

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH CHANGING STORIES:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENTS  
IN RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION

By

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To Judy  
For creating a light in the darkness  
For so many beautiful young people

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## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND

This project is concerned with the developmental process of recovery from substance abuse for adolescent boys and girls. In this paper I explore the recovery process from the phenomenological perspective of adolescents through their personal narratives. In a nutshell, I have interviewed adolescents who are in recovery from addiction and have asked for their personal narratives. In order to set the stage for presenting the research problem in the next section, I want to begin by giving the theoretical foundation for what is to follow. I first present the transactional ecological perspective. I then give a brief account of two developmental theories of identity. Finally, I discuss the role of language and narratives in creating and recreating the self within the framework of social phenomenology.

#### Literature Review

##### Transactional Ecological Perspective

In “Knowing and the Known”, Dewey and Bentley (Dewey & Bentley, 1949) introduced the notion of transaction to replace self-actional and interactional ways of knowing. Self-actional knowing involves the view that a person can be thought of individually without a context or environment. Such “knowing” conveys an intrapsychic emphasis. Interactional knowing refers to viewing a person in relation to another (person or context) but still as having independent characteristics. Finally, transactional knowing embeds the person in the context and is defined as the system wherein the forces among the various parts are in constant flux as they change and are changed by each other. An example of the three levels of knowing may be useful in further clarification. Addiction

between the addicted person and her family and/or peers, with no assumption that either participants are changed by the interaction. Often, interactional thinking is associated with Newtonian physics in that “thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection and the separate reals can be detached or isolated from each other (Handy & Harwood, 1973).”

In transactional knowing, addiction can be seen as a part of a web of interconnected risk and protective factors that make up an individual’s life-space. Treatment would be systemic and would acknowledge that change at any level changes the entire system. Transactional theory is associated with quantum physics and Einstein’s theory of relativity. Where interactional knowing is a linear and sequential process, transactional knowing can be nonlinear and unpredictable (Capra, 1975, p.29-30). In its purest form, transactionalism breaks down all barriers and existence “is completely indeterminate and undifferentiated (Capra, 1975, p.33).” In other words, I may define a group of atoms as a table and may believe it is a solid, useful object; at some level, however, it is a moving mass of atoms that is always changing and moving. The problem with this definition of transactionalism is that it quickly loses utility in the world of our phenomenology where if we crash into the set of atoms that we call a table we will be left with a very real understanding of it in the form of a bruise.

As with any construct, transactionalism is inevitably defined differently by various thinkers. The most useful definition for my purposes is a pragmatic one. I use

*always*

*unitas multiplex*

example of addiction. Addiction interrupts the flow of information in an almost palpable way. The addicted person's drug diverts and absorbs all energies from positive development and growth. An addicted adolescent is not available to struggle with his typical developmental tasks because of a preoccupation with the drug, at all levels of his system.

A discussion of transactionalism would be incomplete without mentioning Lewin's field theory (Lewin, 1938). Lewin used a formula to represent his theory of the person-environment transaction. Self-action would be expressed as  $B=f(P)$  or  $B=f(E)$ . Behavior is a function of either person or environment. Interaction would be expressed as  $B=f(P) + \text{or } x f(E)$  where behavior is a function of the additive or multiple properties of person and environment. Transaction would be  $B=f[P,E]$  or behavior is a joint function of person and environment. An alternative way of writing this that would emphasize the transactional nature of the person and environment would be  $B=f[P\text{-in-}E]$  where P and E are more explicitly embedded in each other (Dokecki, personal communication). Lewin added an element to his equation:  $B=f[P,E]=f[L Sp]$ . In words, behavior is a function of the person and the environment, which is a function of the Life Space. Life Space is defined as "the person and the psychological environment as it exists for him." Seeman explains that this Life Space is the phenomenological world of the individual. The environment does not affect the person directly, but operates only through the lens of her perceptions of the environment. This important distinction that Lewin makes suggests that dysfunction may be in the environment itself or in the person's perceptions of the environment. For example, an adolescent may perceive substance use as an attractive activity to gain social status and acceptance. Whether true or not, this perception affects the adolescent's actions.

Plas and Dokecki (1982) use the term “person-environment unity” to show that although “person” and “environment” are separate words, that is only a limitation of our language. Language tends to separate as it attempts to clarify and define. Transactional thinking breaks down the implicit separations that language creates. The moment that I say “person-in-environment,” I am separating. The question then becomes, “how do we use language to communicate transactionalism?” The way I address this is by redefining words explicitly. To return to addiction as our topic, in this paper I use the word “addiction” in a new way. The traditional Webster’s definition of “compulsive uncontrolled use of habit forming drugs” is a self-actional one. In this paper I redefine addiction in a transactional way. A transactional definition of addiction uses Lewin’s formula of  $B=f[P\text{-in-}E]$  where the behavior of the addicted person is a function of the person-environment unity. When I use the terms “addiction” or “addicted adolescent” in this paper, I am referring to my transactional definition of the person-environment unity.

The transactional ecological framework will serve me well in talking about identity and theories of identity development. I will use the transactional vocabulary that I have introduced in the first section to talk about identity as a derivative of a person-environment unity. A person’s sense of himself is not self-actional—it does not develop within a person in isolation. The transactional model above will help us look at the various theories of identity development and to settle on a shared vocabulary for discourse on identity in this project.

### Theories of identity

Erikson's theory of identity. Discussions about identity development in adolescence historically begin with Erikson's eight-stage life cycle scheme of development, with different psychosocial tasks requiring resolution at different stages of the life span (Erikson, 1968). Each consecutive stage rests on the resolutions from preceding stages and serves as a building block for the ones to follow. Erikson's basic definition of identity is the subjective sense of sameness and continuity over time. One has a sense of being the "same" person in different settings and contexts and at different times. Others also identify the person as someone "they know." Identity "ensures a reasonably predictable sense of continuity and social order across multiple contexts...for the holder as well as the beholder (Kroger, 2000)."

According to Erikson, identity development is the way in which a person faces the psychosocial tasks before her (Erikson, 1968). Identity development is shaped by three interacting elements: biology, psychological needs, and a person's social setting. The social settings provide opportunities for expression as well as recognition of biological and psychological needs. For Erikson, optimal identity development can occur when a person finds social roles and niches within their society that match their own biopsychological capacities and needs. Erikson further believes that the initial resolutions of this task occur in adolescence, but that identity development continues throughout the lifespan. Erikson's notion of identity is clearly transactional in that a person's social setting sets before the adolescent certain tasks to which the adolescent responds. The adolescent's biology and psychological needs transact with her environment to help her forge her sense of herself.

Marcia used Erikson's stage model and identity statuses as a methodological device for testing Erikson's notions of identity (Marcia, 1980). These stages are identity

achievement, foreclosure, identity diffusion, and moratorium. Identity achievement refers to the emergence from a period of exploration to arrive at a relatively firm identity. The person has likely faced some “identity crisis” and has the subjective experience that it has passed (Waterman, 1985, p.11). Foreclosure refers to the commitment to a sense of identity without the exploration of alternatives. A person has not faced a crisis but has his identity forged by a strong sense of identification with parents and/or other authority figures. Identity diffusion refers to a person who does not have firm identity commitments and has either not faced or not resolved identity crises. Moratorium refers to a person who is currently in an identity crisis and is seeking to resolve the crisis. There is often a sense of exploration and exhilaration as well as discomfort and anxiety. Marcia (1980) concluded that:

the utility of the concept of identity in looking at personality development in adolescence had been reasonably well established. . . . Moreover, it is an educationally and clinically useful concept. Individuals ‘do’ better and feel better about themselves and others when the ‘have’ it. (p.181)

Although Erikson’s theory is historically and theoretically important, it is overly simplistic in not taking into account the notion that each person has various selves that emerge in various settings. Erikson’s notion that there is a “sameness” to our identity throughout our life has been challenged by researchers who found that development occurs in varying patterns and at different times for different domains (Cote, 1996, p.143). Adolescents differ widely in the areas of their lives in which they have established identities, that is, goals, values, and beliefs (Waterman, 1985, p.6). For some, the most important domain may be work, whereas for others it may be relationships. Erikson’s “identity” is thought to be forged as the person transacts with her environment, but it is thought to reside within the individual and is something that the person carries within her. Other theories of identity question this basic assumption.

Kegan's theory of identity. Kegan's view of identity (Kroger, 1989) (p141) draws upon the cognitive-developmental models of Piaget, Kohlberg and object-relations theory in describing identity. This theory is referred to as the constructive-developmental approach, and defines identity as follows:

the organism and the environment in which it is embedded keep reconstructing their relationship...Meaning making is a series of qualitative reconstructions of the relation between the subject and the object of experience. (Kegan, Noam, & Rogers, 1982),p.107)

In other words, identity development is the negotiation of boundaries between self and other. It is a process of differentiation and integration (Kegan, 1982). It is a deeply transactional concept. In Kegan's view, *self*, or subject, refers to "the intrapsychic framework in which one is embedded and from which one is unable to create distance."

*Other*

\_\_\_\_\_







*constructive alternativism*











& Bentler, 1986a; Newcomb & Bentler, 1986b; O'Malley, Johnston, & Bachman, 1999). In addition, we have learned much about treatments through extensive research. Studies show that it is the post treatment factors that tend to influence relapse rates the most (Finney, Moos, & Mewborn, 1980). Even after the most comprehensive treatment, if the adolescent is put back into her old environment, she is unlikely to be able to withstand the pressures of sobriety. In this first section I give a brief overview of the risk factors that lead to adolescent addiction in order to give a general context for understanding these adolescents. I then discuss some of the issues that are involved in the developmental process of recovery and how they address the thesis of this paper, that the developmental process of recovery is reflected in and constructed by personal narratives.

#### The developmental process of recovery

Relapse rates are typically reported as being between 38-85% (Catalano et al., 1990). Some of the factors that contribute to relapse are drug cravings, few leisure activities, difficulty contacting and relating to non-drug using peers, and lack of involvement in schools. These are important findings and more research in treatment centers can enrich our understanding even further. But there is another side to recovery that is not covered in the literature. We have information about whether the adolescents are using drugs or not and what their activities are, but we know little about how they are experiencing the recovery process internally. The process of recovery as it is experienced phenomenologically is pivotal in helping us develop more effective treatments. If we take seriously the notion that no one can truly know about someone else's experiences as meaningfully as the experiencer herself, then we must look to adolescents in recovery to teach us about the recovery experience.

In this project, I explore adolescent recovery from the adolescents' perspective. Through their personal narratives, I begin to learn about how they have experienced their own development and recovery. I also analyze their stories at another level. I am interested in the notion that the act of telling one's story in a sense constructs the reality anew (McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). When a person tells his story, he creates his sense of himself, his identity. He is choosing a voice. By changing his story, he can empower himself to change his understanding of himself, thereby changing his trajectory. The "reality" of the story is less interesting to me than the truth it reveals about the inner experience of that individual. My position is that, in order to better understand the developmental process of the changing sense of self that these students experience, it is necessary to listen to their stories, both in what they tell (content) and how they tell (process). Furthermore, I want to find out if in constructing their stories, these adolescents are reconstructing their sense of themselves and reconfirming their commitment to sobriety. Through the stories of recovering teens we will begin to understand adolescent recovery at a deeper and more personal level.

These adolescents in recovery have already been marginalized and labelled by our culture's "master narrative" of what our stories "should be." Western civilization's master narrative is about control, power, and stability (S. Fest, personal communication). The ones with the power decide whose voice is worth hearing, whose story is worth telling.

Often this speech about the "other" annihilates, erases: no need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine. My own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. (Fine, 1994)

I want to give the power back to the speakers in making room for their voice and hearing their story of self with no judgement and no agenda. Although I already have stated the ultimate agenda of improving treatment through knowing about their experience, I feel that this agenda is broad and benign, and should not interfere with my ability to hear their stories. Although I can only get at their stories through my own phenomenology, I will have methodological safeguards in place to help minimize any negative affects and maximize on the positive affects of the lenses that I bring to this research.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

The discussion of the research design has several sections. First, I introduce this study as having an ethnographic research design focusing on the narratives of the students at an alternative school for teenagers in recovery from addiction that I call Recovery High School (RHS) in this study. Then I provide some of the broad research questions. Next, I give a detailed description of field entry, methods of establishing trustworthiness and research ethics. Finally, I describe the phases of inquiry.

#### Ethnographic research design

This study involves the collection of narrative data through interviews with adolescents in recovery from addiction. This study employs a qualitative research design and an ethnographic interview method recommended by Spradley (1979). This mode of inquiry is a process that evolves as the study progresses. Unlike typical quantitative methods, I do not have specific hypotheses that I am testing, although I have formulated many of the questions and issues that I am interested in. The process of this research paradigm is dynamic, contextual, and emergent (Hunkins, Wiseman, & Williams, 1995). My broad research question is “What can we learn about adolescents’ experiences of recovery from addiction through their narratives and their process of constructing their narratives?” Here are some more specific questions that I formulated before analyzing the data. Of course, I remained open to let issues and patterns that I had not thought about emerge from the stories as well.

1. What can we learn about how the Recovery High School (RHS) students' sense of themselves evolves over time, through using, treatment, and attempting to maintain sobriety? How does their self-perception change?
2. What are the major themes that emerge from the students' stories?
3. Have these students typically felt their own sense of agency or were they more passive responders to their world?
4. What can we learn about how these adolescents have experienced traditional schools? How have the schools fallen short in meeting their needs?
5. How have these teens come to terms with their past and how are they thinking about their future?
6. What has RHS meant to them? Has it supported their recovery? How?

#### Field entry

My entrée into Recovery High School (RHS) is not a typical one. I was not looking specifically to work with adolescents or with recovery issues. But when I learned about RHS from a friend who worked there, I was intrigued by it for several reasons. First of all, I had been a non traditional teacher in a traditional setting for several years and had developed strong convictions about how the teacher, as well as the school, affect more than just academic competence. Second, I was working toward a graduate degree in clinical psychology with a special interest in developmental issues for children and adolescents. Third, I was beginning to think about topics for my dissertation and loved the idea of helping a new school evolve in its most formative years. In retrospect, however, all of those reasons got me in the door, but what kept me there and got me “hooked” was meeting principal who we will call Lynn.

My first meeting with Lynn could be considered the informal beginning of my research. I asked her if she would be willing to have me do research at RHS. She was very enthusiastic about it and shared some research that she had done in designing the school. She gave me a detailed history of how the school emerged from the birth of the idea to its then one year anniversary. Before she opened the school, Lynn had worked for a program that helped teens in treatment (for substance abuse) to maintain some scholastics so that their transition back into their school would be smoother. What she kept seeing, though, was that the minute they went back to their school, that environment pulled them back into their substance use. It was heart-wrenching for Lynn to see these “wounded” teens sent back to a punitive system that had no place for them. She decided that there needed to be a better solution. This solution took the form of a school designed specifically for teens coming out of treatment. In this first meeting with Lynn I not only got a history of the school and a sense of Lynn’s philosophy of recovery, but I also immediately felt a strong commitment to this woman and this school, and a profound respect for these students who were struggling to stay sober.

There were several different strands of involvement that I pursued in becoming a participant of the RHS community. Initially, I started by introducing myself at one of the daily wrap-up-the-day meetings. I told the students that I am a graduate student at Vanderbilt and will be doing research at RHS. I answered questions they had about who I am and what my goals are. In addition, we talked about confidentiality and trust. I wanted to be involved on a regular basis at the school and the counselor and Lynn and I met and decided that I could start a group session that would meet every couple of weeks. Its focus was going to be on perspective-taking, which the counselor felt was developmentally appropriate and important for the students. I began the group in October

of 1999 and continued until early June and the end of the academic year. In January, Lynn asked me if I could teach a psychology class to several seniors and I agreed. Because I was a part of the normal routine of RHS, this ended up being an incredibly fruitful avenue for getting to know the school and many of the students more intimately.

In the Spring of 2000, I took a course in qualitative methodology and decided to do my class project at RHS. I met formally with the whole student body (approximately 20 students) to ask for their consent to participate and reassure them about confidentiality. For the project, I conducted a series of interviews with 3 students. Until this point, I thought I was interested in studying the school as a form of treatment for this population. But after the interviews, it was clear to me that I was more interested in getting a deeper understanding of the students' personal experiences as developing persons.

By the time I began collecting data for this dissertation, I felt like a full and intimate member of the RHS community. I had established trust and rapport with the students and a positive and personal relationship with Lynn and her staff.

#### Establishment of Trustworthiness

Along with the paradigm shift from quantitative to qualitative research, there is a shift in the use of language in terms of how we give credibility and believability to our work. The "validity" issues of quantitative research are renamed "trustworthiness" issues in qualitative research. There are four criteria that qualitative researchers use to establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria represent research that is thorough, rigorous, and highly self-reflective. In this section, I define each criteria, and then discuss the steps I took in order to establish trustworthiness in this study using that criteria.

Credibility is established through showing that alternative perspectives were considered and that the participants accept the researcher's interpretations as valid. I used 4 techniques to establish credibility--prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, and member checking. I have had a prolonged engagement at RHS by facilitating a process group and teaching a class. I have been at the school for over two year for various events and meetings to have persistent observations. I had a peer debriefer, someone trained in qualitative methodology who looked at the raw data with me as well as the levels of interpretations, and was able to help me question my interpretations and consider alternative ones. Also, I used a member check by going back to the "members" or participants to see if my interpretations made sense to them.

Transferability is the ability of other researchers to transfer findings to other sites. I used 2 techniques to facilitate transferability for future researchers--thick description and purposive sampling. In terms of transferability, I provide a thick description of my experience at Communtiy High School to give the reader a real flavor of the context. I also describe my sampling as clearly as possible. I believe that a reader who wants to "generalize" some of the themes would know enough about the context and sample to compare and transfer the findings to other settings and other participants.

Dependability means taking into account the changes that emerge as the study progresses. I used two techniques to establish dependability--reflexive journaling and describing the natural history of the research. For dependability, I relied on my reflexive journal and my peer debriefer to continuously consider alternative explanations and interpretations. Also, I faithfully reported the natural history of my methodology.

Confirmability means showing that the data are valid representations of the participants views. I used three techniques to establish confirmability--peer debriefer, reflexive journaling,

and case reporting, My peer debriefer was excellent in helping me question my interpretations and in seeing some alternative constructions of the participants stories. My journal, too , was a place where I could look more deeply into my understanding and interpretation of the data. In reporting my findings, I support my interpretations with several examples from different participants when possible.

Through the four criteria above, I believe that I have made a strong case for the trustworthiness of this research. I attempted to stay true to the qualitative paradigm and to be open to challenges of my interpretations with a non-defensive stance. I believe that this openness contributed greatly to the depth of understanding that I reached with the help of my peer debriefer, my participants, and my journal.

### Research Ethics

As with any University research, I underwent the process of getting permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University, the committee that is concerned with the ethical treatment of human research participants. Although there were some issues that were of concern to the IRB, such as the possible disclosure of illegal activity during the interview, I was able to allay those concerns and convince them that I would treat the participants with the highest level of ethical consideration in my research. In addition, I agreed to destroy the interview tapes after completing the transcription process, and changed the names of the participants in order to insure confidentiality. I was given permission to go forward with my study and interview participants after receiving informed consent from their parents and assent from them.

### Sampling Procedures

All together I conducted interviews with 10 students. I began by alternating between genders and ended up with 4 female and 6 male participants. Although I wanted to select students based on seniority at RHS, the process was guided more by the return of consent letters from parents and word of mouth among students. After the first couple of interviews, students began asking me if I would interview them. They wanted to

participate in the research. The selection process was also limited by the approaching end of the school year.

In reality, I would come to the school to do an interview and whoever was available and had gotten consent was interviewed. When I tried to make it a more structured process, I was not successful. Students were either absent, did not have consent, or were involved in some other activity (e.g. getting a random drug test or taking ACTs, etc.). The group of students I interviewed was varied in terms of histories (e.g., socioeconomic status, divorces vs. nondivorced families, etc.) and length of sobriety. They were all between the ages of 15-18.

#### Process of inquiry

The data collection phase was intertwined with the analysis phase in a 5 step series as follows:

1. Conduct initial interview
2. Transcribe and analyze interview
3. Compose narrative poem
4. Conduct follow up interview including follow up questions and reading the poem
5. Transcribe follow up interview

I call this process the within participant analyses. In reporting my findings for the above steps, I begin by presenting the within participant findings through the poems, and describing some important themes and processes that emerge from each poem. At the end of that section, I also consider the collective phenomenological experiences of the students.

After completing the 10 interviews, each with the above 5 steps, I began the across participant data analysis phase with the following steps:

1. Using the poems, I listed all of the themes from the interviews.
2. I reviewed themes from proposal and literature.
3. I selected the main themes to use for the dissertation from 1 and 2.

