his way through. He continued on this self-help track for a number of years. A few years before he was scheduled to begin SOTP, he hired a private therapist to come into the prison once a month for one hour to provide individual counseling.

Trent participated in private therapy for several years in spite of his perception that the DOC was less than supportive. According to Trent, "They felt like the outside therapists were coddling us. I never heard anybody say that, but it was pretty obvious that they ...would poo poo it and not put stock into what anybody was saying except the SOTP therapists themselves ...they don't have faith in private therapy on the outside." Trent was forced to find and contract with this therapist on his own since he did not have a support network on the outside. As Trent tells me

this story, I find myself impressed with his tenacity. I comment on his commitment to his own “healing.” He reminds me that his commitment was to “making sure that I don’t reoffend.” He says, “I don’t want to victimize anyone else.”

Apart from therapy, Trent got involved in various activities and groups in prison. Initially, he sought spiritual support to deal with his incarceration. He says, “When I went to county jail I did what a lot of guys did and hide in religion and realized that that’s exactly what it was. It wasn’t dealing with the situation.” He is critical of the “tactics” used by many of those who came into the prison representing churches and other religious organizations. He says,

The religious people had a very definite agenda and it was proselytization and that quite frankly just plain put me off. Most of the religious groups that were coming in were very evangelical, very right wing and very...I thought I was talking to used car dealers not people of the cloth...They were trying to sell me their brand of religion which has absolutely nothing to do with my connection with my God.

Trent maintains that he does “believe in God.” He identifies himself as a Christian. However, his involvement with these groups was eventually limited to singing in both the Protestant and the Catholic choirs, reviving an interest in music that started when he was in high school.

He attended workshops conducted by the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) during his time in prison, in part to earn “brownie points” with the counselors and other staff. He describes AVP as an “experiential program” that focused on giving “participants tools or ideas on how to diffuse violent situations, mainly in the yard or in the chow hall or that sort of thing.” The program used facilitators from outside whom Trent describe as “ex-hippie types” as well as “inside facilitators” who were also inmates.

Trent was first introduced to NVC through his involvement with AVP. Trent was invited to a NVC workshop by one of the AVP inside facilitators when he expressed an interest in learning more about some of the communication strategies he was learning about in the AVP workshops. He says that AVP and NVC were “closely related.” However, Trent was attracted to NVC, in part, because, “there was more intellect to it rather than just touchy, feely stuff.”

Trent’s involvement with prison based NVC training predated the organization of the Freedom Project. Three volunteers, one of them a certified NVC trainer and one of the eventual co-founders of the Freedom Project, came into the prison on a regular basis to offer what was referred to as the “basic training.” Trent went to the basic training, not once, but a number of times. He continued because he found that what he was learning there worked. He started using the NVC model in his interactions with other inmates and says,

I found that I was able to make a personal connection with guys in the yard and in the tiers and in the chow hall to where they saw me as a human being...I saw them as a human being and realized that their needs are about the same as the needs I have...they have chosen different ways to get those needs met but they were still the same needs. He was learning new skills; skills that he could use. He also saw the impact that NVC can have through the experiences of his fellow workshop participants. He says, “I could see other guys come in who had never experienced it before and try to change the way they spoke. And I could see the difference in the way they felt. I could see the easing of the stress.” Trent was impacted by the experience of one inmate in particular,

He had been to a couple of the workshops. He was called out of the workshop to go visit with his parents in the visiting room...he came back to workshop the next day and said that it was the first time that he had actually been able to listen to what his parents were

saying and see them as human beings rather than just people who were trying to impose their will on him. And when he listened to what they were saying he tried to tell them back what he heard them say and I guess his mom broke down in tears and said that was the first time she had ever felt heard in the relationship with her son.

In addition to the basic training, Trent participated in advanced training with one of the trainers who offered more intensive, one-on-one instruction for a small group of guys who expressed an interest. Trent describes the exercises that they did in this setting as “very thought provoking.” These sessions began this way, “She’d bring in her sack lunch and we’d sit there while she ate her lunch and would check in and tell her how our week was, how the previous month was and about the workshops we’d been to.”

“Check-in” was an important part of every NVC training that Trent attended. Trent says, “When we first went in for the workshops they would go around the circle, no matter how many men were showing up for the workshop, and they’d check in.” This opportunity for participants to share what was going on in their lives, what brought them to the workshop, and what they hoped to gain by being there, was unique in that it was an occasion to be heard.

This willingness to listen was one of the unique qualities that Trent associated with the trainers he encountered. Trent says this about the NVC trainers he met with, “They treated me like a human being.” As a result, he says, “I didn’t feel embarrassed about showing my feelings and letting other people know that I was vulnerable and I could be hurt.” There were many qualities that set these volunteers apart from those that Trent encountered through other prison-based programs. He describes them as,

...intelligent people who could spend their time elsewhere doing something else, making money, and they were here choosing to pay attention to who I was and my problems...

The people who came in with the Freedom Project were actually interested in what was going on with me and trying to help me decide what I could do...giving me tools to help me decide what I can do about my own problems.

For Trent, these trainers were more than just *in attendance*, they were *fully present* and thoughtful in terms of how they responded to their students. Trent says, “They thought about what they said...they thought about what was asked and then about their response before they said it rather than just a knee-jerk reaction.”

Trent describes his relationship with these volunteers as a teacher-student relationship. However, he notes that it was not a “power-over” relationship. He compares it to other types of teacher-student relationships by saying it was not “like a ninth grader sitting in class and having a teacher yell because they’re entering puberty and not dealing with the situation. I mean it wasn’t power over in that respect.” He says that these trainers exhibited a kind of “professional maturity” that allowed them to “overcome” the kind of power-over mentality that is more common in other educational environments. Trent describes these trainers as “open and aware” and says these qualities contribute to their professional maturity. He says, “Quite frankly a lot of people get too hung up in personalities and their own egos to allow that type of maturity to happen.”

Trent felt accepted by these trainers. He describes them as “people who could accept me for who I was, not just for what they could get out of me.” They saw him not as “that monster, that sex offender, that person who victimized other people” but as a person who was worthy of being seen and heard and appreciated. Trent credits the trainers with creating a “safe space” even within the hostile confines of state prison. He says that this “space of safety” was “different from the rest of the prison, it was kind of like a, I know it’s overused, but kind of like a breath of fresh

air.” It was safe, in part, because the trainers never seemed to be pushing an agenda. According to Trent, “...it wasn’t people telling us what to do or that we were bad or that we should do something or shouldn’t do something.”

The word that Trent used most often to describe how he benefitted from his involvement with the NVC workshops was “connection.” He says, “Before I was exposed to NVC I knew I needed, I wanted, something. I wasn’t sure what it was but I was trying to get it met. I was trying to get that want taken care of and I had no idea how to do it.” He describes this longing as an “empty place” that was filled by connecting with trainers and other participants in the NVC workshops. Trent says, “...it was that personal connection that I hadn’t had before in my life. And that was the personal connection that I was looking for that I didn’t seem to be able to obtain.” Later he clarifies that for him there is a difference between “a personal connection, a professional connection and an intimate connection.” Trent describes his relationships with those in the NVC workshops as one that was somewhere between a personal and a professional connection, however, it was not intimate. He says, “I wasn’t looking for an intimate contact with these people. That only grows with time and there’s a whole bunch of connotations you could assign to intimacy.” He talks about the way that some prison inmates try to establish intimate connections with volunteers in other programs “so they can gain influence over them or with them for when they get out.” This was not something he experienced with the volunteers associated with the Freedom Project.

Clearly, Trent was impacted by his experiences with NVC and the Freedom Project. He says that the NVC training he received gave him a new perspective, helping him to see that his “vulnerabilities and weaknesses” can also be seen as strengths. He says that, unlike some other interventions, NVC was “treating the disease.” However, by the time we reached our third

interview I had given up any illusion that NVC is some kind of magic elixir that transforms lives instantly and completely. By this point, I had come to know Trent quite well. It was clear to me that Trent harbored a great deal of sadness. He had certainly experienced loss: his mother, friends, his wife and children, not to mention the years that he spent living a double life, unable to acknowledge his true needs and desires. Certainly he was still grieving many of these losses. I cannot say whether or not Trent's life was transformed by NVC or his relationships with the teachers he encountered. What I did observe in Trent, however, were signs of resilience. I was anxious to explore this more in our third and final interview.

Our third interview focused on the period since Trent was released from prison. Two years have passed since his release and his experience is a testament to his ability to bounce back. Life is challenging for ex-felons. Trent talks to me at length about the days following his release and the challenges he had to overcome. He moved from prison to a half-way house, an arrangement that he planned long before his release. Like many offenders, Trent had no real support network in the community. He lived at the half-way house for six months while he readjusted to life on the outside. Those first days of freedom were spent learning to navigate public transportation, getting groceries and attending to other mundane details. Trent talks about the unexpected challenges that he encountered immediately after his release:

DOC forces you to save your money while you're in prison, not all of it, they take 10% of all your wages and they put it in the account for you for when you get out...DOC gives you a check. So if you get out on Friday you have got to find some bank that will cash that check. But you can't get the check cashed without identification and the only identification you have when you leave is your...DOC identification and most banks don't know what that is. So you have to find some way to get identification. So you have

to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Licensing or whatever it is and get a State ID card so that you can cash the check that you get from the Department of Corrections. But in order to get your ID card you have to pay for it. So there are a whole bunch of catch twenty-twos.

Once Trent made it over those hurdles, his next challenge was getting a job.

Trent got a tip from one of the other residents at the half-way house about a manufacturer that hired ex-felons. Trent says, "I wanted a job right away and I didn't care whether it was a job sweeping streets or anything, I just knew it had to be a job that didn't...put me in a position to where I would have contact with minors." He was hired by this employer who he says, "specializes in hiring ex-felons just coming out of prison." Trent says, "They only pay minimum wage and they don't give you a whole lot more than minimum wage" despite the fact that they pay people who are not coming out of prison \$15 an hour. This was a source of frustration for Trent. However, he says, "I realize that I'm a second class citizen and the only way that I'm going to move forward is starting at the bottom. And that's where I started."

Trent worked there for three months before he applied for a lateral transfer to a delivery driver position. He made a little more money but had to start work at 3:00 a.m. After about six months, he was hired for a "real driving job" in a recycling company that "didn't specialize in hiring felons." He says that this was "an important step...because with the first job I had it was all ex-felons and it felt like I was in the same society as I was inside." During this time he was involved in the community based components of the Freedom Project although it was challenging to attend events around his work schedule. Perhaps it is this support network that has helped him remain resilient. He is surrounded by people who understand how difficult it can be

to reintegrate, including many sex offenders who also struggle with the unique challenges that entails.

The challenges associated with reentering the community from prison are exacerbated by the public scorn and additional regulations that sex offenders are subject to. There are many rules that govern the lives of sex offenders beyond the obvious requirement to register and maintain registration with the state. Trent maintains that he does not want to “break the law or go back to victimizing minors.” Still he is obviously frustrated with the requirement of his probation that he report any intention to engage in a sexual relationship with anyone. As he says, “I have the state wanting to know where I put my penis.” This requirement, to, in essence, get permission to have a sexual relationship, is further complicated by Trent’s sexual orientation. He says,

Since I am homosexual, most of the people from the state don’t understand my idea of relationships or a homosexual idea of relationships and therefore it makes them uncomfortable...for a homosexual man to go in and say “I would like to date this other man,” that sets off bells right off the bat because it is something different from the norm.

Furthermore, according to Trent, sex offenders are required to only have sexual relationships with individuals who are deemed age appropriate. Trent says, “...there are rules about how... close in age you can have a relationship. And it’s something like 20% of the person’s age. So there’s an actual, um, equation that they plug into to decide who you can have feelings for.” According to this guideline, Trent, who is 57, is only allowed to have sexual relationships with individuals who are between the ages of 45 and 68.

Life since his release has not been easy and Trent is obviously still struggling to create a life that is satisfying and whole in spite of the confines associated with his status as an ex-felon and registered sex offender. At the same time, Trent clearly has some advantages that other

offenders may not. He came to prison with job skills and a work history and he doesn't have a drug problem to contend with. Some might say he has a lot going for him. Still, while Trent is in some ways resilient, he is not always hopeful. There are moments when Trent gives in to despair.