4. For each theme, I devised an appropriate analysis method.
5. I analyzed the data across all the interviews for each theme.

Using the poems and the literature, the themes that emerged were risk factors in the participants' lives, their treatment experiences, and identity development. For the risk factors, I map my participants' experiences onto the existing research in the form of a table. I then describe in detail how these students' lives fit into the risk factor literature. For the treatment experiences, I talk about the similar experiences that most of the students had in their treatment and then also some experiences that were different. Within identity development, I use three different perspectives, Erikson's model, Kegan's model, and the narrative approach. In the narrative approach, I consider 5 processes that emerged as significant ways that the participants constructed their stories. My hope is that this combination of within and across participant analysis that emerges both from previous research and my participants' stories can enrich our understanding of adolescents' experiences in the recovery process.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The Story

Tell me a story, my son requests. And I begin. Once there was a boy named...I lift my voice up just enough for him to know that it is open for him. He says his name with exuberance. And so we continue. And I let him write the story that we tell together. I always wonder at the excitement he shows. It is his story that we tell, and he knows what is going to happen. And yet he looks at me expectantly. He wants to hear his story told to him. There is something about being the subject of a story that makes his eyes twinkle and his arm wrap around mine.

Growing up, I would sit there proudly when my dad would begin one of his stories. I was proud that he was my dad. I have noticed that it almost doesn't matter what my dad is talking about, people are listening. He knows how to tell a story. And I have heard some of his stories literally a hundred times. And I never tire of them. I used to love to watch the listeners being taken down that path of one of his favorites. I loved to watch my father's expressions as he changes his voice and accent to spin his tale. And each time I sat expectantly, you'd think it was the first time I heard it.

And now I have a story to tell. And it is one I tell together with 10 young heroes who are my protagonists. Each one has his or her own unique story, and together their stories can be told as a collective story. I begin my story by presenting each individual story to you. For each participant, I have written a narrative poem expressing his or her story. I begin by presenting the poem, and then I use each story to share part of the experience of that interview. Some of the experiences I share are related to the specific

story, some are related to the experience of interviewing the student, and others are about the experience of reading the poem to the participant and the conversation that ensued. Each participant's story includes the poem and the discussion that followed.

Methodologically, I consider this section to be an in depth phenomenological study of each participant. Through the power of imagery and creative expression, the poem is an experiential way of organizing the events, thoughts, and feelings of my heroes through my own phenomenology. The poetic form "psychologically pre-empts you to emotion" (Butler-Kisber, 1998) and engages the reader experientially. The act of transcribing the interview gave me prolonged contact with the material. Once I had completed the transcription, I typically felt saturated with the story. Then I would begin the creative process of constructing a story.

The form of the poems evolved over time through consulting with my peer debriefer, getting feedback from the students, and developing my own voice for these stories. Typically, I used an image or phrase that came from the participant as an organizing theme for the poem. Often I would take their image and elaborate and expand on it. In addition, there are many direct quotes from the interviews themselves. The poems served for me as a way of adding an interpretive lens to the stories they told.

Each student had a strong affective reaction to hearing his or her narrative poem from me. I would describe the experience as deeply personal and intimate. I invited the students to help me edit the poem and clarify anything that may have misrepresented their experience. There were several instances of such revisions, but all were minor in nature. As a whole, I believe I succeeded in telling a story of struggles, resilience, and hope that stayed true to the hero's phenomenology. I present them in the order in which I wrote them. Before each poem I give a brief description of the student. After each poem I have

a summary paragraph focusing specifically on the way drug use fit into their phenomenological experience.

### Each Participants' Story

#### Poem 1: Carol's Story

Carol is a heavy set, red-headed teenager from a middle to upper class family in a small Southern town. At RHS, she is known for her dry wit and keen ability to be direct and “cut through the bullshit.” Carol has been on medication for emotional issues as far back as she can remember, and continues to have significant mental health issues, although she feels that recently, with her medications, she has had a relatively stable period. Here is her story:

#### The Big House

I lived in the BIG house  
Because I had more freedom  
To use  
Without adult supervision  
I lived there alone  
Or at least unsupervised  
Most of the time

My dad told me he was a "T"  
(I hate the word transsexual)  
"I am only telling you this  
Because I know you can handle it" he said  
I was twelve  
And I believed him

I lived in the BIG house  
Had BIG parties  
Smoked dope every day  
And did not feel even a little bit alive  
And that is what I wanted  
Because to feel  
Was to hurt

I had learned that there were no consequences for me  
Because when nobody cares  
You become invisible

Twice the police stopped me  
I didn't even have a license  
They found dope in the car  
And they sent me on my way  
I missed 70 days of school and my teachers passed me  
I used drugs and alcohol all of the time  
And nobody noticed  
Or at least nobody cared enough to notice  
In order to notice something  
You have to attend  
And when you intentionally avoid  
Then you will not notice  
Even a BIG house

That was my story  
But that was only part of my story  
The dark part of my story  
I could have ended it all  
And I thought about it  
I thought about it a lot  
And there was only one reason I didn't--  
Hope  
And it came from the outside  
One person  
Someone who noticed  
Someone who understood pain  
And made room for me  
Who opened his house and his family to me  
And made me feel welcome  
For the first time

And then I was tired  
Tired of not feeling  
Tired of the pain that comes from prolonged not feeling  
It was dark and depressing where I was  
And I wanted to move toward the light

I went to treatment  
I cried  
I wept  
I trembled  
But mostly I listened  
And I heard that there is another way to be  
One that was as foreign to me as my own lighter side  
One that I would have to learn step by step, day by day.

And it was hard to replace all of that heaviness  
All of the darkness that was my existence before

It was hard to navigate in light  
When my eyes were used to the dark.  
I kept bumping into things.  
It would take time

And then one day  
I was being pulled down again  
Into the darkness  
Only this time I was going to do an experiment  
I was going to see if the new rules applied to me  
I was thinking about guns  
I was thinking and writing about shotguns  
And I couldn't get them out of my head  
And this time I took a chance  
I let someone peek at my writing  
And it happened.  
It happened to me.  
I was not invisible  
It mattered  
I mattered  
And I got help right then and there  
And I got better  
And I am getting better  
And I think I am getting used to the light  
To navigating in the world of the blinding days  
And finding my way out of the too familiar nights

Drugs had a central role in Carol's life as a way of helping her avoid painful feelings. For her, "to feel was to hurt" and she turned to drugs as a way of relieving the pain she experienced in her world. However, using drugs lead to a cycle of pain in this sense. She was breaking society's rules and never experienced the consequences of those rules. This led to feeling invisible and unimportant. If a person is invisible, it means that what they do does not matter, and can make them feel that they do not matter. Drug use was both a means of escaping feelings of worthlessness as well as a cause for some of those feelings. In a way, it was a double-bind for Carol.

One of the central themes for Carol's story is the use of the words "big" and "little". Carol herself is a large, heavyset adolescent. The image began for me with her

use of the expression "the BIG house" with an emphasis on "big." It struck me that the BIG house was a metaphor for this big woman, and that it was an interesting contrast with the fact that she was invisible. It is hard to understand how the school, the police, and the rest of "the system" could not see her. I express this thought in the following lines:

And nobody noticed  
Or at least nobody cared enough to notice  
In order to notice something  
You have to attend  
And when you intentionally avoid  
Then you will not notice  
Even a BIG house

Originally, this was the ending of the poem. And after I had written it, I was quite torn about sharing it with Carol. On the one hand, the story was rather bleak and sad and I did not want to leave her with those feelings. On the other hand, it is her story and I felt a sense of obligation to share it with her both because the story belonged to her as well as to check if my version was true to her experience. In discussing this with my peer debriefer, she asked me about my feelings toward this participant. I expressed an overwhelming sense of sadness for her. I myself was seeing her life as a sad story and my poem reflected that. My peer debriefer challenged me to look into the story and find some more hopeful themes. She suggested that I was hearing only a part of the story that Carol was telling. Pomerantz (1997) talks about what the absence of certain stories tells about the researcher. This was an instance where my lens was biased toward seeing the negative because of my outrage at this young woman's experiences. My peer debriefer helped me broaden the scope of my lens and see a fuller picture. Hence, the continuation:

That was my story  
But that was only part of my story  
The dark part of my story

I could have ended it all  
And I thought about it  
I thought about it a lot  
And there was only one reason I didn't--  
Hope

Once I was looking for the positive themes, they jumped out at me. I am grateful to my peer debriefer for helping release me from my anger and negativity toward all those who ignored Carol, and for getting me in touch with the resilience that Carol showed, a truer and more complete picture. After I wrote the second half of the poem, my ambivalence about sharing it with Carol was gone, and, indeed, I was looking forward to it.

Sharing the poem with Carol is a memory I will always cherish. This was my first narrative poem in this research. I did not tell any of the participants that I would write a poem and so this caught her by surprise. I think it would be valuable to share the brief conversation that followed after I read her the poem. I will use this to discuss not only Carol's reaction, but the reactions of the other participants as well. I found in general that the students were not as articulate in words but more in their display of emotions in their response to hearing their poem read to them. Carol was able to be remarkably articulate:

- C: That's cool. That is really cool. I missed a paragraph. I was thinking about something.
- T: What were you thinking about?
- C: I was thinking about how bad it was.
- T: I could read it again and you could stop me anytime. Or, what do you want to do with it? Your call.
- C: I want to look at it. Yeah. (reading it over herself)
- T: Tell me as much as you can about it. I'm sure it was weird to have someone write your story
- C: No joke. It was crazy. But I really liked it though. Cause it had like everything that I told you, like all the big stuff.
- T: So you feel like it is a real fair representation
- C: Yeah.
- T: It is yours. But we can make any changes.
- C: What does "attend" mean? You mean like show up or something?

T: No. "Attend" can also mean to pay attention.

C: Okay.

T: It means more than just looking or watching to me in that you have to shift your focus and take a moment. And what I was saying is that nobody was doing that. The policeman wasn't even doing that. Nobody was taking the time so that in a way, you are noticed.

[In this next part, Carol is referring to a line that originally read 'who opened his house to me']

C: That was pretty cool. I don't know. The part with they guy kind of sounds like a boyfriend or something.

T: I could clarify it by saying something like "who opened up his house and family" where I said "who opened his house."

C: Yeah, that would be pretty cool.

T: Does that solve that problem?

C: Yeah.

T: There is a lot of symbolism I think you probably picked up on.

C: Yeah. Here is the part I missed. One that was foreign to me as my own lighter side....That is good. I like that part. That is really cool. That is really cool. You really get into this don't you?

T: Yeah. It is my passion.

C: It's great.

T: So is there anything else that you would change?

C: I don't think so.

T: And you feel like it really represents your experience.

C: Yeah. Pretty vividly too.

T: You know what was weird to me, when I read it at home I felt it so it felt right, but when I read it to you I got chills and I was a little bit more, like I felt it more alive because you were sitting here hearing it. How was it to listen to it?

C: It was different. It was kind of like, capturing my past, you know in like a glimpse. Only because I could see the things that you were talking about and that is just odd because you only think about them and every so often and when I was telling you my story, but then you were saying it and then I was thinking it.

T: You are not usually on the thinking side, you are usually on the telling side.

C: And it was like visualizing what happened.

T: How does it leave you at the end feeling?

C: It made me feel good. It is like hope definitely.

T: Like what about it?

C: Like I still got a little ways to go but I am getting there. That is what basically I felt. I was moving forward. Not like down or anything. Just forward. That was cool. I liked that. I loved the part about dad and stuff. That was cool. That is a good one. That is totally cool and adds humor too.

T: If at some point you feel that you want to change something let me know because you are the person.

C: Yeah, that's cool.

T: Thanks so much.

C: That was pretty cool.

This dialogue was quite typical of the conversation that followed my reading of the narrative poem to the students. The students often picked out a favorite line or stanza and reread it several times, commenting on how well it expressed their experience. Other students also remarked that when they heard their story instead of telling it, they were free to visualize it more and the memories were stronger and more emotional. I noticed, too, that when they told me their story, their affect was usually flat as though they were talking about someone else's life. However, when I read them their poem, their response was very emotional, with several students becoming quite tearful and/or laughing at different parts. It seemed to become a more lived experience *hearing* their story than *telling* their story. As I began to notice this, I asked some students about it and they confirmed that this was indeed their experience. I think it was not only the fact that they were listening instead of telling, but the format of poetry that lends itself more to an emotional and vivid experience.

Like Carol, several students pointed out a phrase or order of events that was not as clear as they would want it. In Carol's case, she thought there was an implication that her helper was a boyfriend instead of her youth minister. We were able to quickly change that to her satisfaction. With other students the changes were quite similar. I may have put the wrong grade level or missed the order of things, and we were able during the follow up interview to revise it. I would then bring them a revised version to keep.

Many of the students, including Carol, told me about the people with whom they wanted to share the poem. As it turns out, Carol read hers at her graduation in May. We made an edited version that was less detailed about her father and that she felt comfortable reading in front of him and the several hundred friends, family, and community members that were present. For me, this was a touching confirmation that the

poem had been more than a research tool, but a meaningful gift to the participants. I believe each student was proud of the way they were portrayed in their poem and felt respected and understood. Perhaps they even understood themselves a little better.

### Poem 2: Paul's Story

Paul is a quiet, slight young man with fine features and rich dark curls that contrast with his fair skin. His father's European background gives Paul's appearance an ethnic flavor. Paul is usually smiling warmly and is a wonderful listener. He comes from a middle class suburban home. Paul is a musician, and plays drums, guitar, and almost any other instrument you offer him. He is always humming a tune or drumming his fingers. Here is his story:

#### A Fish Out of Water

I felt so different  
A fish out of water  
No matter where I was

My dad used to say  
Why can't you just be like the others  
Or worse  
He would say much worse  
The things he would say  
To make me feel worthless  
To create that hole inside  
That aching hole that I would try to fill  
No matter what it took

He would comb my curly hair  
Your hair is not curly, he ranted  
As he tried to straighten it  
And force me to go to church  
To face his angry God

And then he shaved my head  
Exposing me  
Exposing me to the ridicule of my classmates

And I was exposed and powerless

I wanted long hair  
I wanted long hair that my father wouldn't cut  
Like Samson, it would make me strong  
Invincible  
I was drawn to those long-haired, dark-eyed kids  
The doom and gloom types  
Those kids that I knew instinctively  
Had that same hole inside

In Catholic school I was taught that God was angry with me  
That God would punish me  
And if that was how God was  
Then what did I need him  
And I got kicked out

Do I drink?  
Of course.  
Do I smoke weed?  
Of course.  
I couldn't let them see that I didn't know  
I need to be cool  
But where is the buzz?  
I can't even get a fucking buzz  
So I drank more and more  
Burning my mouth and my chest  
And then it finally hit me

Oh yes.  
And I felt older  
And I felt cool  
And I felt like I fit in  
And most of all I felt relief  
And I died  
I overdosed and flatlined.  
And they brought me back

Don't ever do that again  
What were you thinking?  
And mom punished me  
She cut my precious hair  
My long locks of acceptance

But she couldn't get through the wall I had built  
She was always working  
Chef boy R D did not fill the hole  
An empty house

An empty soul  
Solitude that leads to insanity  
I had to escape it

Long hair and angry music  
And I was cool  
He likes our music  
He drinks  
He gets fucked up  
He is one of us  
And that meant I was doing all the right things  
Filling the hole with their acceptance  
Built on all of the angry negative energy we shared.

But I didn't know I was angry  
I didn't know I had any emotions  
I had no conscience  
I had never learned  
I had never been taught  
I had been taught to push my feelings as far away as possible

And I filled that hole  
I was never the tough guy  
But I would gain acceptance by outdrugging everyone  
I could take it to the next level  
Smoke a bowl of weed  
Intensify it  
Benadryl  
Intensify it  
Alcohol  
Intensify it  
Speed  
So you are in this purgatory of ups and downs in this weird and twisted mindset  
I can do more of this than you can  
And then you will like me  
And make me feel like I'm okay  
If you don't like me  
I will do whatever it takes to make you like me  
So that I can feel okay

And then I overdosed again  
This time Mom sent me to the Wilderness Program  
And there they made us work from dusk til dawn  
Cutting trees carrying them on our shoulders  
Blue shoulders from the previous day's work  
And I was terrified of them  
If you are lying  
Dig a stump

If you are dishonest  
Dig a stump  
And I was taught what was right and what was wrong  
Through fear  
And I developed a conscience  
And then I ran away  
But before that  
There was the night I went to my first meeting

I remember expecting the guy to point his finger at me  
To say don't do drugs  
And I was sure it was all a catholic conspiracy

But I was blown away  
He told us how his life was fucked up  
He told us his story  
And for once I felt at home  
I wasn't a fish out of water here  
I didn't feel different here  
And the seed was planted  
If these people could get sober  
So could I

At first I struggled with my higher power  
I was still thinking he would punish me  
That he was an angry, unforgiving, and terrifying God  
But when I could let go of that  
I could begin to feel the love of an accepting Power  
A loving parent  
Then slowly I began to fill the hole  
And fill it in a way that moved me forward  
Toward a manageable life

I have developed a sense of the consequences of my action  
And the ability to consider them before  
And to know that I am okay  
Not because friends say I am  
Not because I always feel okay inside  
Because I don't

But because I have a beautiful song inside me  
A beautiful, peaceful song  
And I am learning to sing it clearly  
Toning down much of the background noise  
And hearing the beginnings of  
A serene and peaceful song.

Paul confirmed that he felt the poem represented his story "straight on." I asked about his experience of listening as follows:

T: What was it like to sit and hear your story?

P: It had funny parts but it is almost beautiful. I don't really know what to say. You got it really well. It is the only thing I can think is beautiful.

For Paul, drugs provided an escape from feelings of rejection and worthlessness, peer acceptance, and drug-induced physiological feelings of confidence. Like many of the students, Paul talked about having a hole inside that he would try to fill. Paul was able to recognize peers that shared this sense of emptiness inside and they developed what researchers call "deviant peer groups." For Paul, this was a group of people with which he could identify and feel a sense of belonging. Here is an example of how the literature diverges from the phenomenological experience of the adolescent. When we read about deviant peer groups, we tend to imagine a group of troublemakers and vandals. Although that is one aspect of this group, the more personal one that I want to expose is the way that these groups provide a means of acceptance to vulnerable teens who feel rejected by parents, "non deviant" peers, and society. For Paul, this group helped break the isolation and loneliness that was his life. Acceptance in the group included doing drugs, and Paul went along in order to fulfill his basic need for acceptance and belonging. Once initiated into drug use, he experienced the other positive effects of drugs--the feelings of power and profound "coolness" that the drugs induce physiologically. I found for many of the students that the drugs served this dual purpose of filling the developmental need for peer acceptance and then providing the physiological feeling of power and confidence. These potent positive experiences only last as long as the drug is in the system. The logical

response then is to use more drugs to recapture those feelings of acceptance and confidence.

Paul shows a clear example of developmental progress from turning to the external validation of his self worth to internalizing that process. Even though now he still has the remnant feelings of longing for his peers' approval, he does not respond to that feeling the way he used to. Now he is able to say to himself that he does not need their approval to be worthwhile even though he may long for it. And he is able to begin to believe that.

### Poem 3: Leah's story

Leah is a gregarious blonde young woman of average height. Her clothes usually reflect the latest fashion trends. Her family is now quite wealthy since her mother met her stepfather, although in her early childhood she often experienced financial deprivation. Leah is usually talking on her cell phone, responding to her beeper, and filling her social calendar, all while sucking on a colorful lollipop. Here is her story:

#### Tucked Away

It is hard for me to explore my feelings  
I don't like to probe too deep  
Maybe this comes from so many years of tucking those feeling away  
I suppose that I learned  
That if I just gloss over things  
Then I don't have to see the truth  
How terrible things were

Living half a week with my dad  
Locked me in the room and molested me  
I figured that is what dads do  
Nobody told me differently  
And I had to go to him  
Or he would get mom in trouble  
Tell the judge she wasn't sharing  
So I tucked my anger and hate deep inside

Living half a week with my mom and stepdad  
Stayed upstairs after 7:30  
Scream if you need me, mom said  
But don't come down, whatever you do  
And I could hear him beating her  
And I could hear her screaming  
I wished I could say to her  
Scream if you need me  
And I wished I could come down to rescue her  
But I was 5  
I was helpless  
So I tucked my anger and pain deep inside

There was nowhere safe for me  
Nowhere I could go  
To be a child  
To get my basic needs met  
Nobody to listen if I said  
Hey, this is scary  
Somebody please take care of me  
Somebody protect me  
I am only 8 years old

So I took care of myself  
I decided that those feelings were not going to help me get through  
They were only going to get in the way  
And I tucked them away  
So they wouldn't bother me anymore

And then when I was 12  
My friend's mom gave us weed  
We were on a trip and smoked for the whole week  
And I believed I had found something wonderful  
There were so many positives for me  
I felt good  
I got friends  
They took care of me  
They got my needs met  
They got me dope anytime I wanted  
I would call and they would come immediately  
And it got easier and easier to tuck those feelings away  
It didn't take as much energy anymore

And so I spent my days in pursuit of drugs  
In pursuit of highs  
Eventually I found acid and pills, too

Meanwhile mom had left that awful man  
We snuck out of town while he was served his papers and moved out  
And we cleaned up the stinking meat that he put all around the house  
To punish us

And then mom met a wonderful man  
Who takes care of her  
He gives her anything she wants  
For her birthday he gave her a house and a car  
I could say he spoils her  
But maybe for the first time she can see  
That she deserves to be treated like a person  
And maybe she will start to believe it

Do you know how spoiled my brother is?  
He had 4 different trucks before he was 17  
I remember after I had stayed sober for a month once  
Because I was grounded and drug tested  
I was sitting in his truck  
And they were passing the pot back and forth in front of me  
And like a cat watching a mouse run back and forth under its nose  
I could not resist

New years was crazy  
Trippin acid,  
I was happy it was new years  
I was just happy happy happy happy,  
I was trippin acid,  
I was happy  
I was with all my friends  
And in those 6 days I got 5 hours of sleep  
And I was miserable  
I needed to get more drugs  
Because that is the only way I knew how to be happy  
And this time this girl called her mom  
And her mom called my mom  
And my mom called me  
And I just kept lying and lying  
Until a few days later I just couldn't anymore  
And I told her

I smoked a blunt  
I smoke weed  
I trip acid  
I roll  
I smoke cigarettes  
I am sorry  
But that is what I do

And she was like I am taking you out of homeschool and you are getting this and doing that and your doing this and this and that  
Just like out of anger

And I needed a way out  
And I must have been desperate  
Because I said  
I want to go live with dad  
I don't know why I said it  
And we went home and I packed my bags  
Oh, I was pissed, I was so pissed  
So she called my dad and my dad said  
You've already given me one of my children and I can't take another one  
This one is already a handful  
My dad didn't want me  
Fuck him!

So there it was  
I had nowhere to go  
Nowhere to hide  
Nowhere to tuck myself away from the truth  
And when I took a moment to actually think about it  
I had an awakening  
Maybe rehab is just what I need  
Yeah  
If I wasn't using my life could be so much better  
And I could have a relationship with my mom

And rehab was great  
The people there wanted to be there  
Just because they cared  
And they took care of all of my needs  
And they made me feel loved and valued

And then I found a school  
Where I could be cared about and loved  
And I have 93 days of abstinence  
And my mom says I am a pleasure to be around  
And I believe I am

But I can tell I have a long way to go  
If I were in that truck again  
With my brother and his friend passing the weed back and forth  
And I would be watching like a cat  
I think I would take it  
But I am not in that truck  
And I will not be in that truck

And maybe I can make it

I am still finding it hard  
To learn to talk about my feelings  
It was so much easier to tuck them away  
It is my habit  
It is the way I needed to be to survive  
It is almost too much to open all of that up

I am sober today  
I am happy to be sober today

Like the other students, drugs served several purposes in Leah's life. They provided her with a group of peers that "took care" of her by providing her with drugs when she needed them. For someone whose emotional needs had been neglected, this was a potent force. She had a network of close friends who used together, provided drugs for each other and protected each other from getting caught. In addition, drugs gave her a way of escaping from having to deal with the realities of her life, which included abuse and neglect. Her life had been filled with painful experiences and she could somehow dissociate from those experiences when she was high on drugs. These were all strong positive reasons for her to continue using drugs in her phenomenological world.

My experience with Leah is an example of how the research process of integrating the information into a poem actually moved me to a deeper level of understanding and compassion. Interviewing Leah was challenging. Her responses to my questions were often brief and superficial. Her story was more factual and less personal than some of the others and when I probed for depth, I found her resistant to my questions. I also found myself dreading the writing of her poem. I sat facing my blank page having no sense of where to start. The poem is supposed to reflect an affective level and I felt I had no data at that level from Leah. I also became more in touch with my

feelings of irritability toward her. As I wrote about it in my journal I got some clarity.

Here is an excerpt:

But my sympathy is only somewhat aroused because I found her to be so superficial and concrete in her thinking... So let me try to reframe in a more positive way. She says that she has 93 days of sobriety. That in itself is a real accomplishment...In this interview, too, she got frustrated with my questions. She tended to be quite vague about things. When I would ask for more specifics she would get annoyed. When I asked her about this she said she wasn't annoyed, but rather just didn't know what I wanted. For example, if she said her teacher was the best. I would ask what specifically she liked about her. It was hard for Leah to get to this. She tended to have a hard time analysing her feelings. She doesn't seem to like to do that, which in itself does not bode well for a strong sobriety.

After writing this, I suddenly realized that the story I wanted to tell was staring right at me. The very fact that she was not expressing her feelings was an important theme of her story. I came to interpret this as a learned behavior -- a vital defense mechanism that helped her survive sexual abuse and emotional neglect. Once I was able to reframe her behavior as a resilient childhood response, a caring and compassionate view toward Leah was aroused in me. And from that place I began to write her story-poem. It is noteworthy that the research process itself helped me reconstruct my feelings toward a participant. The methodology encourages the use of my personal reactions and exploration to help me go more deeply into my relationship with the participant. In this case, this exploration stimulated a profound change in my understanding of Leah and in my ability to enter her phenomenology in the form of a poem.

When I was finished reading Leah said "I like that. I really do. Like seriously. (very excited) Yeah that is my story, like I think you can see me or something." She immediately said she wanted to share it with her mom. She also responded strongly to the part about her father. She said "'Fuck him!' That was my favorite part." Her strong response to this verse confirmed that I had captured her sense of rage at him for his rejection of her. As with the others, I asked Leah if she could think of a title for the poem

and she said ‘Tucked Away.’ This was another validation for me that I had expressed a meaningful construction of her story in a way that she could understand.

#### Poem 4: Jason’s Story

Jason has a strong charisma and charm. He is a short and stocky “tough guy” who clearly does not get pushed around. Jason grew up in the inner city neighborhoods of a big city. His head is shaved and his accent and style reminded me of some mobster characters in the movies. His family has moved into the middle class bracket, but Jason has not been sober long, and has not lived with them for several years. Here is his story:

#### My Life

Using wasn't anything special in my neighborhood  
It was as common as single moms  
Working all day to support their kids

It was always me, my mom, and my sister  
My uncle watched us while my mom worked  
Or more accurately, I watched my uncle  
He measured out that white powder  
On his triple beam scales  
And I gathered a lot of knowledge  
I saw all those sorry men  
Burning their lives away  
Those scum like my father  
That's how I felt  
So it was easy for me to sell to them  
They deserved it  
Leaving their wives  
Never saying anything to their children  
As if they don't exist  
As if they are not a part of him

I only smoked weed  
I never touched the white stuff  
I was not going to become my father  
Weed is not even addictive, they say  
But they have probably never smoked it  
And they have a limited definition of addictive  
That feeling of escape

That feeling of relief  
That place to go when this reality needs to be shut out  
That is as addictive as any crack cocaine  
That I learned to rock up

My cousin was killed before my own eyes  
While we were stopped at a stop light  
They shot him  
And I ran  
They shot him  
And his blood was on me  
And I saw that he was dead  
I was so scared  
I heard the shots  
And I ran  
And it took me a long time to forgive myself  
For saving my life  
Somehow I felt like I should have been able to save his  
I was eleven  
He was seventeen  
And he was killed before my own eyes  
And I started taking the weight of the world on my shoulders  
The nightmares made me crazy  
I carried the memory of my cousin like a scar  
And the older kids respected it  
You can come kick it with us, you know  
And I found that weed was the only thing  
The only thing that helped me stay out of reality  
When I was high, I could be happy  
I could laugh and feel almost like a normal child  
But my childhood was over  
With the sound of that gunshot  
The shot heard round my world

When I was twelve  
My dad's dealers took our Chevy Corsica  
While we were in Calandro's market  
He told them where she parked it  
So they wouldn't beat him up, I guess  
So he could escape his sorry reality  
So we didn't have a car

And something clicked inside me in that moment  
When I saw the car was gone  
And the helpless angry look in my mom's eyes  
I couldn't stay with that helpless feeling inside  
I would not be powerless again  
I needed to find a way to feel that I had some control over my fate

That I didn't have to continue to be my dad's victim  
And money was the currency of freedom  
And selling drugs gets you money  
Selling drugs could get my freedom for me  
In my heart of hearts I thought I was helping  
Taking the burden of me off my mom  
I wanted to believe  
Maybe I needed to believe

And so I became powerful  
I became a dealer  
And the money came in  
And I felt free for the first time  
And working a legal job was a joke  
When the money flowed like a steady stream of water

And then we moved to Nashville  
And I was surprised to find that I could make even more money here  
And so I built up quite a reputation  
I was a successful young entrepreneur  
Until I got arrested when I was 14  
And that first night in jail  
I prayed to God  
If you get me out of here  
And I made all kinds of promises  
That I promptly forgot  
When I got out

My mom remarried  
And I waited for an opportunity  
To discharge some of my rage  
On this man she married  
Who thought he could replace me  
Who felt to me like he was invading me  
As man of the house  
And so I moved out  
Not completely by choice  
And it went downhill from there

And after 55 days of juvenile detention  
55 wasted days of my life  
Marked off a calendar but never really lived  
This juvenile injustice system  
That only made me angrier  
Like F this place  
F this government  
F everybody  
F my life

55 days of anger building up  
Because they had no place to put me  
Because they did not know what to do with problems like me  
Because they cannot see my pain and hurt right beneath my anger  
They do not see me as a person  
Only as a problem  
It makes it easier for them

And finally I wound up at New Life for rehab  
And I met a whole lot of good people, you know  
And after I finally started to listen  
I could relate to everything they said  
And then I was like for real I am staying clean this time  
I am staying clean

My mom always said she loves me unconditionally  
But I could see in her eyes  
That I was disappointing her  
I did not want to be a burden to the family  
And I love her so much  
And I felt myself slipping away from her hold  
I felt myself turning my back on her  
And it hurt real bad  
And I decided I would get my act together  
And I did stay clean for a while

But I guess I wasn't ready  
I had the wrong reasons  
They were good reasons  
But not good enough on those long dark nights  
When reality started creeping in  
And I knew of only one sure way to shut it out

I found out my dad had been locked up  
And that was my excuse  
And I was back  
It was me rationalizing and justifying in my head  
I wanted to find a reason

So they locked me up again  
They throw a bunch of kids together  
And ship us around from place to place  
I felt like I was a piece of mail  
Only mail has a destination  
And people value what is inside the envelope  
People wait expectantly for it  
Nobody was waiting for us

And when I ended up in Baton Rouge  
I was locked up for 22 hours out of the day  
One hour for TV and one for basketball  
And the rest of the time was wasted days of my life  
Marked off a calendar but never really lived  
This juvenile injustice system

I wrote poetry  
Played cards, read, drew  
Eventually got more privileges  
Like having opportunities to get beaten up  
And learning how to fight  
I spent my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday there  
I had spent my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday in lock up, too.  
And they had me talk to counselors  
Who talked about the program  
And I remembered a friend who used to use with me  
And she had talked about a school  
Where all the kids were in recovery  
And they were given a chance  
And I did not want to spend my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday  
Marked off the calendar but never lived

And here I am  
Taking some steps forward  
A few steps backward  
But trying to learn  
That when reality closes in on me  
And all my instincts push me toward the escape  
I need to remind myself  
That I am only escaping from my own life  
And that reality won't kill me  
But trying to escape it will

This time  
I pray to God  
To help me get through this  
To help me pray in earnest  
And this time  
I mean it  
God  
Please give me strength

For Jason, using drugs was primarily a means of escape. Jason echoed many of the students in talking about escaping reality:

That feeling of escape  
That feeling of relief  
That place to go when this reality needs to be shut out

I began to understand that reality to the students means pain. They wanted to escape from feelings of powerlessness, shame, rejection, worthlessness, as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These feelings and experiences were their “reality” and using drugs could let them “numb out” or escape from those experiences or transform those feelings through the effects of the drugs. “Reality” also seems to represent society and its rules. There are certain expectations in place about how to behave and what is acceptable, and these students were usually outside those boundaries. “Reality” for most teens is going to school and doing schoolwork, being cared for by your parents, being involved in sports, music, or other activities, and learning to become a good citizen. By using drugs and being identified as “druggies” these kids were escaping/rejecting that reality. But through sobriety and AA they begin to see that escaping society is harmful to themselves, and that they have to learn to live in this world. Their instincts are to see pain or hardship and immediately escape it, and now they are learning to actually cope with it and stay present, or as they would put it, “in reality.”

Near the end of the interview, Jason said he had 30 days of sobriety. We concluded the interview just in time for the daily wrap up group meeting at the end of the school day. During this half an hour meeting, Lynn asks if anyone has anything they would like to share with the group. Jason immediately said that he had something to say. Then he told the group that he had relapsed the night before. Fewer than 5 minutes had elapsed between the conclusion of our interview where he reported having 30 days sobriety and the meeting where he reported his relapse. When I listened again to my discussion with him on the tape about the length of his sobriety, I could hear that he was

hesitantly beginning to say more when I interrupted with another question. In addition, he had not sounded proud of his sobriety time when I complimented him for his accomplishment. Still, the story he told me was not the truth. Methodologically this opens up some important questions. Do I “throw out the data” because of this? Do I question all of the other facts that he shared? Do I confront him about this issue? In my journal I remarked as follows:

Right after our interview I joined the school in the group room and he told the group first thing that he relapsed last night. I was floored. I was not angry or upset at him in any way. I remembered how when it happened last time that I was lied to in one of the pilot interviews I had felt betrayed and angry, but this time I just felt that he had a right to tell me exactly what he wanted to and that was his choice. I still felt confused about what it could mean. When I talked to Erin [school counselor] and asked overall how he was doing she said that he is really struggling.

I think that my style of interview pulls for the resiliencies. I tended to reframe some of their comments to show the students’ strengths. This implicitly gives them the message that they will be reinforced (gain approval) for making positive self-statements and that I may disapprove of negative ones. It is possible that Jason was giving me what I was asking for. This is one of the unavoidable limitations and strengths of being both the researcher and the interviewer. On the one hand, it is limiting because I use the same lens to interview as I do to interpret. On the other hand, as a researcher I have tools to look at the interview, and know better than anyone what the interviewer was thinking/feeling/experiencing at the time of the interview. From the limiting perspective, I cannot know what Jason would have said had my style of interview been different. From the positive perspective, I have a sense of why Jason said what he said and know that the interviewer (myself) may have made it difficult for him to “let me down.”

I realized how much I was able to enter into Jason’s phenomenology when I could interpret his drug dealing as a resilient act. Like most of us, I always thought that drug

dealers are “even worse than drug users.” And yet as much as I am disgusted with the thought of someone profiting from the addiction of young people and fostering drug use in our schools and society, in Jason’s case, I could hear in his story that choosing to sell drugs was a defiant act against powerlessness. He would not be a victim of his father and money seemed to be the way to get power in his world. My interpretations do not condone drug dealing. In fact, I hope they remain entirely judgement-free. I am not interested in approving or disapproving of Jason’s choices. I am interested in understanding them and perhaps in helping him understand them. In fact, in the follow up interview we talked about how he could use that resilience in his sobriety.

J: Yup, every thing was in order, didn't leave anything out. It was weird, like that is me, like someone else is reading about me, almost made me cry, just like about the stuff about what you said is what I thought about like when I was still out there and selling and everybody using and I was thinking of different people and I was remembered all these people up north and like about my dad got those guys to steal my mom's car that did something, like clicked inside me right there. I don't know, a whole bunch of stuff. You said, a Chevy Corsica and I remember that little blue car (laugh)

T: Was there a part that...?

J: Stuck out the most? About the Chevy Corsica that stuck out in my head.

T: (interrupted) People might think that the fact that you became a dealer was a sign of weakness or bad but in a way in that moment you saved your life by doing that because you didn't become the victim, like another person in that situation would be like here I am again, he stole the car, we are helpless and they would have learned from that I can't do shit to save my life...

J: Yeah, me, I was going to do something about it, I am not going to take this shit

T: In I way I saw it as a strength even though if you asked me do you think selling drugs is a good thing of course I would say it is a terrible thing

J: But sometimes you got to look at the person’s motives

T: Like in that moment with your car, you decided am I going to be a victim or am I not? And you decided you were not, and hopefully that is what is going to get your through, too, that strength of character to be able to be willing to do what you need to take control of your life

[end of interview]

T: Anything else? Overall how does it leave you?

J: It makes me feel good like to think about this is where I came from and look at me now, and my mom always told me “That that does not kill you makes you stronger” and none of this stuff killed me yet, so it only made me stronger. If it wasn't for the stuff that I have been through I wouldn't be the person I am today.

Again, Jason was able to confirm for me that he accepted the way I represented him in his poem. I also felt that it reaffirmed his sense of his strengths and ability to have power over his destiny.

Poem 5: Karen's story

Karen is a very pregnant young brunette. She is from a middle to upper class suburban family. Karen can be distant and quiet to strangers, but is quite gregarious and wild with her close friends. She will have to leave RHS next year after the baby is born and is somewhat anxious about that. Here is her story:

I was just curious  
I was 9 years old  
There was liquor in the house  
I was just curious what it would be like  
I was alone  
It was really fun  
I felt really cool

I was just curious  
I was 11 years old  
My brother's friend gave me some weed  
I was just curious what it would be like  
I was alone  
It was awesome  
I felt really cool

And then I was more than curious  
I was seeking it  
And it was as easy to find  
As easy and accessible as the money in my mom's purse  
Not that I needed much money  
People were very generous with the stuff  
We were all good at sharing

And I did anything I could get my hands on  
Partly out of curiosity  
But partly for a darker reason  
Partly out of a deep feeling of resentment toward my dad  
And toward both my parents

Now I look back and see things differently  
Now I look back and know that so much of it came from me  
That I was perceiving them through distorted lenses

But I remember what I used to think  
I thought that they wanted their perfect little Catholic angel  
Good grades  
Good at sports  
Good deeds  
And I could be all of those things  
But I did not want to  
I did not want to be the puppet whose strings they could pull  
Maybe they could make me go to church  
Maybe they could make me go to their Catholic school  
Maybe they thought they could force feed me their beliefs  
But I felt like they were ramming it down my throat  
And I was choking on it  
I could not keep it down  
And so I was going to be very good  
Better than anybody else  
At being bad.

I guess somewhere way deep inside I was scared  
I was afraid that I was going to let everybody down if I didn't do good enough  
So I said Fuck it  
And then I was doing drugs and I was like  
This is better than that anyway  
If I couldn't make it in their little world,  
I'd make my own little world

I'd be the bad kid  
I will be the exact opposite of what they want me to be  
And I will be good at it  
I'll be the best bad kid that there is  
The more drugs I could get the better  
The more I could drink the better  
The more parties I could go to the better  
The more I snuck out the better  
The worst crowd of kids that I could find to hang out with the better

And I had some boyfriends  
Always older boys  
Who could drive me around  
And they were old enough to buy alcohol  
And when I look back  
I remember how I felt dirty with them  
And how I really didn't like them  
But at the time

It fit into the image  
Of who I wanted to be  
I was getting really good  
At being really bad

And mom and dad  
They did not want to know  
I don't think they believed my stories  
But if they had pushed it  
They would have to deal with the truth  
And I am not sure they were ready for that  
I think they were scared of the truth  
And scared of me  
Just like my sister  
Who scurried away like a scared mouse  
When she would hear me approaching

I think I liked that a lot  
I felt powerful  
They had nothing on me  
If they grounded me  
Or ignored me  
Or yelled at me  
It had no affect on me or my behavior  
It did not go past the wall I had built  
To keep them out  
The wall built of blame and anger  
I blamed them for everything  
I hated them for everything  
I was angry with them for everything  
And they had no access to my emotions

Interestingly  
Neither did I

And then I ended up in an assessment office at Cumberland Heights  
I'm not sure exactly how I got there  
The first time I went I was high  
And I lied about everything  
There was something I liked immediately about the counselor  
But I made a joke of everything  
He said to come back in a week

And then something strange happened  
I went into the room with him  
And the truth came gushing out of me  
Pouring out like a volcano erupting  
And my head kept yelling to me to stop

What was I doing  
I was ruining everything  
But I had never opened up to anyone before  
And my words flowed as readily as my tears  
And the strongest dam in the world could not hold me back  
And I agreed to go to treatment

And that is when I started really learning  
Really growing inside  
Facing my resentments for my dad  
Learning about truly being me  
Not just being a reaction to what I didn't want to be  
Not just being the opposite of something

But more than anything  
I learned respect  
Respect for my dad for his beliefs  
For my mom for what she does  
Just respect for people for what they choose to stand for  
And for myself  
Respect and acceptance for who I am  
I didn't want to be the bad person really  
And I was learning that I didn't have to be the bad person  
In order to be my own person

I noticed that I continued to make mistakes  
And some of them were mistakes I had already made  
But this time around  
My head was clear enough to learn something  
So that I would grow from the experience  
Instead of being doomed to repeat it

I have made some mistakes since I've been sober  
And I am scared  
Of the mistakes that I am going to make  
My mom said to me  
You are capable of anything  
I knew what she meant  
My judgement is not always to be trusted  
I tend to get curious about things  
And I can get impulsive  
And that is scary to me  
Because now I have more to lose than ever

I am going to be a mother  
And I am going to be around people who use next year  
And there will be a lot of stress  
So I will try to keep busy

And try to go to meetings  
And try to keep my head clear enough to recover  
Even when I make little mistakes  
And big mistakes

I need to remind myself  
To be patient with myself  
I need to remember to trust  
I may not like the way things are sometimes  
But that is okay  
I know that it is all  
In God's time

Karen used drugs for several reasons. First, the physiological feelings that were induced by the drugs made her feel older and more powerful. Second, she believed that she gained status with her peers by being the "cool bad kid." Third, she could release herself from her father's expectations of her that she was rejecting. For Karen, there was also a thrill seeking aspect to her drug use from an early age. She was always wanting to try new things and did not tend to consider the consequences to her safety or any future goals. She described this as an inborn curiosity for novel experiences.