He says,

...my dreams have fallen apart so badly. My marriage is gone...I don't have any contact with my children which I mourn horribly...I'm getting older, um, it's more difficult to find employment. Uh, I'm 57 and nobody wants to hire a 57 year old man who's physically falling apart, um, especially someone who's a felon and on top of that he's a sex offender. Um, so it's, I'm not seeing that there's a whole lot of bright and rosy options out there... I'm just destined to be a lonely old man...I just hope that I'm not a lonely, bitter old man. That's what I'm fighting against.

Trent does continue to fight. He goes to work every day, he continues his involvement in the Freedom Project and tries to nurture a few modest dreams for his future.

In spite of what Trent describes as "hurdles that I need to build ladders against," he dreams of the day when he is "off paper." Although Trent knows that he will be required to remain registered as a sex offender for the rest of his life, he looks forward to not being in community supervision, when, as he says, "I will not be asked to report anymore or do that sort of stuff." He would also like to regain his voting rights. He anticipates that this may be complicated and "very, very expensive." Trent thinks that he might like to become a certified NVC trainer. However, he is modest about his skills. He has been learning and practicing NVC for about 10 years, and yet he still describes himself as "striving to get to the point to where I know it better."

The dream that seems to resonant with Trent most is one that he describes this way:

My ideal would be to be able to have an intimate partner that I like and that likes me and that we're compatible together and can live together and produce a life that's worth living. Right now I've worked very hard at making myself comfortable with, with, you know, I've got enough food on the table, I've got an income, I've got a place to live. But a place to live is nothing more than a box and it would be nice to be able to share that box with somebody else rather than all by myself. And that's more than just finding somebody to rent a room because that's not an intimate relationship. That's just somebody else living in the same box without sharing the essence of personalities.

Trent defines intimacy differently these days than he did when he was younger. He says,

While sex may be a part of an intimate relationship it certainly is not the top most reason to enter into an intimate relationship...it could be totally absent from an intimate relationship now. I couldn't see that when I was growing up, when I was younger or when I was a young adult. I mean if you were intimate, you were sexual. And I don't see that at all now.

It seems that Trent continues to redefine himself, perhaps because he has been forced to.

Whatever the reason, his worldview continues to evolve. As our last interview ended I was reminded of something Myles Horton (1990) once said: "People have a potential for growth; it's inside, it's in the seeds" (p. 33).

Sol

Sol is a friendly, outgoing, confident man with a big smile and a firm handshake. It is hard to imagine him as a scared little boy. Yet one of the first things he shares with me is a memory from his childhood. He was very young, huddled at the top of the stairs with his younger brother and sister. They could hear their father raging against their mother in the room

below. Sol was terrified. He would spend much of the next fifty years trying to get as far away from that fear as possible. He says, “I hated being afraid...more than anything and my way of dealing with fear was...whenever I felt fear I reacted with anger...quickly and so strongly that I never connected the feeling [with being] afraid.” Sol spent the next few decades on the run and striking back.

Sol describes his mother as “difficult to live with, very high strung.” She was institutionalized, off and on, throughout his childhood as a result of “what was called in those days, nervous breakdowns.” Sol goes on to say,

She was absent from my life for significant periods of time...It was just sometimes she would be gone and sometimes there...On a day to day, hour to hour basis she was a very unpredictable person and very intense...I’ve never seen anybody that could furl and unfurl their flag so quickly...the wind was always blowing strong but it certainly wasn’t always blowing in the same direction.

His mother’s behavior created a kind of vortex that he and his siblings got caught up in. He says, “There was just simply no way to know when or what was coming...Children don’t have the kind of maturity to be able to deal with that kind of uncertainty really well.” He describes his parents’ marriage as “difficult” and says, “I would say that would be putting it pretty mildly.”

Sol’s father was raised in a poor family during the depression. He was a military man, serving in the Air Force and later working for the Navy as a civilian. Sol describes him as “hard working and highly intelligent and ambitious.” He worked long hours, often taking second jobs on weekends. “He wasn’t around often.” When he was around, he too was “unpredictable.”

According to Sol, “...he would get explosively angry, he wasn’t a drinker or a drug user but I don’t think he had a lot of what I would call connective skills with people, he could be physically

violent.” In hindsight, Sol can see that his father “was tired all the time and he probably wasn’t feeling rested and I’m very doubtful that there was much peace or connection between my parents and so, he probably just didn’t have any place where...he could just relax, be at ease.” Clearly, Sol’s father was not the only one in the family in need of a safe place, a level of ease and comfort, a peaceful home.

Sol describes his family as “far from normal.” He says that they were not wealthy, however, “we had enough food to eat and...we weren’t deprived that way, we had decent clothes to wear to school.” At the same time, he says, “I definitely didn’t have some things I needed.” While Sol clearly acknowledges the deficits in his rearing, he doesn’t present himself as a victim of abuse. In fact, he says that while there was sexual abuse in his family, “I was never one of those who felt victimized.” He goes on, “I recognize it was a power over situation but at the time it all seemed like good fun and that’s what everybody did...I didn’t...feel forced to do anything.” He acknowledges that it was different for his sister, the only girl in the family. She was one of only two people Sol felt “connected to” and “valued by” as a child.

Sol was the oldest of three, his brother one year younger and his sister two. About their home, Sol says, “I didn’t wanta be there, neither did my brother and sister...but hell, that was the world we knew, so that was the way the world was as far as we were concerned.” They were a port in the storm for one another. Sol says, “The only security I really felt I had was in my relationships with my brother and sister.” It was only his siblings who made him feel “valued.” He says that they were the only people he trusted as a child. They maintained a close connection in spite of frequent extended periods of separation.

Sol and his siblings were split up and sent to live with various relatives across the Midwest on a regular basis. Sol says, “My brother and sister and I got moved around and stayed

with different relatives at different times...I think that was a really unstable kind of existence.” On one hand, Sol credits this experience with allowing him to be “unafraid [of] just striking out on my own and going out and living anywhere in the world that I wanted to live.” However, he also recognizes that he “never really experienced any kind of a core family.” I ask Sol if there was a place he identified as “home.” He says, “For most of my life I thought that home was wherever I am... I never really felt part of a community... I didn’t feel like I was attached to places.” It was hard to put down roots when, as Sol says, “I didn’t know where I was gonna be next year.”

Sol changed schools often. While he didn’t have many close friends, he says, “I always found people I could hang with.” Sol describes his grades as “decent...not great grades, but decent grades.” He says, “If I was interested in something, I’d really work hard at it...it was like I had a fierce drive to succeed, or to win and so I would really work hard at things I cared about...study hard...write hard.” Sol says that he saw school as a kind of “competition.” It was this competitive spirit that motivated Sol to pursue sports, as well. He was active in track and cross country. He says “...sports was one of the few things in high school that I really enjoyed.” While he enjoyed sports, he was also trying to prove something to himself by competing. He says, “I was trying to prove to myself that I was good enough...but none of that ever worked...It didn’t make any difference if I won a race...it didn’t make any difference in the end if I [got] straight A’s...because I didn’t believe it.”

He suspects that teachers and other adults likely perceived him as a “wise-ass.” He says that he was a “behavior problem” in school: “I was a vandal when I was a boy...I was one of those guys that did things like break into a school and trash [it].” In fact, he broke in and vandalized schools a number of times before he ever reached high school. He says it made him

feel “powerful... that I had some control of my life.” He remembers going to school the day after a break-in and taking “secret glee in the consternation and commotion” that he caused. These activities were, for Sol, a way to act out the anger that seemed to, increasingly, blot out all other emotion. Sol says, “I grew more and more comfortable with anger. Anger temporarily fills you up...it fills you with that sense of righteousness.” Being a “wise-ass” and a “vandal” also gave him a kind of adrenaline rush that he increasingly craved as a boy. He says, “I didn’t want to sit around and be with myself, I’ll tell you that, I wanted action.”

While Sol enjoyed some aspects of school, he pushed back against the structure and authority that school represented. He says, “The structure just grated on me.” He didn’t like being controlled and resented those who tried to enforce the rules. He says, “I didn’t trust adults, any adults. Some I liked a lot more than others but I didn’t trust them.” He points out, “I had no particular reason to think that adults were wiser than I was...I didn’t see a lot of evidence of that.” With such a low opinion of adults, he saw no reason to respect any authority they might claim. In fact, he says, “I would just tell a teacher, ‘fuck you.’” Sol never allowed any adults to get too close, particularly those teachers that he perceived to be “strong willed.”

In spite of his adamant resistance, there were a few adults who tried to connect with Sol in a meaningful way. There was an aunt he lived with in Montana two separate times during his childhood. Sol says, “She always treated me very well... she tried to be nurturing.” She demonstrated an interest in his friends and his activities. Sol, having learned how to effectively “back-off” adults who tried to intervene in his life, told her in so many words, “just get out of my way.” He also mentions “a man, a very maverick teacher” he had in high school who showed care and concern. However, he says,

I made it difficult for people to nurture me. I didn't feel I was loveable or worthy of being loved and so even though I desperately wanted that I had this sense that I...would be rejected if people really knew who I was, so I didn't want anybody else really knowing who I was.

Sol says that from an early age his anger was "outward oriented" and what he really wanted was "to be left alone." And then, after a moment of thought he says, "What I wanted was love, but I...wasn't connected to that...so in order to protect myself I would act aggressively."

At the age of 16, Sol did something that, in some ways, challenges this "tough guy" image. He got married. Sol describes his young wife as, "a real pretty girl, but she was brown skinned, she was from Malta...I think she probably had some feelings about being an outsider." It is not surprising that Sol, an outsider himself, would be attracted to such a girl. She got pregnant and Sol says, "I wanted to do right." He goes on, "I didn't see as we had a lot of options...I mean they didn't get like decent abortions in those days...girls died from abortions and I certainly didn't want that happening to her... I cared about her...I cared about her as a person." Sol and his bride researched the marriage laws in neighboring states, went to Kentucky with a forged parental consent and got married. The pregnancy ended in a miscarriage and they kept their marriage a secret until she decided that she wanted to go to college. Her father arranged for an attorney to handle the annulment.

Like many children who grow up in deprived circumstances, Sol demonstrated a maturity beyond his years. Not only was he married at the age of 16, he was also working as a shoe salesman and living alone, paying his own way. He says, "I wasn't scared of work at all." Sol seems to pride himself on being hard-working and independent. This independence extends beyond the material to encompass a worldview which, at least in the late 1950's, might have

been characterized as nonconformist. This worldview was in many ways an extension of the anti-authoritarian impulses that Sol experienced at an early age. However, it also emerged in response to the people, places and events that were the context for his teen years.

For a period of time in high school, Sol lived near Antioch College which he describes as a “really progressive school...locally known as a bunch of communists.” He identified with the “bohemian culture” he associated with Antioch students and faculty. He says, “It looked like they’re living outside the norm... they’re outsiders, well I’m an outsider...yeah, I was very attracted to that.” He goes on, “I respected and admired people who weren’t mainstream...and so I read them...the Beats...Ginsburg and Ferlinghetti, and I really identified with them...they’re rejection of mainstream culture.”

It was during his teen years that Sol began to define himself as an “outlaw.” Sol says, “I wanted to be an outlaw... a lot of people fall into [it]; I actively moved in that direction.” For Sol, the life of an outlaw was a life “outside the box” and Sol had no intentions of being boxed in. Sol says,

I thought that what is usually portrayed as black hats and white hats in our culture were just the opposite, that the black hats were the good guys. I loved the folk singers and the heroization of people like...like bank robbers or ...Robin Hood ...yeah, I was very attracted to that model.

For Sol, as a young man, being an outlaw was a heroic option. Sol adopted a political ideology that allowed him to cast himself as a champion of the oppressed. He says,

[There] were the good guys, those were the oppressed people and there were the bad guys...the government. I was one of those guys that wasn’t afraid to take action to right these wrongs...I was hitting back at a world that I thought was dangerous and harmful

and I hit back at it in every way I could and I, as I moved toward adulthood, I consciously chose to be an outlaw.

This political ideology gave meaning to the angry impulses that had been with Sol since he was a little boy. Suddenly, his anger was attached to a cause and a purpose.

Radical politics were a perfect fit for Sol. This ideology provided him with a new lens through which he could view and reinterpret his experiences. He says:

I still remember how simply aghast I was when I found out those things they told me when I was a little boy in school weren't true, 'the land of the free and the home of the brave' and 'every man is created equal' and when I started to experience in the world that this is not what is happening, I thought I...had been completely betrayed.