Like many of the students, Karen chose to define herself as the "bad" kid. She was defining herself as the opposite of what her parents/society wanted her to be. In order to feel that she had a unique voice she perceived that she had to be what they wanted. Through her story you can see how she grew to understand that she can have a unique voice without being the opposite of what others want from her. And in fact, when she is being the opposite, she is still letting them define her. Karen's reaction to the poem was less positive and enthusiastic. She remarked that she did not like to think about all of those days:

T: How does it leave you feeling?

K: Sort of mixed emotions. I don't think about the past much so it is weird to look back on it, and like usually when I think about it I am like uh (face showing

disgust), so I don't think about it anymore. It is not like terrible, but it isn't that uncomfortable but just there is no real point.

Karen had suggested that we revise the poem to add a few lines about how she used to perceive her father a certain way but that she does not anymore. Upon reflection, I wonder if now that she is rebuilding her relationship with her father, she does not want to think about how negative things were between them. I am not sure she agreed with my emphasis in the poem that much of her using was her way of rejecting her father's expectations. Either that, or she just wanted to put the past behind her and the poem was bringing back many difficult times. Unfortunately, she did not feel like talking more about this at the time.

#### Poem 6: Sam's story

Sam is an energetic, stocky, young man with very short blonde hair and glasses. He carries himself with a maturity and openness that is remarkable for his age. In fact, at first I was not sure if he was a teacher or a student. Sam is openly expressive both in terms of his willingness to laugh and to cry. Sam comes from a struggling-to-be-middle-class home in a small southern town. Here is his story:

In the mirror I see  
This familiar stranger  
And there is so much about him that I don't recognize  
But I like him  
And I want to get to know him better  
Strange to look at my own reflection  
And barely know that face before me

Looking into his eyes I can see  
That he is trustworthy  
That he is level-headed  
He can keep his cool when all around him seems to be in chaos

When I look through his eyes into his soul  
I can see some of his past  
I can see a little boy

Who never was a little boy  
Whose childhood was interrupted

See, everybody has many sides to them  
And whichever side you feed takes over

I had been feeding the dark side of me  
The side that dominated me until now  
The side that knew too well  
How to get around rules  
How to lie and steal  
Why almost every word that came out of his mouth was a lie  
And when he started taking over  
The little boy in me  
The innocent child that needed love and nurturing  
Was shut out almost completely

And when it got really quiet around me  
I could sometimes hear him crying faintly in the distance  
And it was too much  
I had to shut him out  
I needed to keep the noise levels high  
As much interference as I could get  
To get away from the reality  
The ugly reality  
That his childhood was taken from him  
By an angry father  
Who beat that little boy  
Who taught him well how to hide  
How to disappear behind an indifferent self  
A protective shell  
So that the beating would not get to him

And the tougher side emerged  
The one who didn't give a fuck  
If he kept hitting  
Until I bled  
Who didn't weep like a baby  
Because his father demanded such levels of perfection  
That God would have deserved a beating

And it got to where I hated that little boy  
For feeling the hurt and pain  
And I made room for the other side  
To learn how to get away from feeling  
To learn how to get numb

Some kids try drugs

Smoke dope and drink for a while  
And slowly work their way into the harder stuff  
Not me  
Boy I was swimming in it from the start  
As fast as I could  
And before my body had a chance to recover  
Before my head would have a chance to clear  
I would deep sea dive again  
Without an oxygen tank  
I was hoping I would drown  
And if people warned me that the water was deep  
That this was dangerous  
That I might drown  
All I could think was  
Not fast enough

My brother introduced me to the world of drugs  
And I welcomed it with open arms  
And those years of using  
Are like a wild blur to me  
And that side of me that dominated  
He was a fast learner  
In no time he learned how to get messed up  
And then do whatever needed to be done  
To stay that way  
And it got to where being messed up  
Was more my reality than anything else

Because when I wasn't pumped full of drugs  
My mind would start racing  
And the anxiety and panic would start in  
It was like my mind would run full speed ahead  
But then  
I'd take a shot  
And it would slow down a little bit  
Smoke a joint  
It would slow down a little bit more  
Hit some crank  
It would slow down a little bit more  
And I got to where if you put it on the table in front of me  
I'd take it  
Even if it had a skull and crossbones on it  
I'd pop it in my mouth  
Oh yeah  
I thought I was dying many a time  
And it wasn't happening fast enough

I would overdose

I would be puking my guts out  
Blacking in and out  
And my mom would make sure I didn't die  
But she knew she couldn't help me  
She had learned with my brother  
That you can't force a person to be willing  
They have to take that step themselves

Then it got to a point  
That even being messed up  
Couldn't silence the racing thoughts in my head  
Couldn't hide the depression and self-loathing  
That I was always trying to escape  
And I remember  
I couldn't look in the mirror  
To face myself  
Who I had become  
Without feeling disgust at what I saw  
And I hated that boy there  
He was doing all this fucked up shit  
I would think  
I don't want to be me  
I hate being me  
I'd think about being some other guy  
Any other guy  
And my reality was so distorted  
Like even though I was so skinny and malnourished that my ribs were poppin out  
My cheekbones were poppin out,  
And my skin had that sallow grey tint  
When I looked in the mirror I saw me as a fat ass  
I saw me and I was like man  
I am disgusted looking  
This fat ugly not attractive to anybody kind of guy  
This is what I saw  
It's crazy  
But that is what I actually saw  
When I looked in the mirror

But somewhere deep inside me  
I knew something was wrong  
I knew it

And my mom  
By this time I didn't see her much  
I just saw her as someone that I had to avoid when I was fucked up  
Someone who gave me money when I needed money and who paid for my place to stay  
And she didn't trust me worth a shit  
And I wasn't worth trusting

And one day when I told this drug dealer where my brother was  
So that he would give me some weed  
And when I got home I saw him  
And he had been beaten up by six guys with baseball bats  
I saw him  
And it barely even looked like him  
And I just got in the car and drove  
I guess I thought I could run away from everything  
But you never can run away from yourself  
And when I was 100 miles south of Jackson Mississippi  
I called my mom  
I expected her to yell  
To tell me all of the things I deserved to hear  
But she just said  
Can you come home?  
So I started back  
And it was a sobering drive  
My head was starting to clear  
I couldn't believe how far out I had gone  
I was in the middle of nowhere  
Which is where I had been for the last couple of years  
In my head

And I knew I didn't want to continue using  
There had to be something better than this

And the time did come when I was willing  
A small window  
When I just prayed a little prayer  
God, if you have a better plan for me than this  
If you have something that you are wanting me to do before I die  
God if you have plans for me  
Then help me  
I am ready for help  
Just give me something

And then I fell asleep  
And my mom came in when I woke up and said  
That the treatment center would take me now

And as I was packing my bags it hit me  
That it was a miracle  
They had said they wouldn't have room for 2 weeks  
And I knew that in those 2 weeks that window would have closed

And here it was  
My own miracle

And when I got to the center  
A light snow was falling gently on the beautiful hillside  
And all I could think was  
That this was the most beautiful place I had ever seen

So now I look in the mirror  
After 4 months of sobriety  
And that little boy who had been shut out for so long  
Protected from a harsh reality  
It was finally safe enough  
And he was emerging  
He is a beautiful boy  
An honest boy  
Who is going to learn how to feel again  
And I am going to feed that side of me  
With all that I have

I want to look at my reflection  
And see myself  
A me that I am proud to claim  
A reflection of my precious soul

In Sam's phenomenological world, as with other participants, drugs provided an escape from a painful "reality." For a child who had been terribly abused, who was deeply lonely, drugs took away those painful emotions. In fact, not being high was so painful that he felt he always had to have something in his system. For Sam, it was less the physiological feelings of confidence or control, and more the experience of escaping the pain that perpetuated his drug use. Sam did not care if he lived or died, and would put anything in his body just to escape the feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing. Once he could begin to work on self-acceptance, being sober could slowly become less of a painful experience.

When Sam told me his story in the initial interview, he said that at some point in his using days he looked in the mirror and he was disgusted with himself. Near the end of the interview, I asked him what he sees now when he looks in the mirror. Here is the dialogue that followed:

- T: When you look in the mirror now what do you see?
- S: When I look in there I just see, like I am not really used to me yet, I just see a guy. Right now you know.
- T: You almost don't recognize yourself.
- S: Well, I know it is me you know and all that stuff and I see this guy in the mirror and I don't know like who he is cause I don't really because I am trying to learn more about myself but I don't know that much about myself all that much. I know the other me. I know the addict side of me real well, you know. But the other side of me, the side that is out right now I am just now learning. So like when I look in the mirror it is like who is this guy and I am getting used to him you know. But I don't really, but we are getting along pretty good. I just have to learn more about myself. It is what it is all about...I don't know him very well like I was saying but I am trying to get to know him. He is a pretty good guy.
- T: What is good about him?
- S: He can be trusted, which is a big thing for me because every word that used to come out of my mouth was a lie, cool headed, like now something happens like used to the littlest thing could fuck me up all week and now I know when I can let things go ...now I am really cool calm headed, you know, like I am actually in reality most of the time. The real reality. I am here. Not paranoid.
- T: Fully present.

For Sam, this was a current theme whose immediacy was quite evident in the way he was still exploring it. It was clear to me that it was going to be the theme for his poem even during the interview. The above excerpt, too, can give the reader a sense of how I selected key phrases and ideas from the participant to create the poem. I liked the idea of the mirror as a metaphor for how Sam sees himself. First of all, the original mention of a mirror was his, which would spark some recognition when he hears it in his story. I believe that this technique heightens the sense of ownership of the story for the participant. In addition, the mirror is an effective tool for representing his ability to see himself change over time. In fact, when I was done reading the poem to him, he repeated “a familiar stranger” a couple of times, remarking that it was the perfect description of how he saw himself. I liked this idea so much, that I used the mirror question in other interviews. After hearing the poem, Sam appeared amazed and excited by it:

- S: I couldn't have done that one any better myself. Good job. It's great. It's the shit. It's all good. You hit it pretty much.
- T: How did you feel having me read your life story to you?

S: Oh I'll keep it! And it always helps me too to find out something else about myself after I tell my story. When I read this it was like in the footprints poem it was like a slap on the back of the head. I should be dead, I would be dead.

Sam acknowledged that whenever he tells his story, he discovers new things about himself. In telling me his story, he used the idea that there were many selves inside of us and the “one that you feed” is the one that comes out. This is a remarkably sophisticated way of integrating his “using self” with his new and emerging “sober self.”

### Poem 7: Rose's Story

Rose is a feminine and seemingly fragile, blue-eyed southern belle. She is only seemingly fragile because inside she has remarkable strength and drive which is evident in even a brief encounter. She is quiet and reserved and prefers to have a few intimate friends instead of a big social group. Rose comes from an impoverished background and only recently has moved in with relatives who are financially secure. Here is her story:

My life was a broken record  
It went around and then  
Someone lifted me up  
And dropped me in a new location  
Without warning  
Without my clothes  
Without any familiar things  
And of course, without my permission  
Sometimes for only two weeks  
Sometimes for a year or two  
But then dropped again  
Leaving as suddenly as I came  
With nothing tangible to hold on to  
Only some scars that I accumulated  
That nobody could take away from me

Like a broken record  
That is stuck in a groove  
And is doomed to go around and around  
Playing the same bit of a song  
Over and over and over  
Until you are so sick of it

That your hands are over your ears  
And you want to scream  
Stop it!  
Make it stop!  
But your voice has been taken away from you too  
And you cannot even hear your own thoughts or feelings  
And you feel like there is no point in screaming  
When nobody listens  
Or even worse  
When you get punished for hurting

Like when I told my aunt  
That man was going to die  
The man that was shooting up in my bathroom  
Who was doing what I saw my momma do  
The night she died  
The night she told me  
I love you  
Don't go down like me  
The night I put a warm coat on my little sister  
And went out looking for help

So I told my aunt  
This man was going to die  
And my aunt slapped me  
For having a voice  
For knowing what I wasn't supposed to know  
For making her hear what she did not want to hear  
And I began to learn  
That when I am silent I am safer  
And I was also quick to learn  
About ways of making my fear and anxiety silent

And so I was sneaking liquor when I was seven years old  
I knew a little bit about its effects  
My mom and her friends were often amused  
At the cute little doll  
The cute little drunk doll  
Like a circus animal  
And it was fun to be accepted  
To see them smiling at me  
And I liked that feeling

The feeling was like  
I didn't have a care in the world  
I did not care  
When I wasn't using I was walking on eggshells  
But when I was high

I did not have a care in the world

And I learned early on  
I needed to make everybody else happy  
I became what I thought everybody else wanted me to be  
Like a chameleon  
I took on the color of those around me  
To blend in  
If I blend in I am safer  
If I am like them then maybe they will accept me  
Maybe they will not abandon me

And when I was nine  
The guidance counselor at school asked me if I wanted to live with my dad  
I had only seen him once before  
And I thought of all those kids and their daddies  
And I guess I wanted to believe that it would be great  
Better than living with my aunt  
And her most current abusive boyfriend  
It was not a fair question to ask me  
Do I want to live in this shitty situation  
Or go to one that I know nothing about  
With the promise of a real dad  
So of course I said yes  
And again I did not get to say goodbye to my two cousins  
Like a broken record

It was presented as my choice  
But it was not my choice  
And had I known what a monster that man was  
I would have run in the other direction as far as my little legs could carry me

The only predictable thing in my dad's house  
Was that things would be unpredictable  
And that we would get the crap beat out of us  
There was no way to escape it  
Not for my stepbrother  
Not for my stepsister  
And at first I did not understand why every night she had to go to the gas station with him  
And why she hated it so much  
I did not understand it until he started taking me when I was 11  
Supposedly as a punishment  
And my using really picked up  
I was so scared of him  
I always had to have something in my system  
I didn't care what it was  
Just something to alter my feelings

I remember once when I made the mistake  
Of trusting someone  
An adult who had been good to me  
She bought me liquor  
She made a promise that she wouldn't tell  
And I spilled my story  
Finally able to share the horrors in my life  
And she broke her promise  
Just like my aunt had when she said she would take me to my mom's funeral  
And was gone when I woke up

She had confronted my dad  
I came into the house  
And he was waiting for me  
I was raw meat in the hands of an angry lion  
He ripped me up by my hair  
Pulled me up the stairs  
He beat the hell out of me  
He threw me through the wall  
He broke a vase over my head  
And he told me I better watch myself  
That I had one more chance  
And I knew he wasn't kidding

And then me and my stepbrother got into a battle about who gets abused the worst  
Sarcastically he said  
What you get molested or something  
And I responded  
You hit it on the dot  
And that was too much for him  
And the next time he and my dad started to fight  
They got into it real bad  
And anything breakable in the house was broken on the floor  
It looked like a portrait of my life  
Broken pieces of shattered glass

And when my dad was out cold on the floor  
We snuck out of the house  
But we came back three days later because my stepmom thought he had changed  
Or some other excuse

And finally when my dad was really going to kill me  
He was waiting for me in the car  
And I started to run  
I ran for my life, literally  
I was shaking and crying hysterically  
And my friends hid me in their house  
And when they saw my black and blue face

They decided this was getting old  
They called the police

And finally I really was safe  
In the youth shelter  
People usually stay at the most 2 weeks  
I stayed for 3 and a half months  
I simply refused to leave  
Like a child who tasted candy for the first time  
I was tasting the sweetness of safety

And we got acid in there a lot  
Of course there was a zero tolerance level  
But some of the staff brought alcohol in for us  
Using was not a problem  
Using had never caused me problems  
Just the opposite  
It had brought me peace

And then I was in foster care  
And found friendly users to hang out with

Christmas Eve when I was visiting my little sister  
They called to say my Dad had died  
Overdosed on cocaine  
I couldn't help thinking it was my fault  
So many times I had always prayed to god that he would die  
And I kept thinking  
I didn't mean it  
Part of me felt relieved  
Part of me felt angry that he never got charged with anything  
And part of me felt terrible guilt for thinking this way about the dead  
He was my father after all  
And everyone around me was crying  
But I couldn't cry

And so my final using chapter came  
My final cycle of my broken record  
Before I broke free from that going around and around  
I was brought down to live with my sister  
My little sister who was with me when mom died  
Who saved my life  
Because if I didn't know she was out there  
I would have killed myself a million times before  
But I knew I couldn't do that to her  
She gave me hope  
She gave me something to live for

My using got worse and worse  
And one night on May 27<sup>th</sup>  
I overdosed on almost a gallon of gold shlager  
And I flat lined  
And my boyfriend had to put his fingers down my throat  
To pump my stomach before the ambulance came  
And he saved my life  
And he said he was never touching anything again

When I woke up in the hospital  
And I expected to be in so much trouble  
And my guardian was not angry at all  
I am not mad at you  
I am mad at this disease and you are going to rehab

It took me a little while to open up in rehab  
I had learned so well to be silent and blend  
But here I found that when I did speak  
I had a voice  
And here I had a right to have a voice  
And even if I did not always get what I wanted  
It felt liberating to be able to express my feelings  
I did not want to clean three times a day  
I had to anyway  
But I felt a new sense of freedom  
In having the right not to like it  
It is almost like I was reborn in a new world for me

And now I look back on all of this  
My story  
And I am grateful  
It may seem crazy to be grateful for so much hurt  
But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger  
And now I am on the other side of the hurt  
And I can use that experience  
I can connect with others who are struggling  
And someday down the line  
I hope to spend my life reaching out to those kids  
The way I needed someone to do for me

But for now  
I will focus on continuing to grow  
Continuing to learn to accept myself  
To love myself  
And to being someone that adds a voice of compassion and caring  
To this wondrous and confusing world

For Rose, drugs were the only way that she could escape a reality too horrible to imagine. In fact, there were no negative aspects to drug use for her. She could escape her fear and pain from her abuse and she had a physiological feeling of relief or freedom which she described as "not having a care in the world." Like Carol, Rose seemed invisible to the school system and the social system. Her drug use had no consequences, which could possibly have perpetuated her feelings of worthlessness, since nothing she did seemed to matter to anyone. There was almost a sense that she thought of drugs as a miracle in her life. There was actually a way for her to escape her reality of terrors and go to a place that felt carefree and painless.

I am still not able to read Rose's poem without crying. The part that hits me the hardest is her expression of gratitude for her life. I cried some while Rose was telling me her story. I was filled with rage and disgust at the horrors she experienced. Then when she expressed that today she can be grateful for her life, it was hard for me to hear. I was deeply moved by her ability to interpret the pain as an opportunity to grow. It shows amazing resilience.

Rose had a strong emotional response while hearing me read her poem. We both had tears in our eyes throughout much of the reading. What she told me after was that they had just discovered the night before that her sister was using drugs. This was a devastating blow to her. It was especially poignant to her when I read the part about her sister in the poem. When the poem was over, we both took a moment to be quiet and pull ourselves back together. Here is an excerpt from her immediate response:

R: Woah, that was weird to listen to. I like it.

T: What was weird?

R: Just hearing it come from somebody else I guess. I guess when I tell it I don't really show emotion, and I was able to.

T: How does it leave you feeling?

R: Hopeful and grateful.

T: In what way?

R: Grateful for everybody around me and my support system and hopeful that everything will continue to get better.

Rose's description of how she learned that she has a voice was touching and important. I was amazed at her clarity and ability to articulate her experience. Initially in rehab, they told her she needs to talk about her feelings. When she shared her feelings about not wanting to do certain chores, she had to do them anyway. Angrily, she told them there clearly was no point in sharing her feelings if it didn't make a difference anyway. But then she began to learn that sharing feelings was not going to solve the problems, but it still is a vital part of being human and being in relationships. For so many years, if she shared her feelings she would be punished and abused severely. Now she could share her feelings and be heard and acknowledged, and it was a starting point in negotiating and solving problems. Her voice was heard and that could make her feel worthwhile. Although Rose acknowledges that she is struggling with her self-image and self-esteem, she can begin to accept herself and realize that those things happened to her not because she deserved them, but because she was powerless to stop them at the time. Rose is learning how to empower herself now that she is a young adult.

#### Poem 8: Simon's story

Simon is a tall and slender teenager with big hazel-blue eyes. He takes pride in always dressing well, in the popular brand name clothing. His early childhood was spent in an urban neighborhood and then his mother moved the family down South to a suburban environment. Simon has an aggressive edge and a short fuse. He seems to carry a chip on his shoulder, especially when talking about his father. Simon is clearly struggling to decide if the sober life is for him. Here is his story:

My earliest memories are from my neighborhood  
It was a party neighborhood  
People getting together and getting drunk  
Doing drugs, smoking pot  
And having a great time  
I didn't see how sick they felt in the morning  
I never paid attention to how they went out the back door to throw up  
I just saw them having a great time  
And I wanted a piece of that

My dad was a recovering alcoholic when I was born  
He had quit drinking for 10 years  
And then one night he had that first beer  
And like all of us  
He was one drink away  
And he has been gone ever since then  
I remember being in the limousine with him  
When he would pick up a client  
And he would hide his liquor cooler under my seat and behind my legs  
And he would take a couple of long sips of his drug of choice  
Vodka  
And finally when he was drinking 24-7  
Mom said that he needed to leave  
You can come back when you are sober, she said  
And so he never came back

I would go visit him for the first couple of years  
Every other weekend  
We'd sit on the couch watching TV while he drank  
Until he would pass out  
Then I would down a few beers as fast as I could  
So that I could go to sleep without worrying  
About this strange place where I didn't belong  
It wasn't worrying exactly  
But when I had that warm feeling of satisfaction  
That warm feeling of a buzz  
Against this cold reality of my drunk dad passed out on a couch  
That warm satisfaction  
Became like a home for me  
And I was forever going home

My brother and his friends gave me pot for the first time  
Two days before my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday  
And then my using picked up  
At first it was just now and then  
And then on a weekend basis  
And it didn't take long before it was every day

And we did whatever we had  
If we had liquor  
Like my friend's parents who had that wall full of liquor that they never touched  
So we became alcoholics  
If there was pot  
We became potheads  
We were hunters  
In search of the nearest and most available drugs  
And that is how I spent most of my childhood  
Looking for drugs  
And staying as high as often as long  
As I could

I was on drugs  
I remember there was a while when my dad stopped inviting me  
And when I stopped going to see him  
And then when he did call  
I'd be like, sorry dad, I have big plans  
I have important things to do  
That was always a lie  
I told him that I got big plans tonight  
I gotta go I really got to go  
And it was always a lie  
And I wanted him to think  
You're just nobody to me  
So he could feel how I felt when he didn't call me  
So that I wouldn't have to go there and feel something  
And then feel hurt again when he didn't call back  
And I guess it never worked  
I guess he never gave a fuck about me  
I guess when you are an alcoholic  
You can't really give a fuck about anybody but yourself  
It is a part of the disease  
And I used all of that as an excuse

And then I was sent to rehab right before we moved to Nashville  
And rehab was a joke  
I would get drunk every night after rehab  
And the older guys in there laughed  
You only smoke weed  
You don't have a problem  
We are into the real stuff  
And I believed them  
And I wanted to be like them  
And that is what I learned in rehab

We moved to Nashville  
My mom closed her eyes and pointed to it on a map

She was going to retire from her life of hard work  
And she was so busy worrying about my brother  
Who had been arrested right before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday  
That she had pretty much given up on me  
She never really cared what I did as long as I was home pretty early on a school night  
And the extent of our relationship at the time was  
Hey I am home, I'm going to bed,  
I had that freedom to go do what I wanted  
And that freedom fucked me up a bunch  
Some might call it freedom  
Others may call it neglect  
I had the freedom because nobody seemed to care  
If someone cared they would have noticed  
That I was disappearing in a cloud of smoke

And it was not a pretty sight  
Passing out on my stomach and laying in my own puke  
Throwing up  
But I ignored that  
I saw it as excitement  
As giving me the feeling like I was something  
And I never was clearheaded enough  
To think about where my life was going  
I didn't like that clearheaded feeling  
It was like reality to me  
When I was on drugs I was on the top of the world  
You can't fuck with me  
I am god  
And I didn't have to deal  
Not with my mom  
With friends  
With school  
With life  
With reality  
And I wasn't clear headed long enough to know what that reality could be  
And I guess I didn't want to find out

And I really believed I could quit when I wanted to  
I would quit using the powder for a couple of days  
I would quit pot for a few weeks here and there  
And I felt like I was in control  
I am not an addict because I can quit if I want to  
I just never wanted to

And so there were years of a constant high  
I was drunk, high, tooted, and any other name you can think of  
Coke, crank, acid, weed, metha-amphetamines and any other name you can think of

And then when my friend found that credit card  
And we went on a shopping spree  
And then skipped town so we wouldn't get into trouble  
And when we ran out of money and drugs  
We headed back home  
And on the bus he said  
We really need to stop this shit  
We need to get sober  
And I was into it too  
But mostly so that if we got charged for credit card fraud  
They would lessen the charges

But when I finally did get into rehab  
I was so happy that I was sober the first couple of days  
Yeah I am sober  
At first I was like I am going to whiz through this and get back out there  
But somewhere along the lines I got serious about it  
It was like I really do want to stay sober  
I don't know  
I actually enjoyed being sober more than I did being messed up  
And the one time I did relapse after treatment  
Getting messed up felt horrible  
I did not enjoy it the way I used to

And then I found this school  
My old experience with school left me with so much anger and resentment  
Those schools could give anybody an excuse to use  
If you are looking for one  
100% power based  
You are not going to have your own identity  
You will learn the way I want to teach  
You will speak the way I want to listen  
That is what the teachers were about  
So I gave up on the teachers completely  
Just about when they gave up on me  
I don't know which came first  
I was like  
You stay out of my life  
You give me the work I'll do it but just stay out of my life  
Let me be who I am  
Not who you would want to force me to be

But here at this school  
Teachers don't ask you to fit into a mold  
You are respected as a person who has rights  
And nobody tries to bulldoze over you  
And make you disappear because you are not what they want you to be

And I have a dream  
To own my own business someday  
And I can be king of my castle  
I don't care if I have to work every day every year  
I will be working for my own future

And I just need to keep in my mind  
That if I start thinking like an addict  
If I start thinking that I have power over this disease  
I will never fulfill that dream  
And I will disappear in a cloud of smoke

So I will remember that I value myself too much  
To let that happen  
I do not need drugs  
I do not need a high  
To make me feel important  
Just being me is enough

Like most of my participants, Simon began drug use very early and spent a significant part of their childhood using drugs and doing little else. Simon's main childhood activity was getting and using drugs. When I consider what non using children are doing at the time it can give me a sense of what these children missed out on developmentally. Most of them were not being taken to music lessons, church youth groups, boy or girl scouts, soccer practice, etc. Those kinds of activities are places where kids learn their strengths and get a sense of their ability to accomplish things. They get connected with other peers who are doing positive things as well. They have opportunities to make their parents proud of them and feel a sense of belonging to a community. This is a stark contrast to Simon's experience. He could even sense that the "freedom" he had to do whatever he wanted was what "fucked me up real bad." In the poem I suggest that it was not freedom as much as neglect. Like Carol and Rose, nobody was concerned with what Simon was doing, which could make him believe that what he did was unimportant and that therefore he was unimportant. A vital part of recovery for

teens is a chance to achieve some of the developmental tasks that passed them by as they were “in a cloud of smoke.”

One of Simon’s biggest issues is his rage toward authority. The rejection and abandonment he experienced from his father was potent. He carried that rage to many authority figures Recovery High School, including teachers and the school system. This experience of problems with authority is prevalent in this population of using and recovering adolescents. Simon points out that works for him because it is not “power-based” but rather “relationship-based.” He does not experience an authority over him determining his life, but rather has a strong sense of having a voice and being respected as an individual in this school. The students often talked about this distinction. Every one of the participants had negative experiences in their school systems, both private and public. Much of this difficulty stemmed from feeling that the authority determined the one way to do things, and that they were doomed to be “bad” in a system that could not make exceptions. Once the “authority” determined that they were “bad” or “a problem,” they were marginalized, ignored, punished, and avoided. This continued the cycle of resentment toward authority.

Simon’s reaction to the poem was strong. Although he liked the poem, it was upsetting to him. Here are some excerpts from the followup interview:

S: Wow, you are right, that is a pretty weird feeling, listening to my own story, I am like woah. But it is pretty on.

T: What's weird about it?

S: Like the weirdest feeling that that was me, and I am used to saying it and not hearing it. And you, and when I said it is like me, and then when someone else says it you are like oh my god, that's ME. You know, it is a totally different thing going on in your head.

T: Tell me more.

S: I can't really explain it, it is like oh my god, I said that before and now I am hearing it back at me and wow...it was ON blunt! It was pretty much everything, the only thing was the rehab...[We edited a detail here]

T: You might have noticed I used a lot of direct quotes.

S: I noticed that except it is in poem form.  
T: Overall how does it leave you feeling?  
S: Almost scared of my past now, I don't know like I actually went through all that. I've done that but only in my head, getting it said to you is like--  
T: Like reading your autobiography?  
S: Yeah, I would never read my own autobiography. I would sit there and write it but, like I already know everything. Looking back at it now is like kind of scared me a little.  
T: Does it move you in any direction?  
S: Yeah, to stay positive, I liked the part where you added about how I wanted to work for my future. That right there after hearing everything and then work for my own future that is exactly what I want to do and always I don't ever want to do that again but I got to take it one day at a time...It just scares me that it was my past, I've witnessed everything in my past because it is mine, but I don't look at it that way that it is written right here, I look at it like I've done it all. When you read it on paper it sounds a lot more horrifying, like when I lived it it didn't seem that bad, that is what I went through, but when you read it on paper and especially this poem, oh my god, yeah.

This is evidence to me that I possibly did not capture his phenomenology as completely as some others. I think he would have resonated more to a glorification of the drug use and a highlighting of the fun and excitement that he experienced. When I look back at the transcripts, there is a great deal of material that talks about how great it was and how important he felt. Because of my agenda of focusing on recovery, I talked about the drugs in the most negative way, which was also valid to Simon. He did not reject my story, but he did not construct his story that way. This is clear when he says "I don't look at it the way that it is written here." Even though he confirmed that I got his story right, I know that there are an infinite number of right stories. On one hand, I felt bad that the story I told scared him and horrified him. On the other hand, maybe seeing it this way would help give him incentive to stay clean and sober. Mostly, though I realize now that this story diverges more from his phenomenology. He did not think about his story in the negative way that I portrayed it.

Here is another example of my portraying things in a way that Simon had not thought about. And in fact, he had a strong negative reaction to it:

- T: Other people said what you said about hearing it is weird, it was like they could feel more emotion. When you tell it you don't, but when you hear it you are freed up.
- S: That is what I had running through my head was the pictures of my dad leaving and then going into rehab, and seeing faces...
- T: What about the part about your dad?
- S: I don't know it kind of like crushed me. Knowing that is what he did to me, but whatever. When I was using it pretty much numbed everything out like when I was saying it, it was like I was saying it but I was thinking I numbed it all out by drugs and now hearing it sober it crushed me.

I felt awful when Simon said this. I was concerned that I was contributing to his suffering instead of being a source of hope and inspiration. I wanted to check with him about this:

- T: Overall about the poem, are you sorry that you heard it? Are you sorry that I wrote it?
- S: I actually enjoyed it. I want a copy for myself and I want to show it. I really liked that poem a lot.

Even with the negative emotions that were aroused, his overall feeling toward the experience was a strong positive one. He remarked that he expected me to point out how "bad" he was and how terribly he behaved. He said he was surprised that it did not judge him at all. He felt important being the subject of a lengthy poem. Although I may be critical of myself for arousing some negative feelings in Simon, he was telling me that he truly liked the poem and wants to share it with close friends and family. Perhaps when you have been marginalized, criticized and punished as much as he has, being the subject of a poem that tells your story in a non judgmental and poetic way can be a profoundly positive experience.

### Poem 9: John's story

John is a dark-haired, smaller than average young man with funky glasses and a "punk" style to his clothes. John is expressive and warm, with a willingness to listen and

a wisdom beyond his years. John has an aura of compassion and peace that spreads to those around him. He comes from a middle class suburban family. Here is John's story:

I remember when I made a deal with myself  
That no matter what  
I would never treat anybody like that  
Holding my head down against the side of the bus  
Pressed against their shoe  
Until I licked it  
Until I was entirely humiliated and demeaned  
In their eyes  
And maybe somewhat in my own  
Certainly I felt completely powerless  
To and from school every day  
A nightmare for a frightened child  
I find it hard to believe that people in general think it is okay  
To treat another human being that way  
I don't have to like everybody  
And I don't have to agree with anybody  
But I made a deal with myself  
That no matter what  
I would never treat anybody like that  
And I have kept that promise

I used to see those other kids at school  
The ones who wore that uniform that said  
I am a popular kid  
I want to play football  
I like this kind of music  
And you are not like me  
You are strange  
And I am not going to accept you  
And then when I got my first punk rock CD  
I was mesmerized  
I listened to it over and over and over and over  
And the music spoke to me  
And it was such a relief to know  
That I was not alone  
The message that I heard then was  
Fuck you  
I don't have to be like you  
You are not going to control me  
You are not going to tell me what to be  
And I am not going to give a fuck what you think of me  
And I related so well  
It finally expressed all the feelings that I didn't know how to express

That were storming around in me and confusing me  
And I got clarity  
And so I had my own uniform  
My flannel shirt  
My grunge look  
My cigarette smoking, pothead, dyed hair, I don't need your fucking approval uniform  
I was making a distinction  
You don't want me  
But I don't want you either

When I think about the deep well of anger that was inside me  
That was screaming to the world  
Fuck you, you can't make me be like you  
Certain images flash in my mind  
My mom and her locked doors  
I had not learned to shut off my emotions  
I kept reaching out  
And kept finding myself against a locked door  
Slammed in my face

I was crying because a girl at school had rejected me  
A traumatic event for a 10 or 11 year old  
I came home crying  
And mom went up to her room and locked her door  
I remember sitting with my back up against her door  
Banging my head against the door saying,  
Mom I need to talk  
And I meant  
Mom, I need love and nurturing and reassurance  
Don't be a baby she said  
And she meant  
Don't feel what a normal child feels  
Don't expect from me what a mother should give her son  
She had nothing to give me  
But a locked door  
I remember in 7<sup>th</sup> grade  
I got my first C on a progress report  
Mom, I need help  
And I meant  
Mom, please support me  
She told me  
I don't want to hear your bullshit  
You are not doing your hardest  
She looked right at me with those squinty eyes  
You disgust me she said  
And what she meant was  
You are on your own  
You will not get support from me

And you are disgusting for needing it  
And I snapped  
I disgust myself  
I fuckin hate you  
And I hate myself  
I threw open the door and flung myself on the ground  
I was punching the ground  
My anger was suffocating me  
And she said  
Get out of my way  
I have things to do  
And continued taking the groceries into the house

I remember when I dyed my hair for the first time  
Why do you do this? Why do you do this? What do you want to be?  
And what she meant was  
Why can't you be like me  
Why can't you be good so that I can show the world that I am okay  
And I said  
I want to be everything that you hate  
And what I meant was  
You are not going to make me into what you want  
I am not going to go to college  
I am not going to give you a shining report card to parade to your friends  
So that you can feel like you get approval  
I am not going to tuck my damn shirt in  
So that you can feel that you get approval  
Because I do not represent you  
I only represent myself  
And the more you try to force me to be like you  
The more I will be the exact opposite

And she stormed up to her room  
And I followed and tried to comfort her  
Because when I saw someone hurting  
I felt compassion  
And I tried to explain how I was needing some space  
I just wanted some peace  
And she went downstairs and started yelling  
That bastard  
Telling me he is going to do whatever he wants no matter what  
And I remember feeling so misunderstood  
And again I tried to explain myself  
I hadn't learned yet that you can't be heard  
When nobody is listening  
And I was met with  
You disgust me  
Get away from me

And I went into my room  
I proceeded to slam my head into the corner of my dresser until I passed out  
I was thinking  
I want out of this  
I don't want to feel  
I don't want this hurt  
I can't fix this  
I hate this place  
Look at my shitty deck of cards  
I didn't get just one shitty hand  
I got a whole shitty deck  
I just wanted an escape

And drugs were an escape  
When I was stoned I could sit there in class  
And listen to the melodramatic bullshit of all the kids  
And I could be like ha ha fuck them  
But when I wasn't stoned  
I couldn't do that  
It bothered me  
It got under my skin  
And I got so frustrated and angry  
And I felt I had no control over my emotions  
And that was the key word for me  
Control  
That was my -ism  
When I was screwed up  
I was just feeling  
Fuck them but I am okay  
Hey, don't worry about it just laugh it off  
And I did  
But when I wasn't fucked up  
It was right there in my face  
And I felt completely out of control  
And I needed to stay high as much as possible

At some point I thought I could escape  
By moving down here with my dad  
A geographic cure  
He had always shown me that he loves me  
And I wished that I wasn't just playing the son role  
I wished I could really feel the things I knew I should say  
The way I can today  
But I guess I was too used to the pattern  
The pattern that someone was trying to control me  
And that my only response was anger and escape  
I knew so well how to lie and cheat  
And I really did not know how to face the truth

That had never brought me anything but hurt

And there was that moment  
When I finally realized that I could face the truth  
And there would be consequences  
But not a rejection of me  
When I failed the drug test  
And I was yelling at my dad  
The way I had practiced so many times with my mom  
The way I knew how to deal with threat and anger  
You never cared about me  
You never accepted me  
And he did not respond like her  
He said he could not watch me killing myself  
He could accept my clothes  
And my hair  
And my music  
And painting my walls any color I wanted  
But he could not watch me killing myself

And I began to feel the acceptance  
My dad was a very good role model for me  
He always tried to do the right thing  
Show love  
Kindness  
Acceptance  
And he knew about this disease  
He had been there himself

When I was sober  
And I got into trouble for some graffiti  
And I saw the disappointment in my dad's eyes  
And it really hurt  
It made me want to mask it and numb it  
I didn't want to feel it  
I didn't want to deal with it  
So I lied to him about it  
When I finally told him the truth  
A very big thing for an accomplished liar like myself  
And what a relief  
I felt like a great big weight lifted off of my shoulders  
I cried and I hugged him and I felt like everything was okay  
And that is the difference between my mom and dad  
He could see that it wasn't about him  
And he could accept me even if he did not like everything I did  
His love for me did not depend on pleasing him  
It was unconditional

And I learned that  
Hurt is not a bad thing if you look at it  
If you let yourself experience it  
And go through it  
In fact that is the way that you grow

And now  
And I do not need a girlfriend to feel worthwhile  
I used to feel like I needed that acceptance  
And my happiness was dependent on their love  
But I have grown  
Now I can choose to be with someone  
Or not to  
Without losing myself  
Now I can choose to dress how I want to  
Not out of a reaction to what other's want  
But because I found inside  
What makes me feel comfortable  
Because I am moving into myself  
And feeling comfortable in my skin

And I have begun to build a connection  
With something greater than me  
Which is a wonderful ego-deflator  
When I start feeling too powerful  
If there is nothing bigger than me  
Nothing better than me  
Than I am my own God  
Now I choose to believe that there is something out there that is greater than me  
And that my purpose on a daily basis is to show love and kindness  
And acceptance wherever I go  
Fulfilling the promise I made to myself so long ago  
And I am grateful for the journey I have taken

I feel like an astronaut must feel  
I am in a new world for me  
And everything is new and exciting  
I feel like am discovering all of the little things that I used to take for granted  
Today I can be grateful for those things  
Sincerely grateful  
Inside

Like many of these teens, John was stuck in world that could not hear his voice  
and he felt stifled and powerless. Drugs gave him a feeling of escape and control of his  
world. He was able to endure his mother's and his peers' cruelty and survive. I think of

John's use of drugs as similar to the way young children dissociate in response to trauma. When John experienced emotional abuse, like Rose's physical and sexual abuse, or Sam's physical abuse, he needed to escape. The drugs gave him a safe place to go to cope with his world that rendered him a powerless and helpless victim. This interpretation suggests that the drug use can be seen as a resilient response to a potentially damaging world. The drug use protected John from losing himself completely. But just as with a child who dissociates as a way of coping with a trauma, at some point when the danger/abuse is gone, there are aftereffects of the drug use that would follow John and need to be addressed. John does that through the corrective experience that his father provides.