Sol remembers recognizing the contradiction between the Air Force slogan he grew up with: "Peace is our profession," and the reality that "they could blow the hell out of any place in the world." He describes this contradiction as "idiocy." Sol was even more incensed by segregation. Sol says, "I grew up in mixed race neighborhoods and I had plenty of black friends, although my father didn't approve of it." He remembers, "They had colored bathrooms and white bathrooms...and colored drinking fountains...I was outraged... I mean this just totally set me off."

Sol says, "I was angry and there's nothing that fuels [the] willingness to act or speak in ways that are violent like anger." He studied Marx and Mao from whom he says he learned that "power comes out of the barrel of a gun." He goes on, "that seemed totally reasonable to me because it didn't seem like anybody was gonna voluntarily give up their power over others." Sol's early and persistent exposure to violence made him uniquely qualified to fight back. He says, "I told myself I was in no way softhearted...if violence was the only solution, then I could

be as violent as I thought I needed to be.” He was looking for a way to “[come] down hard on what I saw was the only side I could live with.”

Drugs became the perfect vehicle through which Sol could act out his revolutionary impulses. He says, “I could sell dope and make money. It takes money to buy guns and so that seemed like a perfectly reasonable way to go about getting it.” For Sol, drug dealing was not only a way to earn money that could be used in the political struggles that he aligned himself with, drug use was a revolutionary act, in and of itself. Sol says, “If we get everybody in the world to drop acid all of the problems are gonna be solved, so I saw myself as a knight in a big white hat riding along with my bags of acid and dope...I was subverting the system.” Soon after he graduated from high school, Sol grew a beard and started selling drugs, mostly marijuana and LSD, the first step toward fulfilling his vocation.

Sol’s career plans were interrupted by an unexpected detour. He was traveling around the country on his own when he made a stop in Houston, Texas. He says, “I was working in a brickyard for \$2 an hour, stacking concrete blocks with a bunch of Mexicans.” He was picked up by the police even though he says, “I really hadn’t done anything. [That was] the only time I could say that.” Sol was 19 and carrying a weapon and identification other than his own. He says that he was “beat up” by the police, describing his experience as “old school stuff.” Sol says, “Those cops beat the shit out of me...they never believed I was who I really was ...and they never believed I was as young as I was.” According to Sol, he was interrogated and accused of a variety of crimes, including robbery, armed robbery and murder. He was even placed in a murder line-up. He says that they were trying get a confession or build a case against him for any crimes involving a “white guy with a beard.” He goes on, “That’s pretty normal police procedure...then as now, they like to clear cases, [it] makes them look good... if they think you’re a low life,

which those guys definitely thought I was a low life, it really doesn't make any difference if you really did it or not."

What the police in Texas did to Sol left a lasting impression and confirmed and reinforced the beliefs he already held about the system. He says, "They scared the living shit out of me...I can't stand to be fearful and I was helpless and powerless and felt fearful and I just hated them for that...I mean from then on, I hated cops, cops were not only my enemy but they were objects of hatred." Ultimately, Sol was charged and convicted of carrying a concealed weapon. He was sentenced to time on a correctional pea farm. When he was released six months later, a little wiser and a whole lot angrier, he was told to get out of Texas within 24 hours. Sol made his way to New Orleans where he worked long enough to replace the car that was confiscated by the authorities in Texas. The message that was indelibly etched on Sol's psyche as a result of this experience was that "the world was even more what I thought it was than what I thought it was." Sol had just had an up close encounter with the "bad guys" in the "white hats" and he was more committed to the outlaw life than ever.

Sol spent more time on the road, making his way From New Orleans to Montana via Mobile, Alabama. Montana was the place he had lived with his aunt, a place he says he liked as a boy. Sol enrolled in college. He says, "I did really well in college and for the first time in my life, I liked school. For one thing, you signed up to take what you wanted to take." In many ways, Sol was living the Bohemian dream. He had two primary groups of associates which he describes this way, "Some of them were into politics and some of them were into dope or both...those were the two groups of people that I hung out with...artists were the other group that I really liked...I really appreciated creativity." Montana in the early 1960's provided the backdrop for Sol's Bohemian lifestyle. He only stayed there for about a year, long enough to relaunch his

career as a drug dealer. Eventually he would redefine himself as not merely a drug dealer, but as a drug trafficker.

It was clear from my conversations with Sol that he didn't just happen into the drug trade. For him, it wasn't merely a part-time occupation or money-making hobby. Drugs for Sol were a business, a business through which he could make a political statement. He says:

...from the time I started doing them, I immediately saw...a larger picture than just getting high...particularly in the early days...it was a way to express my distaste for mainstream people and...to feel like I was actually doing something meaningful to shift people's awareness, I mean the underlying idea was that if everybody got high then everybody's an outlaw and then things are gonna change.

By the late 1960's Sol had moved from drug dealer to drug trafficker, meaning that he now imported drugs from other countries to the United States. He spent a lot of time abroad, living in Mexico for extended periods of time. Sol enjoyed the excitement and intensity of his new lifestyle, a lifestyle that afforded him the opportunity to travel and experience a variety of adventures, including living off the coast of South America in a sailboat.

The activities associated with drug trafficking provided Sol with a level of intensity that was, at least initially, very satisfying. Furthermore, it provided a stage upon which he could act out his anger, an anger that was ignited in childhood and stoked by his experiences in early adulthood. About his life as a drug trafficker Sol says, "The intensity aspect played a big part in its allure for me, because it's a world where if you're not intense and you're not focused, you're gonna miss something." Sol cultivated his 'tough guy' persona, an image that served him well in his chosen profession. He says this about drug trafficking,

...it requires elements of ruthlessness and callousness and [a willingness] to do violent things and to speak in a violent way. I know that, my spoken language, I deliberately stopped using any word that was more than two syllables a lot, I recognized that that was a potential weakness or would be seen as a potential weakness, so for a long time I was all 'mother fuck' this, 'mother fuck' that and I mean for years and years and years and I learned to, um, hide my intelligence and resourcefulness as often as possible because I saw them as tools that helped me stay safe in a world that was a violent world.

Trying to stay safe was something Sol had experience with. He learned in his childhood to use aggression to keep others at bay. As an adult, as a drug trafficker, he used this skill to his advantage. He says, "People had to be afraid of you and that was the only way you can insure your own safety, I mean if people weren't afraid of you and they got nailed or arrested, they'd give you up... I was comfortable making people feel fearful." Sol may have been comfortable inflicting others with fear, but he never managed to fully assuage his own fears. He says that for years he slept with a gun under his pillow, "My attraction to weapons, um, was so strong...because I wanted to feel safe and I had the idea that guns made me safer...I really never felt safe...so let's get some more guns...bigger ones."

For some the drug trade is all about the money. Not so for Sol. He says, "The money didn't mean shit to me...easy come, easy go... yeah I made a lot of money, but I also blew a lot of money and gave away money, gave money to political causes." He says he "never wanted to be rich," however, he enjoyed having "money to fund things that I thought were good things in the world." Sol supported "lots of groups." His political idealism was challenged when these groups were ultimately corrupted by power. For example, he supported Falimo in Angola and says, "I saw them win and they won and they controlled the government and they didn't change,

if anything they were worse than the people that they replaced.” He came to believe that “you just gotta cut off the head of the snake” but was increasingly confused about how that might be done and what role he might play. Over time, his idealism waned.

Sol’s relationships during his years as a drug trafficker were limited to what he refers to as “crime partners,” and an ever changing cast of girlfriends and partners with whom he had children. He describes his “crime partners” as people whom he connected with when he needed “more skills, more hands,” to commit crimes or carry out deals that “simply aren’t doable by one individual.” While they had their utilitarian value and Sol believed they could be “trusted up to a point,” he states emphatically, “They weren’t friends like I have now.” Sol says, “I had this sense ...until I was in my 50s that I would be rejected if people really knew who I was.” This, combined with the obvious dangers associated with his lifestyle, insured that Sol would not connect with friends or lovers on an intimate level. About his relationships Sol says, “I ran through a series of girlfriends...I’d be with a partner three or four years and then it would fall apart.” Sol describes himself as more of a “breeder” than a father. He says, “I never had a real commitment to be a father in any kind of way that was useful to my children.”

Sol admits that he was not “the kind of partner that met people’s needs in a sufficient enough way.” Sol treated the women in his life like “buses,” his attitude was “miss one, catch the next.” He goes on, “I’d say things to my partners like, ‘the doors always open honey, you can walk out any time you want.’” In spite of his inability to commit, Sol did feel connected to his lovers. However, this connection was limited. He says,

Sex was probably the only way I was ever really real with my partners, that I was really fully present...so I think that’s why I valued sex so much is because...I took off my mask

then and was just a feeling human being and I think that's why...I enjoyed sex as much as I did.

For Sol, intimacy was explicitly tied to sex. He had no idea that an intimate connection could exist in any context other than a sexual one.

One of the things that contributed to Sol's inability to commit was his drug use. By the early-1970's Sol was consistently using what he considers to be "harder drugs." His drug of choice was heroin. He says that "although any drug was ok and lots of them I enjoyed thoroughly" opiates were his drug of choice because, "I wanted that insulation that, that little furry thing that separated you from what was really, really going on and certainly separates you from yourself." Sol began trafficking not only marijuana, but "harder" drugs as well. He says, "There was more demand for them and my ethical objections to them had melted away with my own use." By the mid-1970's Sol was addicted to heroin. The more he used, the less he cared, about himself, his relationships or his business. He says this about his use and addiction,

It takes the edges, the emotional edges off your world...so I became more and more into that, I started losing the trust of some of the people that I worked with and depended on because of my addiction...it's very easy to get yourself in pretty deep trouble with really addictive substances like the opiates.

Sol did manage to get into really deep trouble on a number of occasions. Well aware of the risks associated with his work, he says, "the cops got all the advantages...sooner or later the jig's gonna be up, I mean things go wrong."

Sol's first drug related arrest was in 1965 in Montana. He was arrested again in 1969 in Juarez, Mexico. Then he learned to work the system. He remained outside of the country for most of the next 10 years. He says, "Beating charges in the places that I chose to live was usually

a matter of you paying money to somebody...the hard part was identifying who is the person to pay...they have a different attitude in some countries about drug trafficking...they do not see it in moral terms.” He also knew how to “buy good lawyers.” However, by 1980 the ‘jig was up’ for Sol when he was arrested in Canada on charges related to drug trafficking. He served three years in a federal maximum security prison there. Sol detoxified in jail and didn’t use drugs while he was in prison, primarily because acquiring and using drugs is “a good way to incur a lot of debt, to get yourself in a position where people have power over you.” Sol, never one to allow others to have power over him, says, “I prefer to just do without.” Clean for three years, Sol was using again within two hours of his release from prison in Canada. He says, “I was loaded and burning and right back in the game.” He managed to stay in the game for another 12 years.

Sol’s final arrest and conviction was in 1995. Sol got caught in a sting operation in Washington State involving the daughter of a long time associate. Sol says,

I’d known her...since she was 4 years old, I knew the world she grew up in...she was fighting a bunch of drug charges herself which I wasn’t aware of...she was working as a confidential informant and I just had no reason to suspect that, so I think it was just chance...having been in the right place at the right time.

At this point, he could no longer afford the expensive lawyers who he had relied on in the past. He says, “I knew I was toast, I knew I was going down on the charges...they had videos and photos and two confidential informants that testified against me and bags of dope, a bunch of money.” Sol was eventually sentenced to 10 years with the Washington State Department of Corrections. This is the point where his life would take a dramatic and sudden, albeit calculated, turn.

The man who describes himself as “mean... a bad guy that sometimes goes off for no understandable reason,” decided, while still in jail awaiting his trial and sentencing, to take up meditation. Devoid of hope that he would be released from incarceration anytime soon, Sol decided that he would meditate and “become a monk.” For Sol, this decision and his subsequent meditation practice was, at least in part, initially an act of rebellion. He says about meditation “In an environment where you’re largely powerless...it was something that they couldn’t stop me from doing because it’s considered a religious practice, you’re free to practice your religion...I [could] have some kind of control over my life.” Sol was a maximum security inmate in the county jail which meant that he was segregated, to a large extent, from the general population. This, he says, “worked in my favor.” Sol practiced Vipassana or insight meditation, something he was introduced to by a friend on the outside. His friend sent him “the forms” that outlined “how to sit, how to walk, how to do walking meditation.” For Sol, with limited stimulation and few distractions, “It wasn’t really hard to learn to sit every day.”