Many of the students expressed the same sense of wonder and discovery of the every day pleasures of life that John expressed. John offered the metaphor of an astronaut, which is a powerful way of suggesting that indeed this sober world is almost a different planet. John, like many of the students who had been inches away from death, was not taking for granted his renewed sense of joining the world of the living.

John had a strong positive reaction to the poem. His response confirmed for me that I had written a story that resonated strongly to his experience of living it. Here is what he said:

- J: That's good. I like that. That is cool. I didn't hear anything that needed to be changed. Wow, that is really good Tova. That is cool.
- T: What were some of the things that hit you?
- J: I don't know like when you were talking about the kids at school and like their uniform and whatever like I remember that, and they way you put it together and everything that was just perfect, and it made me like what I was talking about.
- T: What were you feeling?
- J: Like about the uniform and kids picking on me and stuff, I felt like yeah I remember that and how angry I used to get and the flannel and the dyed hair, and grudge thing and that feeling of going to school and doing stupid things to annoy the popular people. The part about my mom made me feel kind of sad and I liked "my anger was suffocating me" that was great. And then telling her I wanted to be

everything she hates and she is not going to force me and then about my dad it almost made me cry like hearing about my dad and how loving he is and everything. You hit the nail right on the head with a lot of this. It was good, man. It was really good.

T: How does it leave you?

J: It leaves me to feel, like remembering all this stuff it felt like kind of a journey you know and that end today I can be grateful for those things, It leaves you kind of feeling like a closure you know, like up and down and a good closure...Wow this is really good.

### Poem 10: Hans's story

Hans has longish brown hair and blue eyes and comes from an upper class socioeconomic background. He is typically barefoot or in flip-flops and is considered “granola” in the way he dresses, with worn jeans and t-shirts. It is impossible to imagine him in any sort of formal attire or sitting upright in a chair. He is usually lying on the floor whenever he can. Hans can make you laugh and cry at the same time. He is strikingly intelligent and tends to get carried away with the flow of his own thoughts. He asks to be reminded when this happens. Hans has a strong personal magnetism. Here is his story:

If I had been a cartoon as a kid  
I would have been that little creature  
With the dark cloud following it around  
No matter where that little fella went  
That cloud seemed to hover over him and threaten a storm

And there were storms  
I always had that feeling  
Of a dark cloud looming over me  
A shameful secret that was invisible to me  
That made me feel like I was a bad person  
That made me feel like I was the ugliest person  
That made me want to kill myself  
Before I had ever heard the word suicide

And I hated all those teachers that said  
We know you will amount to something great  
Blah blah blah  
I hated those heavy expectations  
Loaded onto my little shoulders  
Like piles of unwanted compliments  
That inside I felt I did not deserve  
And that prevented me from feeling like a normal kid

But I was already a junkie  
And my drug of choice was attention  
I craved it desperately  
I did what any addict would do  
I would steal and fight and lie  
Anything to get my drug

In 4<sup>th</sup> grade they diagnosed me with ADD and gave me Ritalin  
I remember crying myself to sleep  
I thought that drugs made you a different person  
That they killed your real self  
I was scared that I would lose myself forever  
I did not know then that I was already losing myself  
Or at least I was hiding from myself  
Hiding from a secret that was too horrible to remember  
And I got deeply depressed  
And this was about the time when people were getting fed up with me  
And I was beginning to care less and less about them  
And about me

My parents had already given up on me  
They had no access to me  
They had no access to my soul  
Nobody did  
It was hidden deep beneath layers of mystery  
So they made themselves too busy  
And I blamed them for my feelings of abandonment  
For my feelings of rejection  
That my own parents were too busy for me  
And that fed my worthlessness and shame  
And created a volatile volcano of anger inside me  
Erupting every time they came near me  
I literally had a strong desire to murder them sometimes  
I wanted blood  
Because of this consuming red boiling anger  
That made them afraid of their own son  
And I loved that  
I felt powerful  
I felt like they deserved to feel that way

Serves them right  
I was getting my revenge  
After what they did to me  
Even though I really couldn't grasp  
A reason for such extreme resentment  
I had no control over any of this  
I was watching my own self-destruction  
And was powerless to intervene on my behalf  
And I was already getting tired of trying

I always felt like my body was like just some weird thing  
And I was trapped inside  
And I hated it  
I hated my body for trapping me

And then around 7<sup>th</sup> grade I just said screw this  
I grew my hair long  
I dyed it a bunch of times  
Started skateboarding  
Listening to punk rock music  
And hanging around with the older kids that did drugs  
I was drawn to them  
They seemed to share the screw life attitude I was developing  
They seemed to have no cares  
Just did whatever they wanted  
And I think if they were cartoon characters  
Each of them would have a dark cloud of their own  
Just like me  
But then I was asked nicely to leave my school  
And in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I got enrolled in a boarding school

And that is when the drugs began  
Most kids start with marijuana for a while  
They ease themselves into the heavy stuff  
My first using experience was cocaine  
I dove headfirst into the world of drugs  
Seeking to drown myself  
And I did not come up for air  
For a long long time

I loved it so much  
Because it got me out of myself  
And for the first time I felt I had something to look forward to  
Using some more  
I always would have it  
It would become my best friend  
I could always trust it  
It would never betray me

I remember the first time I got completely destroyed  
We had this weed laced with cocaine  
And we didn't know how much we were supposed to use  
And we just kept doing more and more  
And I just remember being overcome with that feeling of complete bliss  
Just nothing mattered  
Just straight up life was no big deal  
I was just in the moment and I felt free  
I had never felt free  
Free of all the pain I was carrying around with me  
Free of that dark cloud that loomed over my head  
Free of my anger toward my parents  
Free of the load of expectations  
Free of caring that I was considered a screw up  
Free of any responsibility to anybody  
I just wanted to lay around all the time  
And the drugs made that possible  
Because they killed my conscience  
So I could do whatever I wanted  
And I was fine

I remember that night we were running as fast as we could  
And going head on into a tree  
We fell to the ground  
And we couldn't even feel it  
No pain  
And it was a miracle

And that is what I was doing with my life  
I was running head on into a tree  
And the drugs made it possible for me not to feel it  
Not to feel the pain of my past  
Not to feel anything  
Imagine how liberating to know  
That I could control pain and make it disappear  
After all that I had been through

And for a long while  
I did whatever I pleased  
No rules  
It was great  
In fact, it was the most amazing thing I ever experienced

And in middle school  
Nobody knew what to do with me  
Because nobody my age was into the stuff I was into  
I became really antisocial

I hated everybody  
But I loved the attention I got  
The kids at school were like you are hard core, dude

I am not sure why nobody said anything about it  
Not my parents, teachers, friends  
Maybe they were like no this couldn't be  
He is in 8<sup>th</sup> grade

My parents were in such denial that they let me do drugs in my room  
I smoked weed and they would open the door  
A big cloud of smoke would come out  
They'd yell at me like what are you doing  
Quit smoking in the house  
Blah blah blah  
Get out of your room,  
Why are you always in your room?  
But they never really wanted an answer  
They were never around long enough to get one

I was so young  
I didn't know what addiction was  
I thought that addiction stuff was for grown ups  
But I have a vivid memory  
I remember looking out my window at the stars  
I was like I am not going to do it today  
I don't want to  
I am going to quit because I hate what it is doing  
I just sit around all day by myself and do drugs  
I need to do something  
And then I remember I hallucinated  
This hand made of smoke came out and beckoned to me to smoke  
I remember I just started bawling  
I kept smoking and crying  
Because I had no control and that was scary  
I was a little 8<sup>th</sup> grader and I had no idea that this could happen  
That was a big turning point  
It was a long time before I tried to quit again

And when high school hit  
I was actually considered cool for the first time  
This was complete heaven  
I hung out with seniors and juniors  
Here was a little kid that could outdrink and outdope everybody  
And they were just like woah dude, hell yeah, dude, you are cool  
I was accepted  
I was considered cool  
They even voted me vice president of my class

I remember I had to be an escort for the homecoming queen  
The football stadium was full of people  
I walked out in front of all those people stoned out of my mind

I had a routine down  
While my dad dropped my sister off  
I would run outside with my boxers and my waterbong and my bag of weed  
I would get stoned under the canoe that was upside down in my back lawn  
I would run inside as fast as I could  
Take a shower to get the smell off of me  
Sit all the way in the back of the van and pray to god every day that he wouldn't talk to me  
He would take me to Arby's where my friends and I did more drugs  
Then we would run across the street to go to school  
I would snort coke in the bathroom with one of my other friends  
And then I'd go to class  
Just part of the routine  
And I kept passing out in class  
I would go to the principal's office and get paddlings  
Yeah, that really worked

It is just that I couldn't get enough into me  
I just wanted to do more and more drugs  
I wasn't trying to die exactly  
Killing myself would be boring  
Although once when I had OD'd I asked my friends for a gun  
I felt so bad, it was so horrible  
But now my plan was to just use drugs and OD by the time I was 18  
That was my goal  
My friends and I talked about what our last words would be  
One of my friends came up with a clever phrase  
He would say "Oh shit"  
We even wrote each other's eulogies  
We all expected to die

For a while things were great you know  
We all lived in our houses still  
Nobody was really dead  
We all lived the high life

And I just loved those hallucinogens  
That was my favorite thing  
I grew my own psychoactive plants  
And I could trip for days  
I'd be in another world  
And I loved cartoons  
My goal was to do enough hallucinogens where I could just be in a cartoon  
Just basically be a fake two dimensional drawing  
The world would be fake and colorful

Instead of black, bleak, and ever so real

And then shit started to go wrong  
People started getting put in jail  
People started getting killed  
People got kicked out of their houses and started living in a drug house  
That is when it kind of got shitty  
We didn't had our cars anymore  
We didn't have a house anymore  
We weren't rich like we used to be  
We were just a bunch of junkies  
Empty shells of people  
With a collective cloud of black smoke hanging over us

My parents tried to put me in rehab  
I ended up at this psych ward detox in Alabama with bulletproof windows  
I didn't have any drugs and I was like freaking out  
What is happening,  
I can't handle this  
I kicked the air conditioner as hard as I could  
And started huffing on the freon  
I remember half my body went numb  
And I was scared  
But not as afraid as I was of not having some drugs in me  
Allowing me to run away from myself  
The self that always felt shame  
And disgust and pain  
If I didn't get some drugs in me  
Then when I would go head on into a tree  
I would have to face the pain

When rehab didn't work  
My parents signed me over to the state of Louisiana  
I got put into a long term lock down facility  
But I even got drugs in there  
Because if an addict wants to get high  
He will get high no matter what  
So I ended up ODing on LSD in there  
I was in a coma and they said I was going to die  
And they were basically calling my parents comforting them and telling them I was dying  
But I didn't  
And I had a spiritual experience when that happened  
God showed me that I wasn't a bad person and I could change these things  
God showed me all my faults and I was saved  
I was like I am saved  
I was shown that I am worth it  
It took me a while to get out of that spiritual haze  
Because that was LSD and it really messes with your mind

Was it a spiritual experience or another hallucination?

And then I was supposed to go home  
They were letting me out  
The tickets were bought  
But somebody had some liquor  
And I remember banging on the wall  
Desperately  
Damn it I don't want to drink  
Damn it I don't want to drink  
And then I just chugged it  
I couldn't  
I just couldn't  
I was not going home  
The plane tickets were already bought  
And I had to stay in that awful place for a year and a half  
The most horrible experience I ever had

And then the hopelessness set in  
It just didn't feel like it was worth it anymore  
I got really depressed  
I hung myself 3 times  
But I still didn't die

When I finally got out of treatment  
I started living in half way houses and orphanages  
And I started relapsing again  
I wanted to be sober  
But I still had not learned how  
And I still had this shame all this time  
That damn cloud was still following me around

And then I began learning about AA  
And I started going to this school  
And I was recommended to go to EMDR  
And then I found out  
I was faced undeniably with the reason for my shame  
The people that I stayed with from when I was an infant to when I was about 3 years old  
They sexually molested me  
And when I discovered this memory  
I wanted to reject it  
I wanted to deny it  
But it just made too much sense  
It explained some of my unhealthy sexual thoughts and feelings  
It explained so much of my anger toward my parents  
It was the missing piece of the puzzle  
And it was a momentous occasion when I found out  
I could begin to see the whole picture of my past

And facing it was really hard  
Realizing that I had a fake past  
I had made up my past that wasn't true  
I bent it around the facts I could accept  
I took bits and pieces and put them together  
And there were bits and pieces I did not take  
But they were there  
Making themselves known  
And so I spent my childhood trying to erase them  
To make them disappear  
And it is not fair that those people stole my childhood  
It is not fair that they stole my innocence  
Replacing it with fury and rage  
And sadly  
Nobody is going to make things fair  
And my body carries the evidence of all my suffering  
As does my soul

And so now I am working on getting on with my life  
On getting my life back  
My life is not a cartoon  
There is a lot that wasn't funny at all  
I can't just look at the parts I want  
Life has too many dimensions and angles  
And I am learning to accept that  
And to integrate all of that into who I am becoming  
And it is a slow and arduous process

But I guess  
I haven't died yet  
And I could have easily so many times  
And perhaps there is a reason for that  
And I am feeling more connected to this world  
This reality  
I believe that everything is connected  
And that helps me live in harmony  
If I do somebody harm  
I am only harming myself  
And when I do them good  
I am doing myself good

Once I found out the truth  
That cloud that hung over me  
Began to rain down all of its heavy darkness  
And it was quite a storm  
Torrents of tears, crashing thunder and burning lightening  
Until it dissipated

And in the aftermath  
The sky is blue  
The sun is hot against my skin  
And the haze is beginning to lift  
And I am experiencing  
Clarity

In his story, Hans defines “complete bliss” as a feeling that “nothing mattered.” For me, “bliss” would be defined as the presence of heightened pleasure and joy, but for these adolescents it is the absence of pain. Again and again I heard them tell me how great it was to “numb out” and not to feel anything. For Hans especially, who had no access to his dark secret, he learned that drugs were a way to control the pain that was consuming him.

Hans’s description of his drug using daily routine was a typical example of how the students devised elaborate ways of fitting drugs into their day at home and at school. They knew which classes they could skip, which parent to avoid, how much stuff to carry with them, and who could hook them up with more. It was astounding how such extreme drug using behavior became a part of a “typical day” for these kids. Equally amazing is the fact that they were using in their homes and classes and rarely getting caught. I have to wonder what could make everybody so preoccupied that they cannot see at least the overt signs of drug use, if not the pain and anguish behind it.

Hans was the final student that I interviewed. When I was ready to share the poem, the school term was over so I invited him to my house. As I was reading the poem, it began to rain, and there was thunder and lightening. As I read the part about the cloud dissipating into a storm, the elements outside my window provided the perfect backdrop for an added dramatic effect. Hans and I appreciated the symbolism. His reaction to the poem was emotional and enthusiastic:

H: Yeah, I think it is good. I think it is really, really good.

- T: What was it like hearing it?  
H: Kind of like I was another person listening to another person's story thinking, wow that is so true but then realizing wow, that it is me.  
T: Like it just sounded like somebody else?  
H: Yeah, but so familiar.  
T: Was there a part that was the strongest to you that sticks out in your mind right now?  
H: Yeah...[looking through the poem] "but I haven't died yet" just like just reiterates that I just don't want to die. I just say I don't want to die and that is like I know that messing around in meetings and stuff is like signing my own death warrant...a lot of kids my age they don't really grasp that they could die.

### Conclusion:

These are my 10 heroes. The experience of interviewing them and then sharing the poem with them was enriching and deeply gratifying. The research took on a meaning that was unexpected to me. Typically, as researchers we enter into a research site, get consent from people, take away many of their most personal secrets and stories, giving them \$5 or a gift certificate to a bookstore. I felt that the gift I was giving them back was as personal and intimate as the one they gave me. It was not only the gift of the poem that they could keep, but the gift of showing them that they are resilient, beautiful, and worthwhile, and that what they have experienced is important. I also believe that they felt that they had a voice that was heard loud and clear. Their life became a work of art.

### Summary

Following each poem, I described the role of drugs in that person's phenomenological world. Several themes emerge from these individual stories. Drugs were important to the participants as an escape from painful feelings, as a physiological booster of confidence, and as a social glue within a drug-using peer group.

In terms of an escape, many of these participants experienced extreme psychic pain in their lives of abuse and neglect. When they were not high, they had to face their

life in all of its misery. Once they were under the affects of drugs, those feelings dissipated. They either expressed feeling nothing, or sometimes even feeling positive emotions such as confidence and "coolness." It is easy to understand how this would encourage continued use of drugs.

As mentioned above, often the drugs gave them feelings of power and confidence. In many ways these young people had internalized feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Because they seemed invisible to their schools, their society, and sometimes their family, they began to see themselves as worthless. Nothing they did seemed to matter. When they used drugs, they had what we might call a "false" sense of power. But from a phenomenological perspective, it cannot be false. It is their real experience of themselves in the moment. It is easy to understand how this, too, would encourage continued use of drugs.

Using drugs also helped these individuals develop a peer group, which for some of them had been a difficult process. Each one of my participants found that using drugs was a ticket into a network of peers who helped provide drugs, who shared in using drugs, and who seemed to feel a similar sense of alienation from school and society. For some, this peer group was their first experience of acceptance and belonging. It is easy to understand how this, too, would encourage continued use of drugs.

In sum, the phenomenological experiences of these teenagers make it clear that using drugs had numerous and important positive affects and few if any negative consequences. At least until they began the recovery process. At some point for all of them, there was a shift. Either drugs did not give them that same physiological feeling anymore or they started facing consequences such as being sent to treatment. In either case, there began to be strong internal and external incentives not to use drugs. Until that

point, however, looking at their phenomenological experiences, it becomes clear that using drugs had much to offer them in an otherwise bleak and painful world of experience.

I will conclude this collection of in depth personal stories, or more academically, my within subject analysis, with a final statement-poem that shares many of my thoughts and feelings and the lessons that I took away from this experience. I wrote this in a state of agitation at the fact that children endure such horrors.

The deep deep tragedies  
That walk about this school  
The victimized  
The invisible  
The raw and angry souls  
That have every right to be  
I may be older in years  
But their maturity is visible in their eyes  
Eyes that reflect years of suffering  
Well beyond their actual birthdates

And they tell me their stories  
And sometimes it is almost too much to listen  
I don't want to hear  
I don't want it to be true  
Somebody tell me how this could be  
Why is the world so silent  
When there is all of this horror around us?

And they even have gratitude  
If I had not experienced that, they say  
Then I wouldn't be me today

And I am awed and amazed  
I am deeply impressed  
When I hear them  
I listen to them  
And I am learning so much  
About not taking for granted  
About honesty  
And the danger of lies  
Even the smallest  
About facing myself

And not pretending I am anything I am not

So much of their lives ahead of them  
And yet every day is a struggle  
To remember that escaping doesn't help  
It may feel like it helps  
Or at least they won't feel anything  
Which is better than reality sometimes  
And they have to remind each other  
That escaping leads to nowhere  
And they have all been there  
And miraculously  
They have come back alive

They tell me their stories  
Stories of shameful adults  
Who themselves are lost souls  
Who themselves carry worlds of anger in their hearts  
And these supposed grown ups  
Who are damaged and hurting children inside  
Feel too powerless to fight  
So they find power  
In oppressing the only ones more powerless than them  
The children

But these children are not powerless anymore  
They have the power of each other  
The power of a spirit greater than them  
The power of a place where they come together  
And the amazing and dazzling power  
Of their own survival  
The power of their story

## The Collective Story

The previous section familiarized you with the participants' stories in great detail. The goal was to bring the reader into the phenomenology of the experience that these teenagers lived. Unlike the previous research about adolescent addiction, the stories did not try to generalize or understand any group phenomena. The goal of the previous section was not to assess risk and protective factors or understand treatment implications. It was to hear 10 young voices loud and clear—voices that have been quieted, ignored, and muted for too long.

And yet there is much to be said about these adolescents as a group. Having immersed myself in the literature before embarking on this dissertation, I am now going to relate my findings to previous research. There are three strands of analysis. First, I begin by presenting the risk factors in my participants' lives based on previous research (Hawkins et al., 1992). Second, I present my findings regarding the treatment and post-treatment experiences of my participants, including the role of Recovery High School. Third, I talk about identity development using Erikson's model, Kegan's model, and finally the narrative model.