According to Sol, meditation was not part of some grand plan to change his life. He says, “I wasn’t one of those people who intended to change their lives...I thought I knew what life was about and I had no intention of changing my stand...I didn’t do it so that I’d be a better person or fit in better or...connect with God or any of it.” He reiterates, “I did it because they couldn’t stop me from doing it, I did it as an act of rebellion.” Sol kept sitting because he could. He continued to sit after he was transferred from county jail to state prison. In fact, it was easy according to Sol, “You wanta sit on the floor...most celles will give you the time and space to do that.” Sitting, for Sol, had unexpected consequences. He says,

...after a year or two of doing this...gradually...none of these things ever came in big chunks, what do you call them, epiphanies or anything, I never had any of those, but I

started to recognize that I was looking at myself in a different way than I ever had and that...my world view was being challenged.

Sol credits himself with one thing, “I stayed with it and I opened to what was happening, I opened to the change that was happening, but it was really the practice that did it to me.”

Although Sol says that meditation, in the beginning, “was part of being a tough guy...I was gonna be a tough sitter, tough meditator,” over time his practice brought feelings to the surface that he had been trying to avoid most of his life. Sol says, “Sooner or later all your shit’s gonna pop up.” He goes on,

I recognized...I’ve got a lot of work to do here because there’s all this stuff in me that is...suppressed...I started for the first time as an adult...going back and looking at my childhood, where did the I...come from and I was open to exploring that and I started learning a lot about myself and I found out that I was not who I thought I was...I wasn’t really a tough guy and...what was inside me was a lot different than I’d ever known and yeah there was a lot of pain there...Those are some hard years of sitting.

Prison for Sol, in many ways, became a place of healing. Together with other inmates, Sol helped to form the first prison Sangha (Buddhist community) in the State of Washington. This was perhaps Sol’s first real experience with community. Sol was learning to make a home, not in prison, but within himself.

When Sol went to prison in 1995, he was 50 years old, considerably older than the average inmate. He says that other inmates referred to him as “Pops,” he was “one of the father figures.” Being part of the “old guard” meant that he was respected. He came to prison hardened by a life of crime. He wasn’t surprised to find himself there and he wasn’t particularly afraid. After all, this was simply a consequence of the life he had chosen and it wasn’t his first time

behind bars. As a result, Sol had a certain ease with being incarcerated that perhaps those who are younger or less worldly might not experience. He was no longer the scared boy who was beaten and threatened in a Texas jail at the age of 19. This sense of ease allowed him to pursue his interests and, for the first time, focus on his own personal growth.

Through his reading of Buddhist texts, his connection with others in the Sangha, and his meditation, Sol developed an interest in compassion as a practice. Sol says, “My practice exhorts me to be compassionate, and it doesn’t exactly tell [me] how.” Sol had been struggling with this problem for several years when he was invited to an upcoming NVC workshop in the prison. Sol thought that perhaps this workshop would provide him with some guidance that would enhance his practice. Sol doesn’t recall learning much about the actual communication strategies that the NVC trainers presented. However, he says,

I did recognize that I really valued that quality of connection that those people brought in with them and that I hungered for that, that these people came in and they didn’t want anything from me, they didn’t want me to be any way or anything, they just valued me for who I was and that’s not an experience I’d really had.

Sol credits his meditation practice and experiences with the Sangha with opening him up to “the place where I was willing to go to a workshop that was about feelings and needs.” Sol attended his first NVC workshop in 1999. From that point forward, Sol says, “I was there...every time they came in for the rest of the time I was...in prison.”

Sol says that he “just started studying the hell out of nonviolent communication...and bit by bit...it was revealed to me...this is the way to bring real compassion into my life and sure enough it was.” Sol not only attended the workshops, he also participated in a NVC practice group with other inmates. He says, “I can remember sitting there in our little study group and

trying to support each other and working with a language that...felt very awkward...it wasn't idiomatic...it isn't the way people usually talk to each other on the street." Over time he and the others in the group came to realize the NVC simply provides "forms and if you can internalize the forms and own it, then you can speak it in your own language and it doesn't sound stupid or foolish or it isn't going to attract undue attention in a prison yard or a cell block." Initially, Sol primarily applied the forms not so much in conversation with others but, rather, internally. He explains it this way,

I started practicing when I stood in lines, and I did it all internally, so I still had my tough guy exterior that kept me safe and kept people at a distance...I would watch for my judgments, of course I had about a thousand of those every hour...I would say 'Now I'm thinking that guys a real asshole and oughta get his hand cut off at the wrist because he reached across somebody else's tray or did something outside of prison etiquette...' I could react from...my habit energy...use anger and violence to try to make somebody do something in a different way, punish them if they didn't, or I can try to see, what was going on with that guy, what was he feeling and what was he needing when he did that...I could do that entirely internally...I just had to remember to do it.

This kind of practice allowed Sol to develop "new habits" in a way that never compromised his sense of personal safety.

Sol eventually became an inside mentor in the NVC workshops. He was responsible for encouraging other inmates to attend. He was often inspired by the experiences of these inmates. He recalls one inmate in particular. Sol asked him to come to an upcoming workshop. The inmate, who knew that one of the trainers was an Asian woman, said that he would, but only

because he wanted to “get up close to some of that Asian pussy.” Sol recalls what happened at that workshop:

We were singing a song, *See Me Beautiful*... we were singing to each other and changing partners and singing it again, going around in a double circle. I’m singing it to this guy and like he just broke down, I mean...tears just started rolling out of his eyes...all he thought he wanted was to get up close to that Asian pussy, but he found something a lot different there.

It is not hard to imagine this inmate being moved by the words to this Red Grammer song:

Look for the best in me/

That’s what I really am/

And all I want to be/

It may take some time/

It may be hard to find/

But see me beautiful/

See me Beautiful/

Each and every day/

Could you take a chance/

Could you find the way/

To see me shining through/

In everything I do/

And see me beautiful (as cited in Rosenberg, n.d., p. 4)

However, it is hard to imagine a group of prison inmates singing these words to each other. Few people on the outside experience this kind of intimacy in their daily lives. And yet, Sol, a man

who had almost no experience with intimacy outside of a sexual context prior to coming to prison, found himself drawn to these workshops and the intimate connections that were engendered there. Sol says, “I actually experienced that innerconnectedness and it...was just more valuable to me than anything else... I never as a child experienced those kind of things that I’m sure some people do in loving families...so it just drew me into it deeper and deeper and deeper.”

Sol credits the trainers with inspiring him through their courage, their willingness to be vulnerable, as well as their unconditional acceptance of him and other inmates. Sol says, the trainers “were absolutely without blame and judgment and criticism.” It wasn’t that the trainers approved of the choices that led him to prison, however, he says, “They were able to distinguish and separate who I am as a human being from my acts and speech.” He was drawn to what he describes as the “genuine...presence that those people brought” when they came into the prison and describes the trainers as “deeply authentic.” Sol was never drawn to the NVC workshops because of the content or instruction; for him it was more about the relationships. He says that if these trainers had been teaching geography, “I’d probably be an outstanding geographer.” Sol says that the trainers never came in with the intention to “tell you how to live or show you the light or lead you to the light...they came in with this attitude...lets work on this together and see if we could learn and grow from each other.” He says that while this work is “...difficult and scary...I responded to it on a really deep level...it’s something my heart yearned for but I hadn’t been aware of it.”

Sol remained an active participant and volunteer in the NVC workshops for several years. However, after serving seven years of his ten year sentence, Sol qualified for work release. He was not allowed any contact with Freedom Project volunteers during this time. Department of

Corrections (DOC) policies forbid contact between inmates on work release and volunteers in order to prevent volunteers from being “preyed” upon, a “liability concern” for the DOC. It was difficult for Sol to be “cut off” from what he had come to rely on as his support network, his community, his friends and mentors. Sol says, “I recognized how much I missed this in my life...being connected to people in the way I felt connected to those handful of people.” Instead of leading him into despair, this longing to be connected led him to make what he describes as “the best decision of my entire life.”

He had planned, after his release, to move in with a female friend. He describes their relationship prior to his incarceration this way, “We’d been fuckin’ buddies off and on for years and years and years, um, we’d never been partners.” She had a nice house and offered Sol the kind of ‘no strings attached’ arrangement that sounded appealing. However, she also still “dabbled in hard drugs” and Sol felt certain that eventually he would be drawn back into that life. He decided that the temptations were simply too great. He says that making the decision not to move in with this long time friend “was a big deal...I spent a long time coming to that decision, I mean it was a life where I knew I’d be comfortable, where there was money, where there was, camaraderie and friendship.” However, this friendship didn’t offer him the kind of connection he longed for; a connection he knew to be possible through his involvement with the Freedom Project. Sol’s decision to “reverse course...triggered a lot of pain in other people and disappointment and anger.” It also allowed him to begin to create a life that is fuller and more contented and peaceful than he could have imagined possible.

Instead of moving to his friend’s waterfront home, Sol moved into the Aloha Inn, a halfway house in Seattle that Sol describes as a

...very structured environment...they give people one shot...you have to work, you have to work at the Aloha Inn as well, you have to save at least 50% of your pay check every month and they verify it every month, you have to be clean and sober and volunteer to submit to UAs at any time, and its dirt cheap...it was started as a place to get street people off the street and so it's pretty highly structured...I was coming from a more highly structured environment, so that wasn't hard.

Sol lived at the Aloha Inn for six months.

During the time he lived at the Aloha Inn, Sol reconnected with the Freedom Project. He says, "I started having more people in my life and I had learned more and more how to effectively connect with people and I started...experiencing the benefits of that, started feeling more at peace with myself, I was happier, I was less fearful, I felt safer." Sol worked full-time at "a low paying job." He spent most of his time, outside of work, volunteering for the Freedom Project. After leaving the Aloha Inn, Sol shared a home with three other returnees. They called their new home Giraffe House. Giraffe or giraffe language is a metaphor for NVC used by Marshall Rosenberg in his work (2005). Sol says, "We supported each other...we committed ourselves to using these processes in our lives and to really owning them and trying to live them."

During his time at Giraffe House, Sol continued to volunteer for the Freedom Project. His life focused around "working to learn NVC, reading, doing exercises and activities and working on my mindfulness practice...I'd go to retreats whenever I could...I had very little money, but...I wanted to do that, that's what I wanted to do...work for Freedom Project." Sol wanted to co-facilitate workshops inside prison but was not allowed back in until he was off parole. Sol says, "Most of my life I never imagined that I would ever willingly walk into a prison." Today,

however, he willingly spends a great deal of time behind bars. He works full time for the Freedom Project and is a certified NVC trainer. He says, “I’m really, really proud to work with Freedom Project and to have become a skilled trainer in prisons and a sufficiently skilled trainer in mindfulness practice.”

Sol diligently cultivated his facilitation skills and moved from being self-conscious to being self-aware. He says, “Self-conscious to me means that you’re worried about what other people are gonna think of you or...will I be good enough to do this or am I doing this right... those thoughts that go through our minds... you’re in your head...” Sol learned to slow down his speech and pay attention. He says, “I was consciously and determinedly trying to stay connected to who I was and be present to myself.” For him, this was a process of learning to “trust [his] heart.” Today, he says, “Most of the time when I’m training or interacting with people, I’m really present, I’m really present... to offer that gift to others...I had a strong intention to do that and I worked hard at it.”

Sol has also worked hard to mend old relationships and cultivate new ones. He maintains his relationship with his siblings, although he says, “The years and physical separation has diminished the quality of connection in our relationships.” They are separated not just by time and geography, as Sol says, “We live different lives...they never went to prison...they weren’t like career criminals like I was...neither of them were ever real addicts.” In spite of the distance, Sol says, “I think they are very reassured about who I am today and [that] I’m happy.” After his release from prison, Sol got to know his father, in many ways for the first time. He says, “I recognized that...I needed to accept him...as he was and not get hung up in how I wanted him to be.” While he seems grateful for this opportunity to get to know his father on new terms, free from the anger that so defined him as a boy and young man, he also expresses sadness about who

his father was and what they were never able to have. He says, “My sadness with my father is that he wasn’t willing to meet people halfway and there were parts of himself that he just was in total denial about and [he] died that way.”

Sol hopes to have a better relationship with his own adult children, in spite of the missing years. He started writing letters to his three children while he was still in prison “...being honest with them and expressing my regrets, deep and abiding regret for things I’d done and said in each of their lives...I had plenty of those things.” Each of his children has responded in different ways. He has a daughter who lives in Seattle. He says, “We are really, really close and connected, we spend time together and...now I’ve got a grandchild...so I go over there a couple times a week just to spend time with her.” His other daughter lives in California. She has “a stepfather...and she relates to her stepfather as her parent...I’m just her biological parent...I’m the sperm donor.” In spite of the fact that they don’t relate to each other as parent and child, Sol says that they have a strong friendship, “I enjoy her enormously and she enjoys me.” His son, who lives in Colorado, has been less forgiving of Sol’s absences and inadequacies as a father, as a result, they are “less connected.” He talks about how his son felt betrayed by broken promises. Sol says, “I remember telling him...back in the early ‘90s...I’m out of that life, I’m not doing that any more, no chance I’m ever gonna go back to prison again and then a couple years later I’m back in prison.” Sol says that while they see each other a few times a year, their relationship is “not as deeply connected as I would most enjoy.” Sol accepts this as a consequence of his previous actions and hopes that someday their relationship will be closer, more connected. Toward that end, he tries to “do and say things that tend to bring us closer.” He says that he continues to work on his relationships with each of his children “not to...repair them, but to have a new kind of relationship...[different] than we ever had in the past.”

Today, Sol is in a “committed” relationship with a woman he describes as his “partner,” a relationship within which he feels “safe.” He met his partner at a Freedom Project event where he was speaking. Afterwards they went out for coffee and Sol did something he had never done in a relationship before. He says, “I told her everything about me...I just wanted to have everything on the table, no surprises.” Early on, Sol told his partner about his previous relationships and insisted that he wanted something different this time around. He says, “I wanted a relationship that we had a real commitment to each other.” Before they moved in together, Sol says, “We made a commitment for one year, like no matter what, we were gonna stick it out for a year...it’s probably a good thing that we made that commitment because there were times it was pretty strained.” Sol says this commitment “helped me feel safer.” Sol and his partner continue to “be as honest and as straightforward with each other” as possible. He says, “We’ve had our share of challenges.” But, he says, they have grown as a couple, “We’re more and more skilled when we get disconnected at getting reconnected and in a shorter and shorter period of time; we don’t tend to hold on to things...hold on to anger and resentment.

Sol is obviously proud of his many accomplishments since being released from prison. At the same time, he still has many regrets. Sol says, “I’m really sad that I lived like that for so long...I really have a deep and abiding regret...for choosing to live that way.” Sol did a lot of soul searching concerning his responsibility for the harm caused by his actions as a drug dealer and trafficker. He says, “I started really thinking about...all the dope that had gone through my hands over all the decades and how many people have OD’d on that dope...I’m not responsible for their doing what they were doing, but...my hands are really dirty because I helped them.” Much of Sol’s grief has been triggered by the understanding that “most of my life I’ve chosen to live in a way that was [not] in harmony with who I am.” He says that what he learned through

the Freedom Project helped him to process this grief in a constructive way. When he looks back he doesn't see himself as a "bad person." Instead, he sees himself as a "foolish person." He goes on, "I'm not proud of what I did and I have my responsibility for the harm that I brought to people but I know I was doing the best I could." Sol has come to understand the needs that motivated his actions. He says, "I used to be mean...I was mean because I was really trying to meet my needs for safety or any of a number of other things...I thought the world was really unsafe so my methodology was I would attack it..."

Part of Sol's journey toward self empathy involved learning to empathize with others. Sol tells about an experience that moved him to understand that "as human beings, we're all equal...there aren't any bad people, but there are people who do bad things." One of those people is the man referred to in the media as "the Green River Killer." Sol talks about a discussion of this man that occurred at a meeting he attended as a member of the Freedom Project training team,

One day, years ago, when they apprehended him, one of the Seattle newspapers ran a full page color [pictorial]...in the middle of the page was the inset oval picture of him and around that were 60 of his known victims. [The facilitator] brought in 8 copies of that and she gave us each a copy and she asked us, 'Can you see the beauty in this man?' Well I couldn't and I wanted to and so for the next six months, including two 30 day retreats, I worked with that. Could I see the beauty in this man? I moved toward that place and finally I could, I could see his humanness despite the fact that he had probably killed more than 100 people.

Learning to forgive this man no doubt helped Sol learn to forgive himself and all of those who had so disappointed him as a boy. Sol no longer needs to strike out against the forces of injustice

in the world. In many ways, Sol appears to be as free a man as I have ever met. He is free from the anger that once dominated and controlled his life and actions; he is free from drugs and the lifestyle they entail; he is free from the egoic judgments that once isolated him; he is free to recognize and acknowledge the interconnectedness that he sees as a natural state, the fulfillment of a lifetime of longing.

In spite of the vast changes that Sol has experienced, changes he fought for, Sol sees himself in every prisoner he works with. He says, "I know without any doubt at all when I walk into [a] prison that I could have done what...anybody in that prison had done to bring themselves to prison." He goes on, "...all those people in prison, they just didn't wake up that morning and say 'who could I hurt today?' but maybe they needed a fix, so they would steal somebody's car and then...things got out of hand real quick and then somebody ends up hurt or dead." This understanding that heinous acts are not the result of evil, but are more often the product of circumstance, might explain, in part, why Sol refuses to see himself as "transformed." He says, "I'm not so comfortable with the word transformed because it implies I'm different than who I was before, I'm all those things I was before and I'm those things I am now, so I really experience a sense of wholeness." Sol insists on staying in touch with what he considers his "shadow side." He explains, "I don't wanta ever forget the things I did and said and how I acted and my responsibility for all the people that I hurt in one way or another...I revisit that very regularly because I don't wanta forget that I can act and speak in these ways."

While Sol insists on staying grounded by reminding himself of where he has been and that his choices could lead him back there again, he recognizes that some see him as a sort of "poster boy" for the causes he represents. Sol has been recognized for his work in prisons and is sometimes the focus of local media. He says, "I'm a reluctant poster boy...I will do whatever I

can do to move this work forward, I will, and if that means standing up and making speeches, I'll stand up and make speeches. I don't enjoy being in the limelight one little bit. I would like to live just an ordinary normal, quiet, wonderful, loving, gentle life." He is leery of the attention he has received, in part, because he has seen others before him falter and fall from the pedestals that they were placed on. He talks about his sadness in seeing his "best friend" return to prison after "he lost his courage and he lost his commitment and his determination." Sol never seems to take for granted what he has accomplished.

One of the words that Sol uses to describe himself today is "grateful." He says, "I would have loved to have come to this when I was 20, but...I am really, really deeply grateful I came to it ever because...it is such a wonderful opportunity and it has so much impacted my life." What Sol has come to are "new ways of living," ways that he says are "in harmony with who I am as a human being." Sol has clearly done a lot of soul searching to understand how he ever lived in a way that was so contrary. Reflecting on his past he says, "I just never learned how to love and be loved...I thought I learned how to love people but I found that that was pretty shallow compared to the way I love people now." Today, he says,

I have a completely different set of tools and I have a rich array of tools that I can choose to use and get my needs met much more effectively than I ever could with meanness or toughness or hardness...I thought that I had to harden my heart and I did and it turns out I didn't have to do that at all.

Sol describes this change as a "paradigm shift" and claims that it "was...worth...all seven plus years and if it took that or took twice that in prison for me to move from one kind of worldview and one kind of view of myself to this other one then, um, it was worth every day."

Toward the end of our time together, I ask Sol about his vision for the future. Sol is clearly a man worldly enough to understand that the future holds no promises. However, he speaks earnestly about his dream for the “peace work” that has become a driving force in his life. He says, “My dream in life and I won’t [live to] see it...is not that there won’t be any prison, but that prisons will become places of healing rather than places of punishment. I believe that is possible.”

Recently Sol faced a new challenge in his personal life. He was diagnosed with cancer. Sol laughs at the irony of the situation. The boy who “hated being afraid more than anything” now has to face a situation that he describes as “a fear triggering event.” Sol describes his cancer this way, “The treatments are all scary, not just the damn cancer and whether they can kill it or not or knock it down...the feeling...fatigue...the physical effects of that stuff, the surgery...” Sol says he practiced “death meditations” and learned to “be present to what was really going on in me.” And while this didn’t eliminate his fear, it did lessen the power it had over him. Sol says,

I can’t imagine what it would have been like...getting cancer and going through all these cancer treatments...without the kind of community and the support I have from other people and the level of understanding I have...I recognize a lot of people don’t have that and I can’t imagine how hard it is for them because it was hard for me, it was difficult and if I didn’t have the tools that I have now to deal with life on life’s terms...I just can’t imagine the kind of emotional shape I would be in.

Regardless of the uncertainty that comes along with his diagnosis, Sol is clearly still a very grateful man.

On a final note, I would like to include some of my own observations and reflections about Sol and our time together. I interviewed Sol on three separate occasions over a number of

weeks during the summer of 2008. We spent about six hours together, sitting face to face, me asking questions, Sol responding to my questions. As in all of my interviews, I made brief, reflective notes after the conclusion of each interview. My process, as a portraitist, involved taking those notes, as well as the transcripts from the interviews and weaving them together into a cogent narrative.

As I reflect on my time with Sol, I realize that my experiences with him were different from any interviews I have ever conducted. Generally, I have found that as a participant is speaking, I listen with only part of my attention. On another level, I am judging, evaluating, and planning my response. With Sol, I found that I was able to attend to him and what he was saying much more fully. I did not experience the kind of running, internal, reactionary monologue that I have become accustomed to. Absent were the self-conscious assessments of myself and the other that I have become so habituated to. As a result, my notes were very brief and centered on one idea, variations on a theme. That theme was essentially that Sol appeared to be “fully present” with me throughout the time we were together.

What does this mean, “fully present?” What I observed was that Sol appeared to be at ease, calm, never guarded or distracted. I never sensed, regardless of how probing or sensitive my line of questioning, that he was holding back or defending himself. I listened intently to what I was asking and answered my questions directly. He was never evasive. Sol appeared, to me, to be an open book. In turn, I felt more comfortable and at ease than is generally the case for me in these types of situations. I was initially nervous at our first meeting. Perhaps it was something in his handshake or his warm smile, but I was immediately calmed by Sol’s presence.

I met a volunteer at the Freedom Project who told me that her motives for volunteering were not altogether altruistic. She said that she just wanted to spend time around people like Sol.

I suspect that she and others want to be around Sol not so much because of what or who he is, but rather because of what or who *they* are when they are with him. Sol seems to be a person who has put down his armor, completely abandoned his defenses. That very act, invites others to do the same.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

My partner and I sometimes attend art exhibits together. I have often observed our very different styles of browsing. My partner tends to stand in front of a single piece, be it a painting or a sculpture, for an extended period of time, seemingly transfixed by the details and nuances. I, on the other hand, prefer to stroll from piece to piece, rather quickly, observing the similarities and differences among and between the different works. There is something to be gained through careful observation of a single object. There are other lessons that can only be gleaned through contrast and comparison.

The portraits created through this research stand alone as meaningful statements of the lived experiences they represent. My hope is that these portraits serve as living documents that stir and confound the reader, as I was stirred and confounded by the narratives as they were presented to me. Now, as I metaphorically lay these portraits out, side by side, like a series of snapshots, I am compelled to look at them as a group.

In chapter three, I constructed a theoretical framework founded on a feminism that privileges intersectionality and acknowledges power as discursively constituted. I argue that both a dominant discourse of violence and a counter discourse of nonviolence have been clearly articulated in the literature. Now I turn my attention to the portraits or narratives that represent the lived experiences of the participants in this research. In what ways do these narratives reflect a discourse of violence? When and where did participants engage in counter discursive practices associated with a discourse of nonviolence? By overlaying the theoretical framework discussed in chapter three on the portraits presented in chapter four, we begin to see how two of the three individual participants were clearly constituted by a discourse of violence before being exposed to a discourse of nonviolence through their involvement with the Freedom Project. We see how

the rules that govern this discourse of violence were embedded in their social practices and institutional affiliations. We see how each of the three individual participants resist and adopt counter discursive practices. Perhaps most interestingly, we see the way that divergent discursive streams merge and part. This clearly happens in the community circle meetings, as well as in the lives of the individual participants.