### Risk Factors

In discussing risk factors, it is important to remember that when thinking transactionally, we do not see drug abuse as simply a behavior that occurs in isolation. We must consider how a child transacts with her environment to weave a fabric that is her world. Throughout a child's development there are factors in her world that place her at risk for the dangers of substance abuse in adolescence. In Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller's (1992) review of risk factors for adolescents, they define risk factors as those that "occur before drug abuse and are associated statistically with an increased

probability of drug abuse.” In my research I found that this definition was not so straightforward. For example, some of the participants began their drug use as early as 6 years old. In that case, almost none of the risk factors would be relevant to them because they all occur after drug initiation. Another example of the poor fit of this definition to my participants is that truancy occurred for all participants, but they skipped classes in order to use drugs. Technically, this would not be a risk factor because it did not precede the drug abuse. However, I am considering all of the behaviors associated with a drug-using-life-space to be risk factors. Even if it occurred after drug initiation, the behavior put the child at risk for maintaining and supporting the drug use. Each risk factor is a strand of that child’s fabric that is woven in during development and maintains the drug abuse cycle, whether it occurred before, during, or after drug initiation.

In the introduction I presented the fabric metaphor, suggesting that the strong and flexible strands (protective factors) tend to support the child’s development; and the weak and brittle strands (risk factors) tend to hinder the child’s development. Risk factors can be discussed in various contexts which are deeply embedded in each other. The most salient contexts for adolescents are their society, school, peer groups, and family. There are also some individual characteristics that put adolescents at risk for drug abuse. Table 1 presents the participants and a checklist of their risk factors.

At the societal level, few of the students experienced laws being enforced. Even when they interacted with the police or school officials, there were few if any meaningful consequences for their drug use. Carol is the most blatant example, having been stopped by the police without a license and with drugs in the car and being sent on her way to

Table 1

Risk Factors for the Participants

continue driving high and without a license. The students believe that the police are only interested in drug dealers and not “small time users.” One possible interpretation is that these students did not fit a typical profile of young criminals. They are white middle to upper class youth who live in suburban neighborhoods and drive nice cars. Unfortunately, this kind of lack of consequences only promotes the notion for kids that their behavior is harmless and unimportant. If they were minority children from urban neighborhoods, it might have been a different story. And in fact Jason, the only one from an urban setting, did have more severe consequences, although this may be due more to the fact that he was selling drugs.

All of the participants indicated that availability was never an issue. They could find drugs anytime, anywhere and with or without money. Some had drugs around the house with an older sibling or their parents or relatives, others took money from their parents’ wallet or pockets. Still others found that their older friends were happy to share their stash. When there were no illegal drugs available, they could always count on over-the-counter drugs or the medication in their medicine cabinets at home. In our society today, if a teenager is looking for drugs, he does not have to look very far.

For the most part, the students did not say much about media messages and their drug use. The main way that media seemed to influence them was through music. John and Paul describe the “fuck you” music that they related to so well and that went along with the “druggie” image with which they identified.

Three out of the 10 participants experiences some level of economic deprivation. Another 3 were from wealthy families. The wealthier participants threw more parties and provided more drugs and alcohol to their friends. They initially attended private schools and eventually were kicked out and attended public schools. For some of the middle

class participants, their single mom worked “all the time” to maintain their economic status, leaving them in an empty house seeking company.

When considering whether the communities were disorganized and disconnected, I based my inference on the comments that were made about neighborhood activities, neighbors, parent activities and participation in a church or youth group. Most of the students felt disconnected from their families and churches. In fact, the fact that their parents wanted them to go to church was a source of tension and stress for many. In their neighborhoods, the drug using kids tended to find each other and create their own underworld neighborhoods with other kids and adults who used. To conclude, availability was high, legal roadblocks were few, and kids felt alienated from their communities at the societal level.

At Recovery High School, there is an effort to build a community for these students through AA. They are expected to attend meetings regularly and create a supportive sober community for themselves. Drugs are not available at their school, and students are randomly and regularly drug tested. There are always consequences to their behaviors that are consistent and clear, although the individual circumstances are also always considered. They do not talk about discipline and punishment, but rather choices and consequences. This creates a sense of empowerment which increases commitment to their school community.

At the school level, all 10 participants were regularly truant, had poor school performance, probably because they were high all the time, and experienced academic failure. Those who expressed attitudes toward school had very negative ones such as “I always hated school.” None felt any connection or commitment to their previous schools. They often said that they felt invisible or like a number. Some had strong

resentments and anger toward their schools and teachers. Several of the girls said that their teachers passed them because they felt sorry for them and liked them or just did not want them to repeat the class. Now they say that they have some high school credits but they don't know anything and feel like they are stupid.

Of note is the remarkable difference that these students feel now toward their school. They often expressed that they love coming to school. They are very committed to Recovery High School and believe that without it they would certainly be "back out." They are beginning to experience academic success within a responsive school environment. This school factor has gone from being one of the most consistent risk factors to being a strong protective factor in their lives.

At the level of peer interactions, half of the students experiences peer rejection, for some quite severe. Half of the students showed some aggressive behaviors toward peers. What is remarkable is that there was no variation in the factors related to peer drug use. Their drug using peer group was a supportive network that provided drugs, encouragement to use, and a strong sense of belonging. This has important implications for treatment.

Recovery High School provides a new peer group that supports and encourages sober behavior with a rigorous commitment to keeping their peer group safe from drugs and unsober behavior. I believe that it is this peer support above all else that makes Recovery High School successful. When students come out of treatment, they are going to naturally turn to their peer group, which was their source of support as well as drugs. In fact, the RHS students that do relapse typically use when they are visiting their old friends. Developmentally, peers are the important people in adolescent lives and

treatment Recovery High School programs need to utilize that fact through support groups, peer counseling, and schools like if they want to succeed.

At the family level, all of the students experienced low family bonding, especially as they got more involved in drugs. All but one student lacked maternal involvement. It was not always that the mother was not interested in being involved. In 3 cases it was a matter of a single mom trying to support her family. For other kids it seemed like they built a wall to keep their mother out, even if she tried to get involved. Eight students came from divorced families and 6 experienced indifferent/neglectful parenting styles which are both low on demandingness and responsiveness. From the participants' perspective, there were negative communication patterns in all of the families. Some parents would demean and shame their children when angry, while others would ignore or avoid them. In other cases, the parents would try to communicate with their kids and the kids would show anger or ignore their parents. Also, in all but one case, there was drug use by at least one other family member, whether a parents, an older sibling, or an uncle. In general, the family experience of these adolescents increased the level of risk of drug addiction.

At the individual level, it was hard for me to determine whether they had a difficult temperament or not. I based my assessment on their comments about their behavior as kids and their thrill seeking behavior. Three out of the 10 appeared to have had particularly difficult temperaments. Only 3 did not experience abuse, although one of those experiences severe trauma (witnessing a murder) and another experienced neglect. Everyone described periods of severe depression and most of them were suicidal and/or expected or wanted to die. Several were seeing psychiatrist and were on medication for much of their childhood. Almost all of the males showed signs of conduct

disorder, but many of the criteria are congruent with drug using behavior such as staying out at night despite parental prohibitions, being truant from school, and stealing or lying. All of the females were suicidal at times, had early sexual experiences, and depression. In general, this is a group of kids who had been victimized and were experiencing depression and anger. All of these individual characteristics are risk factors for drug abuse.

My findings confirm the previous research about risk and protective factors for adolescents. As I said in the introduction, when a child is not connected at home, at school, or with peers, and is getting negative messages from all of these contexts, she is likely to feel alienated and seek environments that make her feel accepted. My group of participants mapped very closely on to the model of Hawkins et al. (1992) in terms of their risk profiles. This is important for several reasons. First, in describing their phenomenology, we can hope that we would understand the collective experience of adolescents in recovery in America today. Second, we could be fairly confident that if there is a treatment that works for this group, it has potential to work for other groups that are like them.

How then do professionals intervene in an effective way to break the cycle? The research shows that the most effective interventions enter as many levels of the system as possible. In this next section I will talk about the treatment experiences of these adolescents from entering their treatment program through their experience at RHS.

### Treatment

Every student had a different treatment experience, but there were some general trends and themes for all of them. First I discuss inpatient programs because all but two students went to an inpatient treatment program. Then I discuss briefly what happened

between treatment and admittance to RHS. Finally I talk about their experiences and once they enrolled at RHS.

Even within the inpatient experience there was much variety, from a wilderness program that was insight and behavior oriented to a 6-9 month intensive inpatient program based on AA. All of the students had strong positive experiences with staff at the inpatient centers. They tended to start out with ambivalence toward sobriety and AA, and ended up being strong believers that AA can give them the tools to stay sober, which had become a desirable thing for them. AA talks about 'working a program.' This means that a person is going to AA meetings regularly (possibly every day), has a sponsor who is a recovering addict, and is working the AA 12 steps. This is a process of going through each step and doing some related activities. Most of the students began going to meetings while in their treatment programs. Most programs rely on process groups in place of individual work. Most of the day is spent in different therapy groups. Several of the programs included a family weekend which the students found was extremely useful. The family dealt with many of the important family issues within the supportive environment of other families and experienced staff. Even those students who were only in a treatment program for 7 days (due to insurance decisions) felt they got a good start toward sobriety.

For thoroughness, let me report on the two students who did not go through inpatient programs. One student saw a play put on by RHS about several of the students and their stories of how they got sober, and decided he wanted to pursue sobriety as well. He called Lynn and went directly to RHS without any other treatment program. The other non inpatient student went to an outpatient program before finding out about RHS and attending. He was mandated to enter the treatment program and initially planned to

“bullshit” his way through, but said that somewhere along the way he started getting serious about it. Overall he had a positive outpatient experience.

Once treatment was over, about half the students went directly to RHS and the other half went back to their old schools briefly. In all of those cases, they knew that if they stayed there they were sure to relapse. Several started skipping school to avoid the drugs and old peers that expected them or pressured them to use. Several asked their parents to find them another place. There was no difference between public or private schools in terms of this experience. Then the families heard about RHS either through a treatment center, through a counselor, or through some RHS students at AA meetings for teens. They called Lynn and were invited to spend a day of interviews and observations at RHS. Soon they were informed of their acceptance and enrolled immediately.

The overwhelmingly positive experience that the students have at RHS is remarkable. For many of them, they are grateful to have a safe place to be for the first time in their lives. Almost everyone acknowledged that if not for RHS they would definitely be using, and possibly be dead, as happened to some of their friends. In terms of treatment, RHS offers not only a safe school, but a safe peer group. The students often compared RHS to a treatment center in the level of support and caring they experience.

The other theme that emerged from almost every student is the “non-powerbased” learning model. They appreciate deeply the fact that there is not a punitive authoritarian system, which had been their experience before. RHS offers choices and consequences in a nonjudgmental environment. If a student relapses and reports it to the group, she is not suspended or expelled. In fact, the school gives her extra support. However, if this occurs repeatedly or if the student lies about relapsing, she will talk to Lynn about her readiness to be at Recovery High School and may need to be suspended or expelled.

Even if students relapse and must leave the school, they come by and visit Lynn, and her office is open to them. This is a testament to the thoroughly nonjudgmental nature of the experience at RHS. Students feel that teachers are their friends and allies and are always accessible both on a personal and academic level. This is the kind of program that takes the ecological framework into consideration. It removes the adolescents from the toxic environments of their old schools and their previous peer groups by providing a safe drug-free school full of other recovering teenagers.

The school also has parent programs and is always involved in making sure the home environment is as safe and helpful as possible. Sometimes students have moved to live with other students when they needed to get out of their home for a while. In addition to the safety of the school community, students are required to attend AA meetings and be working a program. This encourages them to create a recovery community for themselves. I am painting a picture of a treatment program that creates what Lynn calls “a holding environment” for young people who are recovering from drug addiction.

Several specific comments that students made are worth reporting. Carol had skipped more days of school than she had attended in her previous schools. When I asked her if she ever skipped school here she said, “I love coming here.” Hans was talking about how the old schools seemed to have so many ridiculous rules and punitive attitudes. He said, “This school is sanity where other schools are like insanity in a way.” Simon, who had terrible anger toward his teachers and principal at his old school said “I changed my attitude toward school,” when talking about RHS.

Of the 10 students in this study, 8 are still currently clean and sober and 2 have relapsed and are using as of this date. Of the 8 that are sober, 2 had brief relapses and

then came back into the program. Several of the students have graduated and are in college or working. They stay in touch with Lynn and visit RHS when they can.

### Identity

In the introduction, I presented Erikson's and Kegan's as well as a narrative approach to looking at identity development. In the following discussion, I present the participants' stories through each of these lenses by applying each theory to the data. Aside from the content that I present, this is an example of the different stories that can be told from the same data by using a different lens. When I look at the data through Erikson's lens, I tell a unique story that is different than the one I tell using the narrative approach, although I believe they complement each other. All of these stories are true, informative, and important, and none of them is the complete picture, for there are an infinite number of stories that could be told. Just as the participants decide which salient events and feelings they want to string together to create their story, so I choose which theories and perspectives are the most salient for me to fulfill my agenda. As in the introduction, I begin with Erikson's theory followed by Kegan's, and finally the narrative approach.

Erikson's theory of identity development. Erikson's basic definition of identity is the subjective sense of sameness and continuity over time. A person is faced with different psychosocial tasks requiring resolution at different stages of the life span (Erikson, 1968). The individual looks for a social niche within which to resolve this task. Each consecutive stage rests on the resolutions from preceding stages and serves as a building block for the ones to follow. For Erikson, optimal identity development can occur when a person finds social roles and niches within their society that match their own biopsychological capacities and needs. Because the stages build on each other and

exist in us at every level of development, I found it useful to look at each participant in each stage and get a general sense of where they are developmentally in resolving each psychosocial task. As with any transactional model, if the first stage is left unresolved, it affects the next stage in a profound way. For each stage, I first talk about what is expected for optimally developing children. I then present data from my study that suggests where this group of students stands in terms of that specific stage. Finally, I talk about how their recovery program is working toward helping them resolve that stage.

Erikson's first stage deals with the development of trust versus mistrust. In healthy development there is a favorable ratio between trust and mistrust. Although it is important for children to mistrust "in order to trust discerningly" (Erikson, 1968), trust should outweigh mistrust in a child's experiences. Trust enables a child to postpone gratification. If his caregiver has responded reliably and consistently to his needs, this enables the child to develop a basic sense of trust, knowing that his needs will be met. The child will then internalize that and learn that he can trust himself as well. The trust is also generalized to other caregivers such as teachers. Thus, healthy development can continue unhindered.

What happens when the ratio is in the direction of mistrust? In every participant's story there were salient incidences that moved this balance in the favor of mistrust. They learned that in their world things were unpredictable, caregivers were unreliable, and they were not safe. Hans was dropped off by his parents into the hands of child molesters. Although his parents did not know this, Hans had no way of communicating this with them, but learned he could not trust them. Rose insisted that her aunt wake her up to take her to her mother's funeral and she promised she would. Rose woke to find her aunt already gone. For Carol, there was "constant chaos" and she could not count on any

consistent or reliable care. For most of these kids, they learned early that caregivers are often the source of pain and danger instead of nurturing and trust.

Just as trust generalizes to other adults, mistrust does as well. Problems with trust can develop into problems with authority, which can lead to problems in school, in church, and in any other organization. This mistrust of authority can also lead to anger and a desire to rebel against authority, a behavior that is common to most of these teens even when they were young children (e.g. Karen, Hans, Paul). Within their phenomenology, it seems reasonable and even adaptive to mistrust authority and protect themselves from further pain. The authority figures in their lives were not trustworthy in their experience.

Several of the students said that the one thing they *could* trust in was the drug. It never let them down. It was as consistent and reliable a source of pleasure and escape from pain as the most loving parent would be. It served the dual purpose of rebelling against those untrustworthy adults and expressing the anger toward them by refusing to be the “good little angel (Karen)” or the college bound “A” student (John). If they were needing to resolve this developmental stage, using drugs was also a way to create a psychosocial niche of peers who began to take care of each other, providing each other with drugs and a “safe” place to use them. This, in turn, created a strong sense of mutual trust, and additional incentive to continue using drugs. All of the participants talked about the strong bond they had with their “using buddies.” They may have experienced basic trust for the first time with this group. This may be part of the reason that the peer influence is particularly strong for this group.

For optimal development, it is important for these adolescents to achieve a basic sense of trust that was not achieved in early development. This can only come from

experiencing trustworthy people who are consistent and reliable, and who help them meet their basic needs. Only then can they begin to replace their experiences of mistrust with new experiences that show them it is now safe to trust. From their stories it is clear that treatment centers and RHS provide that kind of environment. Leah's remarked about her treatment center:

The counselors were there because they wanted to be there, they weren't there just like because they had to be because they need money...so I loved it so much like I still talk to them and check in"

To her, this consistent and reliable show of concern and interest even beyond her stay at the center helped her begin to trust adults around her. Others found that because RHS is not based on an authoritarian model they were not forced to protect themselves by rejecting the authority. This kind of non-threatening environment helped release them from their defensive stance. Not everybody with power was interested in overpowering them and making them feel powerless. At RHS the people with the power give over that power to the students by providing a model of choices and consequences that are clear and predictable to everyone, and following through on those consequences, both positive and negative. Students can begin to let down their guard and trust the school, often after testing the boundaries for a while. After a time, they begin to trust the school, the teachers, the principal, each other, and most importantly, themselves. Thus, they begin to achieve a balance in the direction of trust over mistrust.

The second stage in Erikson's model is autonomy vs. shame and doubt. Most children face this task by learning to do things on their own, with the encouragement of caregivers. Included in this is learning to adjust to social regulations and balancing a sense of autonomy within the structure of a society. If children begin to try out their independence and are encouraged and supported, they begin to feel empowered and

competent. They are more willing to face new challenges with the expectation of success. They also use the feedback they get in the form of disapproval or punishment to adjust their behavior to social norms. When the balance is toward positive feedback and encouragement, a child develops a sense of autonomy.

In the stories I heard from my participants, the balance they experienced was in the direction of shame and doubt. Several of the students gave poignant examples of the ways in which their parents shamed them and filled them with self-doubt. Paul's father told him that he was "a piece of shit that won't flush down the toilet." John's mother told him "You disgust me." Rose's father would beat her if he perceived she did something wrong. This kind of verbal and physical abuse to powerless children who have no means of escape engenders shame and doubt. It is not an environment that fosters autonomy. Any attempt at autonomy was met with extreme and often piercing pain. In order to protect themselves, the adaptive response for them was not to attempt to achieve autonomy at that point in their young lives.

Once they got to treatment and RHS, they were finally in an environment that was determined to empower them. As with trust, they first needed a psychosocial niche that created a safe environment for them to take in new experiences. Rose's example of how she regained a sense of autonomy is a powerful one:

And I was really scared because I was always brought up kids are not, they are seen and not heard or speak when you are spoken to, and I didn't feel right saying that to an adult like if this continues to happen I am going to do something about it, and it was really hard but I realized that they do love me and that I am worthy of a life

Rose was able to articulate how she used to feel that her role was to be a passive, almost invisible child, and now she can tell adults in her life when something needs to be changed and it will happen. She is learning that she is no longer powerless and that the

consequences to her exerting her autonomy are not going to be harmful to her. In fact, she is learning that the more she can let others know what she needs, the more likely she is to get her needs met.

The next stage is one of initiative versus guilt. Children who resolve this task find a niche in which they can create goals and achieve them, in which they can compete with peers and have successes, and in which they can be imaginative and creative. Some children achieve this through academic success, social success, athletics, music, or other common activities in our culture. For the participants of my study, their goal directed activity took the form of finding drugs and using them. Most of their energy for several important years of their childhood was spent in this endeavor. There is even evidence that within this niche, they competed with each other. Paul said “I am going to be more fucked up than anybody else and then I will be the cool one.” Karen said “I was the first person to ever be suspended from the school...and I was like the big bad person. And I was like, I am just the toughest coolest person in the world.” These comments were typical of these kids who showed initiative, but not in the socially acceptable ways that other non using peers chose. When a person has not developed trust or autonomy, it is unlikely for them to believe they can succeed in the pursuits of their peers. It becomes a self-fulfilling process. None of these students tried to be the star athlete or pupil. They had already created a niche for themselves that created the expectations of failure and powerlessness.

In RHS, a new niche is created in which each person is appreciated for the gifts that they bring to the group. Every person is seen as making his or her contribution, whether it be humor, honesty, compassion or just showing up regularly. This is an attempt to help them redefine themselves in a way that they can create positive goals for

themselves and begin to achieve them. At his graduation recently Hans remarked, “This isn’t me. I don’t finish things.” To which Lynn responded, “ Let me tell you the news. This is you.” His sense of himself before was one of not having the initiative to follow through and achieve goals, but his experience at RHS can begin to help him redefine himself as someone who can achieve initiative.

The stage of industry versus inferiority in our culture challenges the young person to achieve success in school through steady attention and perseverance. This includes learning to work and play with peers. Successful achievement of industry gives the person feelings of confidence and self-worth. They can begin to feel like valuable and important contributing members of society.