Violent Discursive Practices

Discourse of violence is characterized by rigid gender roles. The concept of masculinity, within discourse of domination, dictates what boys and men are expected to think and feel and how they are expected to behave. Bell hooks (2004) says, “Patriarchal boys, like their adult counterparts, know the rules: they must not express feelings, with the exception of anger; that they must not do anything considered feminine or womanly” (p. 42). Kimmel (2004) adds, “Masculinity comes to be defined as the distance between the boy and his mother, between himself and being seen as a “Mama’s boy” or a sissy” (p. 81) and “boys tend to acquire masculinity as much by avoiding anything feminine as by imitating men directly...masculinity is far more rigid a role construction than femininity” (p. 132). Both hooks and Kimmel associate masculinity with violence. Kimmel notes that most violence is perpetrated by males, including 99 percent of all rapes, 88 percent of all murders and over 80 percent of all assaults. Hooks says, “Even though masses of American boys will not commit violent crimes resulting in murder, the truth that no one wants to name is that all boys are being raised to be killers even if they learn to hide the killer within and act as benevolent young patriarchs” (pp. 43 – 44).

In comparing the narratives, it is clear that both Trent and Sol were confined by a narrowly defined conception of masculinity. Trent describes his father as “a bit of an authoritarian” who was largely absent except “when it was time to dole out discipline.”

Likewise, Sol's father was a "military man" who "would get explosively angry." In their childhoods Sol and Trent learned to perform the role of the 'tough guy.' Trent played football and hockey, in part because they were activities that "sounded macho." He says, "You learn how to swagger, you learn how to spit and learn how to swear." Sol was drawn to the masculinized image of the "outlaw... like bank robbers or ...Robin Hood." For Sol, even his meditation practice was initially "part of being a tough guy...I was gonna be a tough sitter, tough meditator" Early on he was compelled to compete, as a student and as an athlete. He speaks of a "fierce drive to succeed, or to win." Part of winning for Trent, as an adult, was associated with the acquisition of material possessions. He says, "I got caught up in the idea of outdoing the Jones next door."

Trent says that he never saw his parents "express affection toward one another." Likewise, he found it difficult to express emotion toward his own children and fell into the role of the disciplinarian. Consistent with discourse of violence, feelings were devalued in his childhood home and in the home he made for his children. As I observed Trent in our interviews, it clearly continued to be difficult for him to express his feelings, particularly when he spoke about his childhood and his life before prison. Although he was obviously sad about many of the events of his life, it appeared as if these emotions are barricaded behind a wall, not unlike many, if not most, men schooled in discourse of violence.

Sol seemed to have an easier time accessing his emotions at this point in his life; however, he articulated some of the same struggles. He reiterated a number of times during our interviews his desire as a boy and young man to rid himself of the pervasive fear that was part of his experience. He talked about how he "hated to be afraid" and how he learned to transform that fear into anger. Within a discourse of violence, anger, not fear, is associated with masculinity.

The anger made him feel self-righteous and powerful. In many ways, it made him feel like a man. The anger also kept other people at bay. It was a way of protecting himself, creating a false sense of security. Sol eventually turned to drugs as a way to “insulate” himself from his emotions.

Both Sol and Trent spoke of the pain they experienced in childhood related to their unmet needs, needs that they were never able to express as ‘little men,’ needs of which that were scarcely aware. They talked about the need for connection and intimacy, something that was largely missing from their lives at home and in school. They each, in their own ways, learned to value independence, something that is strongly associated with masculinity within discourse of violence. Both learned to seek intimacy and connection through sex. Contrary to feeling abused or victimized as a very young child who was initiated into what Trent referred to “the club,” he said, “I felt like I’m making some connection with these kids.” The sexual activity associated with the club provided him with “a feeling of intimacy.” As a young adult, Sol admits that he never really felt connected to another human being except through sex. It was the only time he took off his “mask.” This mask can be seen as a mask of masculinity, designed to hide authentic feelings and needs from the outside world.

Both Trent and Sol were subjected as children to *power over* discursive practices. Trent was made to feel powerless in relationship to the older boy who victimized him as a child. He talked about his fear of this boy who threatened him with a knife and how he sought protection from both his own mother and the mother of his harasser. The adults refused to offer protection and Trent succumbed to the sexual play initiated by this boy. Eventually, Trent came to associate this activity, which was in many ways born out of violence, with the positive feelings of belonging he derived from his membership in “the club.” Sol said of the sexual abuse in his

family, “I recognize it was a power-over situation but at the time it all seemed like good fun and that’s what everybody did.”

Individuals respond to violent, power over discursive practices in different ways, depending on their varied subject positions. Trent learned to play by the rules and “fly under the radar.” Sol, on the other hand, responded with rebelliousness. He was determined to avoid being under the control of others. He talked about how he hated the rules and “the structure” that he associated with schooling. He generally had a low opinion of those in authority, including his teachers, and was not afraid to demonstrate his disdain through his interactions with them. He talks of breaking in and vandalizing school buildings even as a student in grammar school and of how this activity made him feel “powerful.” Discourse of violence casts some as victims and others as perpetrators. Sol was determined to avoid being powerless. He came to accept that violence was inevitable. There was only one question to be answered. Would he be a perpetrator or would he be a victim? He said, “If violence was the only solution, then I could be as violent as I thought I needed to be.” Sol described his “ruthlessness” and “callousness” as “tools that helped me stay safe in a world that was a violent world.” The discourse of violence frames the world as dangerous, making violence not only acceptable but necessary. Sol learned to speak and act in ways that made others fearful: “the only way you can insure your own safety.”

Sol refused, from a very early age, to play by the rules. Discourse of violence not only serves to define what the rules are, but also how they will be enforced. The language of *accountability* is central to discourse of domination. This term was used by Sam in the first Freedom Project community circle I attended. He talked about how Walter had reoffended and was sent back to prison. He suggested that the group should have held Walter accountable for actions that may have led to him “slipping.” Sam was, in essence, asking the group to hold him

accountable if they observed him engaging in behaviors that might lead to reoffending. I found myself in agreement with Sam in his call for accountability.

Accountability is a word that is used often in modern society, particularly in institutional settings. In my work in schools, mental health agencies and detention facilities the language of accountability was pervasive. The Washington State Department of Corrections (n.d.), for example, describes itself as an agency that “positively impacts offenders by stressing personal responsibility and accountability.” Behn (2001) argues that beyond the dictionary definitions of accountability are implications of punishment, in other words, “when people seek to hold someone accountable, they are usually planning some kind of punishment” (p. 4). He describes accountability as a “cliché” (p. 6) that is intended “not solely to catch, reverse, and punish wrongdoing. It is also designed to deter wrongdoing” (p. 14). When we deconstruct the word accountability, we find that it is code for punishment; punishment without all of the rough edges, all dressed with good intentions.

Foucault (1975 / 1995) spoke of “punishment as a complex social function” (p. 23). Punishment is, first and foremost, about the exercise of power. Foucault argues that we must “analyze punitive methods not simply as consequences of legislation or as indicators of social structure, but as techniques possessing their own specificity in the more general field of other ways of exercising power” (p. 23). Foucault goes so far as to say that “we must rid ourselves of the illusion that penalty is above all (if not exclusively) a means of reducing crime” (p. 24). Punishment is intended to control. In order to control, punishment must produce signs that are universally understood and accepted. Foucault says that “the art of punishing... must rest on a whole technology of representation” (p. 104). He identifies a number of “obstacle-signs” (p. 104) that he associates with Western-style, modern day punishment. Among these is the need to see

punishment as being in the best interest of those who are punished. At the same time, punishment must “extinguish the dubious glory of the criminal” (p. 112) and present “the criminal as an enemy who must be reeducated into social life” (p. 112). Foucault describes the prison as a “machine for altering minds” (p. 125).

I argue that the concept of punishment is part of the discourse of violence. Rosenberg (2003) says that within “domination systems” individuals are motivated by the desire “to gain rewards and avoid punishment” (p. 14). He goes on, “Punitive action is based on the assumption that people do things that harm themselves and/or others because they’re...evil...a corollary of this way of thinking is that to correct the situation we have to make the wrongdoer see the error of her ways, repent, and change, through some punitive action” (p. 129). When Sam called for accountability from the community circle he was not only enacting a discourse of punishment, as articulated by Foucault, he was also enacting a discourse of violence which is characterized, in part, by punitive discursive practices. Both Sam and I were well schooled in the discourse of punishment: Sam as a former inmate in the Washington State Department of Corrections, and me as a social worker in institutional settings. We were anxious to reenact the dominator / dominated dichotomy inherent in this discourse by asking the group to observe, judge and act in a disciplinary fashion.

Nonviolent Discursive Practices

To this point I have identified and discussed a number of concepts and ideas that are associated with discourse of violence and I have aligned these with statements spoken by participants in this research. These same narratives also reveal discursive streams aligned with discourse of nonviolence. These discursive practices promote egalitarianism, privilege feelings

and needs as valid forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, and support the development of communities that are spaces of inclusion, empathetic understanding and peace.

Bell hooks (2004) talks about a man in the church she attended as a girl and how he challenged traditional notions about masculinity, “As a girl, I was awed by a man in my church, a deacon, who would stand before the congregation and speak his love for the divine spirit. Often in the midst of his testimony he would begin to weep, sobbing tears into a big white handkerchief” (p. 135). Hooks uses the image of this man “to counter patriarchal representations of men as being without feeling” (p. 136). Her example is not unlike what I observed at the third community circle meeting I attended. At that meeting, Blake shared his struggles with the group and openly wept. Unlike the children at hooks’ church who were “embarrassed” for the deacon or the men who “turned their eyes away...ashamed to see a man express intense feeling” (p. 135), the Freedom Project participants at the community circle meeting listened with rapt attention to what Blake had to say and to the pain behind the words. Clearly, the community circle served as a safe space for men to step outside the limits of patriarchal masculinity.

Trent also spoke in ways that challenged traditional notions of masculinity and were consistent with discourse of nonviolence. He talked about how he redefined intimacy and his vision of the kind of intimate relationship that he would like to be part of. He said, “While sex may be a part of an intimate relationship it certainly is not the top most reason to enter into an intimate relationship...it could be totally absent from an intimate relationship now.” He openly admitted that when he was younger he could not separate intimacy from sex, saying, “If you were intimate, you were sexual.” Sol too challenged traditional notions of masculinity and talked about how he came to realize that he “wasn’t really a tough guy.” He shared the story of a man in one of his Freedom Project workshops who was moved to tears as Sol sang *See Me Beautiful* to

him. He says: "I'm singing it to this guy and like he just broke down, I mean...tears just started rolling out of his eyes." These are all examples of resistant, counter discursive practices.

Whereas the dominate discourse of violence limits the ways that men can perform, discourse of nonviolence redefines masculinity to include a wider range of options for behavior.

Much of the discussion in the community circle focused on feelings and needs. It appeared to be the norm when, in response to Frank's complaints about the Department of Corrections, Mary asked him how he was feeling and what he needed. Frank's first response was to identify anger as a primary feeling. The group encouraged him to look behind and beyond the anger. This wasn't just a lesson in creative problem solving it was also counter-discursive in the sense that it challenged the discourse of violence and traditional notions about men, masculinity and feelings. Another emotion that I saw individuals in the community circle grapple with was grief. Macy (1998) talks about how discourse of violence encourages individuals to deny and repress feelings of grief by "gritting our teeth and trying to be nobler, braver citizens...soldiering on with a stiff upper lip" (p. 37). Contrary to this idea, in the community circle, Henry talked about his sadness over the deaths of his mother and grandmother while he was incarcerated and his regret over missing their funerals. Similarly, Trent talked about his regrets over his failed marriage and the lost relationship with his children. He said that this loss was one that "I mourn horribly." Sol, too, talked about his own grief and regrets associated with his previous actions, actions that harmed his partners and children, as well as countless associates and strangers. He talked about his sadness in choosing "to live in a way that was [not] in harmony with who I am."

Eisler (1987 / 1995) speaks of the "prevailing paradigm, where ranking is the primary organizational principle" (p. 39). This prevailing paradigm, or dominate discourse of violence, is countered by the notion of communities within which individuals are not ranked, but instead

experience a sense of equalitarian connection. For Rosenberg (2005), the purpose of NVC is to facilitate and foster these kinds of relationships. He says, “The intent is to remind us about what we already know – about how we humans were meant to relate to one another – and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge” (p. 3). This assumption, that hierarchies are not only undesirable and unworkable, but also unnatural, is central to discourse of nonviolence . Thus, discourse of nonviolence encourages empathetic understanding, inclusion and peaceful collaboration. I experienced a sense of inclusion and connection as I participated in the community circle, in spite of having little in common with most of those in attendance. Trent talked about this as something that encouraged him to participate in the Freedom Project workshops while in prison. He said, “I found that I was able to make a personal connection with guys in the yard and in the tiers and in the chow hall to where they saw me as a human being.” He also shared a story of another young man who was able to connect with his parents in a new way after attending the workshops, “He had actually been able to listen to what his parents were saying and see them as human beings rather than just people who were trying to impose their will on him.” It was this same “quality of connection” that Sol spoke to as a reason why he too felt drawn to the Freedom Project. He said, “I never as a child experienced those kind of things.”

All of the participants, including those in the community circle, talked about and demonstrated empathetic understanding, a concept consistent with discourse of nonviolence. Rosenberg (2005) defines empathy as “a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing” (p. 91). Even when Sam expressed an idea about accountability that was contrary to the prevailing discourse, Dale, another former inmate, expressed empathy for Sam and encouraged him to continue coming to the group. Whereas I was harsh and judgmental in my own assessment of Frank, the individual who was believed himself to be a victim of the

Department of Corrections, others in the group were quick to offer empathy. Blake talked about this encouragement to empathize as one of the benefits of his experience with the Freedom Project. Blake even felt compelled to offer empathy to authority figures within the Department of Corrections. He talked specifically about empathizing with his counselor as a way of connecting more effectively. He also talked about how he empathized with his stepson's need to be acknowledged and valued as a member of the family. Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of empathetic understanding revealed through these narratives was Trent's disclosure about how he had come to empathize with his victims. He came to realize that "I was hurting other people and changing their lives unalterably." This is what, he claimed, caused him to reexamine and attempt to change his behavior. Sol said that he saw NVC as a "way to bring real compassion into my life." He talked about empathizing with guys as he stood in chow lines in prison; through an internal process he would ask, "What was going on with that guy?"

The community circle appeared to me to be a community of inclusion. As I said in the group portrait, group rules or norms were not immediately discernable and the group was more heterogeneous than most. There was a prevailing message that was reiterated in various ways during the meetings, "prisoners are just like everyone else." This message is part of a counter discourse. Within discourse of domination, individuals are ranked. Those who behave in ways that are "anti-social" naturally fall to the bottom of the hierarchy and are excluded from many aspects of social life. For Sol, who "never really felt part of a community" the sense of acceptance and inclusion expressed by participants in the Freedom Project pulled him in. Sol maintained an emotional distance from others as a boy to avoid being rejected. He said, "I had this sense that I...would be rejected if people really knew who I was, so I didn't want anybody else really knowing who I was." It was the acceptance and sense of inclusion that Sol

experienced with the Freedom Project that he credits with leading him away from his old life once he was released from prison.

Sam identified himself as a sex offender, as someone who lives with a “monster” inside. This kind of labeling and pathologizing is consistent with the dominant discourse. The members of the group demonstrated resistance by refusing to accept this characterization of the sex offender. They offered a counter discourse of nonviolence that focused on unmet needs rather than inherent evil. Blake spoke to this when he said, “You’re not your crime; you made some poor decisions at the time you made them.” Interestingly, Blake talked a lot about responsibility, which is closely aligned with the concept of accountability. However, he was quick to clarify that his perception of responsibility is one that does not include “pointing fingers, blame.” Whereas discourse of violence dictates punishment, Sol spoke of an alternative when he talked about his dream, “that prisons will become places of healing rather than places of punishment.” For Sol, this healing begins by seeing the good in those who have done bad things. He talked about this own struggle to see the good in the man referred to as the “Green River Killer.” He says, “I moved toward that place and finally I could, I could see his humanness despite the fact that he had probably killed more than 100 people.”

Navigating Discursive Streams

I find waterways to be useful metaphors for describing discourse, in part because discourse is fluid, always shifting and moving. Discourses of partnership and domination can be seen as separate discursive streams, although they are related as part of the same system. So far, I have explored when and how the participants in this study navigated each of these streams. Now I turn my attention to the transitions, how individuals moved from one discursive stream to another. Very little has been written about the relationship between dominant and resistant

discourses, particularly as they are articulated at the level of individual narrative. However, a relevant body of literature looks at transformative learning. O'Sullivan (2002) provides the following comprehensive definition of transformative learning,

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awarenesses; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 11)

I argue that the process of transformative learning described by O'Sullivan and others (Mezirow 1978, 1990, 2000; Miller, 2002; Taylor, 2000; The Transformative Learning Center, n.d.) can also be described as movement from one discursive stream to another. As individuals begin to question and resist dominant discourses, they may identify and adopt novel discursive practices, the language, as well as the rules of discourse are transformed. The information on transformative learning is useful here because it confirms that such shifts are possible and documents examples of movement. At the level of the individual, discourses can be described as meaning schemes and perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). Perspective transformation is the process by which these meaning schemes and perspectives are challenged and modified. Did the participants in this study experience perspective transformation or movement from one discursive stream to another? If so, what was the process by which this movement occurred? More specifically, what role, if any, did mindfulness and NVC play in facilitating this

movement? These are difficult questions to answer, in part because of the fluid nature of discourse. It is impossible to completely separate out discursive streams that are always moving, diverging, coming together, and flowing into each other. Therefore, in many ways this discussion is tentative. However, I argue that deconstructing narratives to, however tentatively, reveal the discursive streams that flow through is still a useful and illuminating exercise.

Blake, the man who said he was “raised by women” described himself as a “peaceful person... a peacemaker.” He talked about his tendency to reserve judgment and his ability to “get along with everybody.” In spite of growing up in a place characterized by poverty and deprivation, Blake said he learned to be “helpful” and “responsible.” Based on the stories he shared, Blake seemed to spend a lot of time in his childhood with girls and women. He talked about his “little cousin” a girl who accompanied him when he jumped the gate for the L Train and hopped the public transit buses. Later, during his teenage years, he spent most of his time with a girlfriend. He said, “Everywhere I went she went, we was together all day.” Blake’s story is devoid of anger and hostility. Even when he was wrongly convicted and sentenced to nearly 20 years in prison, rather than striking out at the court system, he thanked the judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney. He demonstrated an astonishing degree of forgiveness by saying about his wrongful conviction, “I’m not mad... it was meant to be... I think everything happens for a reason.” In prison, Blake described himself as an advocate for others. Blake’s story is remarkably consistent with discourse of nonviolence: from the egalitarian way he related to girls and women to the tendency toward passivism. In his story there were a few examples of discursive practices associated with domination. There was an incident in prison when Blake lashed out verbally at another inmate. He presented this, however, as uncharacteristic. Prior to moving to Seattle, just before being arrested, Blake described his neighborhood in Chicago this

way: “it’s every man for himself because now no one can be trusted.” Blake was so uneasy with this environment, as he perceived it at the time. He made the decision to leave rather than stay and fight for a place in the pecking order. The neighborhood that Blake tried to escape was much different from that of his childhood and youth. Blake described his boyhood home as a place where community was paramount, where adults were protective and nurturing, where kids were taught to be generous and carefree. This was a place where he learned a language associated with discourse of nonviolence. When he was exposed to NVC in prison Blake merely saw it as a set of tools to do what “I’ve been trying to do...for years but I just didn’t know how to do it.” The language of NVC did not represent, for Blake, a new kind of discourse. It merely gave him the tools to hone a language he was already familiar with, the language of nonviolence.

Trent, born a decade later than Blake in a very different kind of community, describes a childhood steeped in discourse of domination. Raised in a nuclear family with an adult male authority figure, he learned that being a man meant being emotionless. Even of his mother’s death when he was 14 he said only, “We knew it was coming...we simply watched her die in bed.” There was no emotion, no connection to the pain that seemed inevitable. Trent did express one emotion, rage. Much of this was directed at his father, he said, “I didn’t like my father...I saw him as an uncaring son of a bitch.” Trent tried to be the kind of man that he thought he was supposed to be, the kind of man defined through discourse of domination. However, there was always a conflict for Trent. This conflict was brought on, at least in part, by Trent’s growing awareness of his own sexuality. It was his sexual activity, even as a teenager, that set him apart from other boys/men. Trent always felt this dissonance between the image of the “macho” man he thought he was supposed to be and his sexual desires. As he said, “You’re not supposed to go around and have sex with other men.” He responded to this incongruity by hiding, suppressing

his feelings and needs. Prior to his arrest and imprisonment, Trent never questioned the language of violence that he spoke so clearly, any thoughts or feelings that were not consistent with this discourse were simply judged to be wrong. Clearly, they should be shamefully denied or concealed.

According to Mezirow (2000) perspective transformation is generally precipitated by crisis. Trent's arrest was a crisis on every level. Not only did he lose his family, his life; all of his secrets were revealed and distributed for public consumption. Perhaps it was the nature of this crisis that led Trent to begin to question and resist the dominant discourse of violence that had so profoundly shaped his life. There could be no clearer validation that Trent had failed in his efforts to belong, to be a man. As he said, "Every time I tried to express myself in a way that was halfway acceptable by society it was met with a rejection or a blank wall." As a prisoner, he began to search for an alternative discourse. As he was introduced to NVC, he came to see it as an alternative to the discourse of violence that he was so accustomed to. NVC offered a new language and novel discursive rules. He said, "I didn't feel embarrassed about showing my feelings and letting other people know that I was vulnerable and I could be hurt." Trent continued to question the ideas and resist the rules associated with discourse of violence. This is evident in his choices about work, relationships, even his behavior as a consumer. Mezirow (2000) describes a process of transformation that for most is a clean break and a clear shift from one perspective to another. Discourse, however, does not operate in this way. Resistance and power are co-implicated. We see this in Trent's story. He doesn't move cleanly and distinctly from a discourse of violence to a discourse of nonviolence. He shifts from one stream to the other, seemingly without much conscious awareness, at times succumbing to the dominant discourse, at other times resisting. He struggles. Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in

his effort to be more empathetic. He expressed empathy for his victims, and yet he was unwilling to express or accept empathy for himself. When I expressed empathy for him, he said, “Don’t go talking me into being a helpless child...I’m not asking for sympathy.” Trent understood the concept of empathy on an intellectual level, yet appeared to have never fully grieved the losses that he described in his narrative. As a result, at times he fell into self-pity, as when he said, “I’m just destined to be a lonely old man...I just hope that I’m not a lonely, bitter old man.” I saw Trent as a man trying to learn a new language. At times he fell back on the words and rules that are more comfortable for him. As he said, “I’m trying to do the best that I can and be as honest as I can...Right now, I’m at the point that I try to be... transparent.”

Sol, a decade older than Trent and two decades older than Blake, was, in a sense, homeless, much of his young life. With an unstable, unpredictable mother, and an emotionally distant father, Sol never felt safe or secure. Fear plagued him from an early age, yet he learned to transform that fear into anger. Sol was willing to play by some of the rules of the dominate discourse, but resisted others, even as a boy. Sol talked about the contradictions he saw all around him, the way that adults seemed to say one thing and do another. The injustices and lies inherent in such practices as segregation and war fueled his anger as a boy. A post WWII baby, Sol was part of a generation of resistance. Growing up, as he did, within the vicinity of Antioch College, he was influenced by the “Bohemian” counter-culture movement of the 50’s and 60’s, with its legacy of resistance. Although Sol acted in ways that were resistant, he continued to embrace many aspects of the dominate discourse of violence. He saw violence as the primary means by which society could and should be reordered. He embraced an ethic of violence on a personal level and routinely acted in ways that were violent. Sol didn’t question this discourse of violence until he started his meditation practice. It was through this practice that Sol said he

learned “a lot about myself and I found out that I was not who I thought I was...I wasn’t really a tough guy and...what was inside me was a lot different than I’d ever known.” Meditation became a pathway, for Sol, to compassion. He became interested in NVC as a method for cultivating compassion within himself. It was meditation or mindfulness practice that led Sol to question and resist the dominate discourse. He was then able to utilize NVC in a resistant way.

What we see in the stories conveyed by both Trent and Blake is power operating in primarily a power-within or disciplinary way. The knowledge conveyed by Blake, through his narrative, is consistent with discourse of nonviolence. While this can be seen as a resistant, counter discourse, in the sense that it does not occupy secure institutional locations, Blake describes it as the norm in the neighborhood and homes of his childhood. Growing up in this environment, as Blake described it, the knowledge associated with discourse of nonviolence came to “grasp” him “from within.” As Lash (2007) says, “Knowledge and indeed words (discourse)...enter the object themselves. As knowledge enters the capillaries...so does power” (p. 61). Sol’s narrative, on the other hand, revealed something that does not appear to be at work in the other two narratives, something I will call *potentia*. Lash says that *potentia* “is connected not so much to domination as to invention...[it] works less like mechanism than like *life*... it is the motive force, the unfolding, the becoming of the thing-itself, whether that thing is human, non-human or some combination thereof” (p. 59). Whereas both Trent and Blake appear to be like the metaphorical fish that remain unaware of the water, Sol articulated a certain awareness. It is this awareness that allows him to freely choose a discourse of nonviolence rather than succumb to it as a determinate of his environment.

Practices of Freedom and Ethics of Self

I argue that individuals are not only constituted through technologies of power and domination, but also through technologies of self. In other words, individuals are self-determining agents. Sol's story is a clear example of self-determination. Additionally, we see Trent resisting and struggling to break free from what Foucault (1988) calls "an oppressive morality which concerns heterosexuality as well as homosexuality" (p. 3). Through their participation in the Freedom Project, participants were introduced to a novel discourse aligned with NVC. Perhaps more importantly, however, the Freedom Project facilitated practices of freedom and a new ethic of self.

Besley (2005) describes practices of freedom, from a Foucauldian standpoint, as "work completed by the self upon itself" (p. 79) and distinguishes these ascetic practices from "more traditional left-wing *models of liberation*" (p. 79). Elaborating on both Greek and Christian traditions, Foucault (1988) identifies disclosure and truth telling as exercises associated with care of the self and practices of freedom. According to Foucault (1984a), "No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise...without an *askesis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself" (p. 364). This training may take a number of different forms, including "abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, and listening to others" (Foucault, 1984a, p. 364). We see participants in this research engaging in a number of these practices through their involvement with the Freedom Project. The meetings of the community circle included periods of silence and an emphasis on disclosure and listening. I am also reminded of Sol's period of reflection and meditation on the man known as the "Green River Killer" and his effort to hold him in compassion.

Foucault sees this kind of critical self-reflection as central to a modern ethics of self. Foucault (1984c) rejects the humanist conception of human nature as fixed and advocates instead for an *ethos* or new way of life which he describes as, “A philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (p. 50). Foucault (1984a) proposes a blurring of the lines between art and life:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be a work of art, but not our life?...From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. (p. 350 – 351)

I see the men in this study as active creators of their own lives. I am reminded of Blake and his effort to weave together a life from the remnants he carried with him from prison and the realities of family life on the outside. Likewise, Trent spoke of his struggle to carve out a dream in spite of the limitations associated with being identified as a sex offender. As they told their stories, in their lives before prison and the Freedom Project they appeared to be more passive. Through their involvement with the Freedom Project they appeared to have acquired a new ethos, what Besley calls a “principle of action” that is associated with techniques of self and practices of freedom.

Foucault's conceptions of care of the self, practices of freedom and ethics of self are based on his studies of Greek and Christian traditions concerning the self. Interestingly, it is the practice of mindfulness, associated with the Buddhist tradition, which seems to be closely

aligned with Foucault's conceptions for participants in this research. From a Buddhist perspective there is the egoic self that Gunaratana (2002) describes as a "false sense of "me" that is distinct from everything else" (p. 37). It is the true, interconnected self, the self that is *fully contextualized*, that one seeks through various forms of meditation. Through mindfulness practice, Freedom Project participants attempted to be more aware. As Gunaratana states, "Mindfulness is present moment awareness" (p. 140). I am reminded of Sol's description of standing in lines in prison as he consciously attended to his thoughts and feelings. Gunaratana says, "Vipassana meditation teaches us to scrutinize our own perceptual process with great precision. We learn to watch the arising of thought and perception with a feeling of serene detachment" (p. 36). It is this detachment that can be described as freedom, detachment not from the world, but from the thoughts and perceptions that can enslave the individual. Mindfulness provides a method for detaching from the various discourses that unwittingly rule the individual.

Implications

This study looked at the lived experiences of men who studied and began practicing NVC while in the prison. The methods and theoretical framework utilized in this research bring into focus the relationship between personal narrative and public discourse. Lyotard (1993) clearly articulates the implications of narrative research:

The popular stories themselves recount what could be called positive or negative apprenticeships (*Bildungen*): in other words, the successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings. The successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions (the function of myths), or represent positive or negative models (the successful or unsuccessful hero) of integration into established institutions (legends and tales). Thus the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand to define its

criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it. (pp. 75- 76)

The participants in this study, the heroes of the individual narratives, can certainly be seen as apprentices. Their experiences point to the ways that power and knowledge are produced and operate and the relationship between dominant and resistant discourses. Though narrative knowledge, as Lyotard says, makes no claims of “cumulative progression, no pretension to universality” (p. 87), it can and does contribute in meaningful ways to specific areas of scholarship.

I have defined cultural studies as a cross-disciplinary field concerned with the ways power operates in particular historical and cultural contexts. If one assumes, as I do, that power and knowledge operate through discourse, we must examine discourse in operation. As Belsey (1993) states, “The constraints on knowledge, normativity, and subjectivity are the ranges of meaning culturally and discursively available. What it is possible to “experience” at any specific moment is an effect of what is possible to say” (p. 557). Resistance and freedom are limited only by discursivity. One problem with discursive research is that it has so often been limited to a focus on fully articulated, dominant discourses. Foucault’s work, for example, focused primarily on what Cain (1993, p. 84) refers to as “elaborated discourses” rather than “common-sense knowledges.” This research provides a framework for looking at common sense knowledges. While this model may not be a perfect one, it is a model that can serve as a starting point for future research. Studies such as this one are needed if we hope to reveal subjugated knowledges embedded in individual narrative. What is the subjugated knowledge revealed here? In essence, this research documents examples of resistance to the dominant discourse of violence. These examples serve as guideposts for future resistance. The lived experiences of Sol, Trent, Blake

and other members of the Freedom Project community circle illustrate the ways that individuals can and do develop and respond to counter discursive practices and novel discursive forms.

Although they may struggle, falter and fall short, they serve as heroes who point the way.

In her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks (2004) defines feminist masculinity and calls for “a creative loving response that can separate maleness and manhood from all the identifying traits patriarchy has imposed on the self that has a penis” (p. 115). She goes on to say, “Our work of love should be to reclaim masculinity and not allow it to be held hostage to patriarchal domination. There is a creative, life-sustaining, life enhancing place for masculinity in a nondominator culture” (p. 115). This research identifies the discursive practices associated with both “patriarchal masculinity” and “feminist masculinity” as they are revealed through the personal narratives of men who studied and practiced NVC while in prison. This research documents a process of deprogramming through NVC. In doing so, it provides hope for social relationships free from domination.

More specifically, this research contributes to the field of education by identifying teaching methods that individuals characterized as meaningful. In some cases, these strategies appear to facilitate perspective transformation. Each of the participants talked about the Freedom Project volunteer teachers and how their methods were different from those associated with most schooling. They talked about how they, as students, were moved not so much by the content of the NVC classes they took in prison, but by the methods that these teachers employed. Trent said, “They treated me like a human being.” He describes these volunteer teachers as “people who could accept me for who I was, not just for what they could get out of me.” He talked about the sense he had that they were fully present and thoughtful in their responses to him. Sol said that these trainers “were absolutely without blame and judgment and criticism...they were able

to distinguish and separate who I am as a human being from my acts and speech.” He was drawn to what he described as the “genuine...presence that those people brought” when they came into the prison and described the trainers as “deeply authentic.” I witnessed these same qualities in Mary at the community circle meetings, qualities associated with what Carl Rogers (1961) calls “unconditional positive regard” (p. 62). According to Rogers “significant learning...which is more than accumulation of facts...learning which makes a difference – in the individual’s behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality” (p. 280) occurs only in the context of unconditional positive regard. Rogers defines unconditional positive regard in the context of therapy as “a caring which is not possessive, which demands no personal gratification...it involves an acceptance of and a caring for the client as a separate person, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences, and to find his own meaning in them” (p. 283). Discourse of nonviolence and teaching and learning intersect at this concept of unconditional positive regard. Eisler (2000) identifies unconditional positive regard as central to “partnership process” in educational settings. She says, “Partnership process is an integrated teaching style or pedagogy that honors students as whole individuals with diverse learning styles...partnership process promotes not only learning and personal growth but also the shift to a less violent, more equitable and caring society” (p. 14). This research documents the experiences of adult students relevant to these pedagogical strategies and provides testimonial evidence of their effectiveness in facilitating perspective transformation.

Initially I was daunted by the prospect of producing research findings that would contribute to my field of scholarship in a meaningful way. I’ve always seen some merit in the adage that everything worth writing has already been written. And yet discourse is always

morphing, in part because of novel forms of resistance. So I decided to start with a few simple questions, deeply personal questions. What moves *me*? What is it that *I* feel compelled to resist? What answers am *I* searching for? The answers were immediate and clear. I am moved by oppression and domination, in all forms. I feel compelled to resist systems within which individuals are hierarchically ranked. I am searching for knowledge that is tied to the notion of personal freedom. I am interested in how I might break free from the dominant discourses that operate from within. I have spent most of my life repeating the discursive scripts with which I was programmed. Through this research I have come to equate freedom with awareness. I encountered individuals through my inquiry who demonstrated a kind of freedom through awareness.

I recently met a poet who said that he no longer asks himself, “Is this a good poem?” Instead he asks, “What is a poem good for?” This is not unlike the question that has of late been ringing in my ears. I set out to collect and record stories associated with the work of the Freedom Project. Now I find myself waking up at 3:00 a.m. with this question: “What are these stories good for?” I can only answer that question by reflecting on what these stories mean to me. I was honored that the Freedom Project family welcomed me and shared their stories with me. I learned what a discourse of nonviolence looks like in community and in the individual lives of the men who shared their stories with me and the ways that varied discursive practices intersect and flow together. I was inspired by the ways that these men enact practices of freedom and perform a novel ethos of self and community. But perhaps the thing that moved me most profoundly was the sense of *disequilibrium* that I experienced in response to these stories. My experiences in the community circle taught me what empathy looks like in community, something I had never witnessed before. My perception of life for children growing up in the

projects of inner city Chicago was challenged by Blake's description of his childhood. Trent challenged me to look beyond the "sex offender" label to see a real man and not a one dimensional "monster." Before I met Sol, I thought I knew what it meant to be fully present for and with another person. I was wrong. Perhaps the value in these stories lies more in the questions they provoke than in the answers they provide.

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Appendix
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview #1

Tell me about your life before you started NVC training and practice.

Where did you grow up?

What was your childhood like?

Tell me about your family.

How would your family describe you?

Tell me about your experiences with school.

What was your adolescence and early adulthood like?

Tell me about your experiences with work.

What were your relationships like?

What were your beliefs and values?

What were your favorite things to do?

What kind of situations did you struggle with?

What were your strengths and weaknesses?

How did you see the world around you?

What was your relationship to the world around you?

What were your hopes and dreams?

Interview Guide (continued)

Interview #2

Tell me about your experience with the NVC training project.

When and how did you hear about the project?

What were your first thoughts about the project?

What made you decide to participate in the project?

Reconstruct for me the first time you participated in an NVC workshop or training.

What are some of your most vivid memories of the training that you received?

How did you relate to project volunteers?

What kind of training and support did you receive from the project?

What were your thoughts and feelings in the days and weeks surrounding the training sessions?

Reconstruct one or more specific instances when your beliefs, values and behavior began to change as a result of your NVC training and practice?

How did you interact with others during the training sessions?

How did you interact with others in the days and weeks following training sessions?

Interview Guide (continued)**Interview #3****What impact has NVC training and practice had on your life?**

Tell me about your life today

How do you spend your time?

What is most important to you?

With whom do you have significant relationships?

What role does NVC play in your life today?

Have your beliefs and values changed? If so, how?

Has your behavior changed? If so, how?

How has this impacted your relationships?

How has this impacted your self-image?

How has this impacted the way you see the world around you?

How has it impacted your plans for the future?