Many of the participants began to feel inferior from a very early age. The ridicule of their parents and/or peers filled them with feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. Paul always felt like “something was wrong with my family and just me.” Hans remarked that “I just wanted to be a normal kid and I felt that I wasn’t normal, I felt that I was wrong, a freak of nature I guess.” Once their drug using became a main focus of their lives, they were less available to be industrious. Several students commented that they would spend all their time using or sleeping. When their head would begin to clear, they would begin to think about how empty their lives were and how little they were doing. But the affects of the drugs made them feel important and took away those feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Using made them feel “cool” and good about themselves. It was more than an escape from pain. It actually transformed the feelings of worthlessness into feelings of self-worth and power. This false sense of positive feelings was a potent enticement to continue using.

At RHS, the students use group process time to remind each other that the feelings that the drugs induce are false. When a person talks about how great they felt when they were using, someone in the group reminds them of how they looked to others or how they felt when the drugs wore off. They try to demystify the positive affects of the drugs. There is also a focus on redefining their sense of themselves as inferior. As their strengths are supported and recognized, they begin to internalize those messages and see themselves as important to the group. In addition, most of the students begin to acquire study skills and academic success for 2 reasons. First, they are no longer high and are available to learn for the first time in years. Second, there are no more than 3 or 4 students in a class, so that the teaching can be tailored to each student's strengths. Thus, students can begin to build a sense of industry and plan a productive future.

Erikson's next stage is identity versus role confusion. This stage is considered to begin in adolescence. In the introduction I talked about the various ways that individuals approach this task. These are identity achievement, foreclosure, identity diffusion, and moratorium. According to Erikson, in healthy development there is typically a period of exploration and identity crisis while a person begins to question the expectations and ideas of their parents and culture and determine where they want to situate themselves. Moratorium refers to this period when an individual is seeking to resolve the identity crisis. There is often a sense of exploration and exhilaration as well as discomfort and anxiety. For much of their lives, the teenagers at RHS had been labeled "the bad kids" and their identity could have foreclosed by internalizing that. Paul remarked that "I had been so used to catholic school and had my niche there being the bad kid." Karen said "I was like the big bad person." But these individuals have challenged that and are trying to forge a new identity of a sober, successful, worthwhile person. It is not easy for someone

who has had extensive experience feeling worthless and being treated as “bad” and a perpetual “problem” to begin to challenge those messages. Karen said “I am scared of myself more than anything, like that I am going to make really bad decisions again.”

RHS and AA support these teens in helping them through this identity crisis. One important contribution that AA makes is redefining their behavior as belonging to a disease called addiction. Although society, parents, and teachers have defined these kids as a problem, AA takes the locus of the problem out of the person and puts it in a disease. AA says that all of the behaviors others used to define the addict are behaviors that control the person through a disease and do not truly belong to the person. This helps the adolescents begin to accept themselves as worthwhile individuals. Sam said “somewhere in the back of my head I knew it did but my addiction was me you know, like there was no Sam anymore. It was the addict, the junkie.” They can put the past behind them and redefine themselves as addicts who are in recovery.

This new identity is accompanied by a period of moratorium. Most of the students are clearly in a state of moratorium. They make statements that show that they are changing the way they used to be, but still feel like they do not fully know their new emerging self yet. Sam said

When I look in the mirror I just see, like I am not really used to me yet. I just see a guy. I know it is me, you know, and all that stuff and I see this guy in the mirror and...I am trying to learn more about myself. I know the addict side of me real well, but the other side I am just now learning...but we are getting along pretty good.

John also could see how he has changed. He used to like punk music because it symbolized all of his anger. Now he sees it differently:

I still liked the punk rock and everything but it means something different to me today. Today it means we are all a bunch of people trying to be ourselves and it is

okay to be yourself...It is more like a philosophical try to change things you know then angry as go burn a building or whatever..."

As they face their identity crisis, they have the power of their AA group, the support of their school, including peers who are going through the same kinds of struggles as they are, and the support of their growing sense of self.

Although Erikson's stages are consecutive, they build on each other. It is nearly impossible to resolve the identity stage without having achieved a certain level of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry. As these young people begin to achieve all of the stages that they had missed as they went through the first time when they were using drugs, they begin to blossom and develop a strong sense of identity and self-worth. There are those students who relapse and then return, and then there are those who do not return. Those students have not begun to redefine themselves as sober individuals. The ones who leave that behind, often have to leave all of those friends behind as well.

To conclude, through the lens of Erikson we are able to see how the students at RHS did not have the opportunities to achieve those developmental milestones that their "healthier" peers achieved. They have much difficult work ahead of them to make up for their deficient childhoods. Treatment, AA, and RHS all contribute to helping them achieve those important psychosocial tasks, culminating in a sense of their unique selfhood.

Erikson made important discoveries for our understanding of identity. He focused on how a person differentiates from their world. What is missing is the important ways in which a person forges their identity in the way they commune and connect with those around them. Kegan's theory of identity fills that gap.

Kegan's theory of identity. According to Kegan, identity development is the negotiation of boundaries between self and other. It is a process of differentiation and integration (Kegan, 1982). People have the dual yearning for independence or agency as well as connection or communion. Kegan's primary interest lies in the tension between these two important developmental forces. For the participants in this study, I began to see a pattern emerge in terms of their experience of this tension. From early on, the sense of agency for many of these children was stifled, although they did find ways, although limited, to experience some agency.

Some parallels can be drawn to Erikson's stages. The trust vs. mistrust stage contains both agency and communion in it. In fact, it is only when the relationship of trust exists through communion that a child begins to feel safe to test their autonomy and explore their world. In Erikson's stages of autonomy vs. shame and industry vs. guilt, there is more of a focus on agency. These young people experienced more powerlessness and shame than a healthy sense of autonomy. Using Kegan's lens, I noticed that without a sense of communion, there seems to be little drive toward agency. However, I began to notice some ways in which these resilient young people found ways to have a sense of agency despite their circumstances. Furthermore, it seemed that communion needs came first for them before they could begin to foster a sense of agency in themselves. Let me elaborate on these statements.

Without a sense of connection, there seems to be little drive toward agency. Instead of feelings of connection with their caregivers, the participants were alienated and victimized by them. As Rose described a horrific scene of her childhood, it becomes evident that she did not have a sense of agency, nor did she particularly yearn for one at that point.

“...he pulled me and my cousin and had a gun to our heads, telling my aunt if she left and took us that he was going to kill us...and still then I don't remember feeling fear. I think it was maybe that I didn't see a point to living then...”

Rose did not have a sense that any action she would take would make a difference in determining her fate.

For Paul, whose hair became an important symbol of his self-expression, he experienced powerlessness when his parents used that as a way of punishing him. His father would shave his head. Paul experienced this as evidence that he had no autonomy. It exposed him to the ridicule of peers and left him powerless.

For John, too, there was little sense of self-determination from an early age. He said, “I remember one time not wanting to go really bad and being all like my stomach hurts and my mom like dragging me through the parking lot trying to get me in...” Their parents were a source of oppression instead of connection and nurturing. In addition to feeling lonely and unsafe, they learned to feel powerless about their fate.

Despite their circumstances, some of the students did find ways of experiencing agency. For example, Rose took on the role of caretaker to her sister and cousins. She describes how doing this gave her a sense of control and meaning for her:

I did everything in my power and tried to control things I could not control by caretaking and just trying to make everything right and to ensure that everybody else would be safe I would take the rap. Like if me and my cousins went out and did something and I'd say I did it so they wouldn't get hurt

This was Rose's way of experiencing some agency in her world.

Jason became a drug dealer at the age of 12 in order to feel some agency when he was powerless to help his mother, after his father's dealers stole her car:

That is when I said that I would start selling drugs, and so I started selling drugs just so like, just for me really you know, like I felt like it would help my mom out if I did it because she wouldn't have to worry about my lunch money. She

wouldn't have to worry about nothing like that. I thought I would get more power that way too because no one would mess with my family no more if I did this.

John, too, found a way to feel some power in his oppressive home and school life.

His mother abused him verbally and emotionally as did the children on the school bus.

John's way of feeling some agency was as follows:

I made a deal with myself that no matter what I did, I don't have to like everybody and I don't have to agree with anybody but I am going to try my hardest never to treat somebody else like that.

He was always particularly kind to the younger kids on the bus, and kept his word to himself. That was something nobody could take away from him and it gave him a sense of agency.

For Hans, his sense of agency came from his drug use. He had found a way that he could have control over his pain. He did not have to be a victim to his depression and misery.

Until now I have focused on their sense of agency, which parallels with Erikson's view that the important task of development is differentiation. Now let me shift toward the importance of communion. Although in small ways these young people found ways to feel some agency, the preponderance of their experience was of powerlessness and helplessness. I noticed how they began to focus their attention more on getting their communion needs met, putting aside the need for differentiation. The students describe how drugs were an avenue for achieving a sense of communion. Carol described it as follows:

C: Yeah, and so from then on me and my brother were pot-heads together.

T: Before that did you have a relationship with him?

C: No...we got so close.

Leah also began to feel a strong connection with her peers through drugs. She said

“and it just got to the point where everybody knew me because I was like the biggest pothead like one of them at least. And I could just call anybody and be like go get me a pack of cigarettes and they would...I had so many friends, not to be like bragging or anything...”

Her friends got her drug needs met and were always there for her. For Hans as well, the drugs were a key to acceptance and friendship. He said:

It was just I got lonely...I was never accepted but then my freshman year came around and I went to high school. There was complete heaven. I met all the older kids and I hung out with seniors and juniors because there was a little kid outdrinking everybody and they were just like woah dude...you are cool.”

Hans was even voted vice president of his class. These are just a few examples of how the drugs became more than an escape from a painful reality. They brought along a sense of communion—something that had been missing in their lives from the beginning. But it was a superficial sense of communion. It only went as far as the drugs went. When they were getting sober, they began to realize that those drug using friends were interested in maintaining a relationship with “them as a drug addict” and not “them as a sober person.” At this point, AA and RHS had an important role in fostering a deeper sense of connection, which eventually lead to the beginnings of a sense of agency.

During his first AA meeting, Paul said that “I knew that I could get sober because these people were like me...just people telling the stories of how much they fucked up and that they can recover from it and there is a way, and I thought that there is a chance for me.” Paul, who had always felt like a “fish out of water,” felt like he belonged with this group. Leah described her peers at RHS as her family. She said that “Here, like, everybody knows me... and I love them to death and I can talk to them about anything like I just love them so much. They are always there for me and we are always together.” Rose also gave a good example of how connected she feels to her peers at RHS. In

addition, in her example, you can begin to see how the communion fosters a sense of agency:

And just knowing that I could just call any of them any time of the day and just be like I feel shitty ...and not be judged on it and I am able to ask for help today and I have people that I am able to feel comfortable asking for that..."

Rose has learned that when she can feel connected and build trust with people, she can begin to have a sense of agency and autonomy in terms of taking initiative to get her needs met. When people begin to feel communion with others, they can begin to feel worthwhile and that their feelings matter. They also begin to see that others care about what they are experiencing. They can begin to internalize that and get more familiar with their own feelings and thoughts. This leads to a better knowledge of what they want for themselves and a better sense of how to achieve those goals.

Narrative approach to identity development: Kegan's lens is useful in seeing beyond Erikson's focus on differentiation. He gives us the perspective of seeing how the interplay between agency or autonomy and communion is a vital part of development. Both of these theorists help us understand how young people begin to develop a sense of identity.

Both of these theories could be classified as top down theories. We have a list of their categories, pictures of their models and can begin to map those onto the experiences of the participants. The final theory I am going to present could be considered a bottom up theory. The narrative approach begins with the participants telling their story and situating themselves in a world they construct. As the stories are told, the heroes are creating their sense of identity. Every time they tell the story to someone new they tell a different story. This approach is a phenomenological one, because the lens that is used is

different for each storyteller, based on his or her experience. As the students interpreted their chaotic world, they gave it order in constructing their story.

In the above theories, there is an implicit evaluative component to interpreting development. The person who develops optimally will behave in certain ways and the person who does not achieve the necessary goals is considered unhealthy and/or deviant. At the least they are judged not to be developing optimally. This supports a psychopathological model of development. It implies that there is a right and wrong way to develop. Of course in general we can say that certain paths of development have proven to be better for optimal functioning. But there are enough exceptions of people who did not follow that single path who were remarkable and even surpassed any traditional sense of optimal functioning. None of the students in this study followed that single path. All of these individuals have been labeled by traditional systems and theories as severely dysfunctional and pathological. Unfortunately, that narrow approach to understanding development leads to a cycle of continuing to blame the victims and limit their chances to grow instead of trying to help them heal.

The narrative approach is qualitatively different. There is no objective measure of positive functioning or negative functioning. There is a story of a person who is trying to find a meaningful way to be a part of this world and find her or his unique place in it. In fact, instead of judgement and evaluation, we come to a deeper sense of empathy and caring using this approach. Instead of saying “Using drugs is bad and therefore a child who used drugs is doing a bad thing for themselves and for society,” we ask, “how did you get here and what was it like for you?” There is no explicit or implicit judgement. Just a caring curiosity and desire to understand a unique phenomenology.

Interestingly, my experience of using the different lenses evoked different affective responses from me. After looking at the risk and protective factors, I felt angry at society/schools/parents and sorry for these victims. When I looked at them through the Erikson and Kegan models of development I felt that they were terribly deficient and missing many skills and abilities. When I looked at them through the narrative lens, I could truly understand the choices they made and could respect their unique strengths and experiences. I felt deeply connected to them, and hopeful for their futures.

Whereas using Erikson and Kegan's theories there is a sense that there is some objective criteria to use to interpret the data, it is entirely in the subjective realm where the self selectively creates a story through stringing together the salient events of experience. It is in the intersubjective realm of communicating the self to the other that the self is constructed. A person who is telling her story is choosing the story she wants to share with the listener. Different listeners call for different stories.

There is always an agenda in the telling of a story. The teller considers what the listener wants to hear as well as what she wants to tell. Every story is a partial one. Details are selected as well as omitted. To me, the importance of this is to remember that I am not interested in the accuracy of the story as much as in how the person chooses to present herself to me through her story (Skinner, Bailey, Correa, & Rodriguez, 1999).

In the first section of the discussion I have presented their stories to you. In the section following that I continued to interpret the content of their stories using different lenses. In this section I focus more on the process of the telling of their stories to me as opposed to the content of their stories.

There are 5 processes that I have chosen to discuss. First, there were examples of how students commented on the way their story has changed over time. Second, there

was evidence that their stories changed because of their interaction specifically with me. Third, there were instances where I inadvertently tried to lead them toward a certain story, which was at times successful and at times unsuccessful. Fourth, there were instances where the students interpreted their stories for me. Finally, there were times when they confirmed my interpretation of their story as they told it. These five processes give a rich understanding of the importance of using narratives not only as a tool for research, but also as a tool for personal growth and reflection.

One of the important aspects of personal narratives is that they are constantly evolving. Every day brings new experiences and insights that lead to changes and “updates” in our stories. My participants often make comments that show how their story has changed over time. This is one of the important aspects of a person’s narrative. The changes in the story often reflect changes in self-perception or identity. The changes represents points of growth and development. Here is a quote from Jason showing how he sees things differently than he used to:

I felt like it was my fault. I always felt like I could have stopped it, I mean I know I couldn’t, I mean like now I know I couldn’t have done nothing about it but then I felt like I could have stopped it...as I got older and got more into the gun scene or whatever I figured if I was carrying a gun I could have shot that guy before he shot my cousin you know, but like I know I couldn’t have done nothing about it, it was his time to go.

Jason gives 3 different perspectives here. First, his story was one where he felt he should have stopped the gunmen but didn’t know how. Later, his story was one where if he had a gun, he could have possibly saved his cousin by shooting first. Finally, his current story is one where he appreciates his 2 previous interpretations of the event, but has come to accept that “it was his time to go.” He no longer blames himself or tries to change the past.

Karen gives another example of this kind of change of perspective over time:

I thought it was cool [using drugs] because he thought it was cool and he had 2 friends that he always hung out with that I didn't like very much and when I think about it now, I didn't even like him very much.

Karen can remember how she felt at the time. For her then, it was important to appear cool even if it meant being with people she didn't like and doing some things she didn't like. Looking back, she can reassess her feelings and see that she did not even like her boyfriend. She was able to talk about how he treated her and how willing she was to be treated poorly. She had some sadness for who she was then, but it is clear that she is describing a young girl that has changed into a stronger young woman. Her ability to recognize that she did not even like him can lead her to a better choice for herself next time.

Rose was able to trace some of her growth over time:

And I was still at the point where I couldn't express how I felt because it felt like it didn't matter and I didn't feel like I was worth anything...I have a choice today and whatever I choose to do with it is what is going to happen. My choices.

Rose can recognize how when her story was one of victimization and powerlessness, she did not express herself. Now that she sees herself as worthwhile, she not only expresses herself, but believes strongly that she determines her own destiny. This dramatic shift is captured in her ability to distinguish between her old story and her new one.

The second process was one where our interchange led the participant to revise their story in some way. For example, Carol was talking about her youth minister and how important he was for her. Here is our dialogue:

T: They cared about you?

C: Very much so.

T: Is that why?

C: I would sleep at their house many nights.

T: What was different about them than other people that you met?

C: I really couldn't say...[pause] I guess he was like a dad, I never had that at all.

Carol's initial response was that she "couldn't say" or didn't know. As she thought about my question, though, she came up with the answer. She interpreted his positive influence on her by saying he was a father that she never had. Now she has defined her relationship with him in a new way and has taken it to a new level of understanding.

Paul and I talked about his experience of loneliness in the following dialogue:

T: You were home alone all of the time?

P: Yeah. There was a while where I would just talk on the phone with people for like hours, it was ridiculous.

T: Empty, empty house.

P: Yeah. Sometimes I'd go a little wacky in the head like quirky. Like someone might be stalking the house because it is so empty you know, what if someone was in the house?

T: You can kind of understand how people in solitary confinement must feel.

P: Yeah, I never thought about that...Hmmm, that is interesting. I never thought about the solitary confinement thing. I thought they were looney to begin with but that probably adds on to the looniness, separating them.

Paul reacted strongly to my use of "solitary confinement" to describe his experience. He had never framed it that way, but his eyes lit up and he was clearly relating deeply to that image. He made another mention of that later in the interview, which indicates that it stayed with him, too.

Sam was telling me about his excessive drug use and was reflecting as he was talking:

Phew, talk about no reality at all. Yeah, I was just like it was more a reality thing to me. I didn't like the reality as it was so I decided I could change it the more I take. Maybe that was it.

Sam was exploring as he was talking. At the end, he had a new insight about himself.

Maybe that was the reason that he was using so much, in order to change his reality. He seemed almost surprised at this discovery.

For me, these types of comments where I could see their insight or growth happening in the moment before my eyes was a powerful testament to giving people the opportunity to tell their story. Each time we tell our story and think about the events of our lives, we have the opportunity to make revisions and redefine ourselves. My participants did this on their own as well as in response to my probing questions.

After listening to my first interview tape, I became aware of how often I interrupted with a question or comment that interfered with my participant's thought process. Because I transcribed each interview as I went along, I was able to learn from the previous interviews. My heightened awareness of the way my questions directed the interview led to fewer questions and different kinds of questions. Even so, there were plenty of times when my agenda seemed to be different than theirs. Fortunately, my participants were usually clear about what they wanted to say and were able to say it in spite of me at times.

John was talking about his immediate positive response to punk music. Here is our conversation:

- J: I just listened to them over and over and over again and like now I don't hear it but at the time I heard the fuck you, you know, fuck you I don't have to be like you, you are not going to control me, you are not going to tell me what to be, and I played them over and over and over and over again and...
- T: Kind of brainwashed yourself?
- J: Well, kind of, or I just related to it so well, and it expressed all the feeling that I didn't know what they were.

Although John let me down easy, he rejected my interpretation of the music brainwashing him. He did not listen to it and become brainwashed. Instead, he experienced it as an almost miraculous experience of the realization that he is not alone and that there are people out there who can express the way that he has been feeling for so long.

Karen, too, was able to correct me when I interpreted her statement in a way that did not match her own view:

T: It is like you decided to be the underachiever.

K: Yeah, well, see I decided that I would be good at what I wanted to be good at and not what they wanted me to be good at.

Karen was essentially saying, “No, Tova, I was not an underachiever. In fact, I was still an overachiever, but just not the one they wanted me to be.” The word underachiever felt dissonant to the way she saw herself. Karen was very energetic and active in being the “Bad kid.” The connotation of underachiever is someone who is lazy and is not competitive or interested in success. Karen was the opposite, and she clarified this for me.

My first interview, where I believe my questions were excessive, was with Carol. She was able to get her story across anyway. My favorite example of a student setting me straight is when Carol responded to one of my many questions by looking me in the eyes and saying simply, “No. Listen.” And then continuing with the direction that she felt was important for her story. I am grateful to Carol and all of my participants for teaching me how to be a better listener.

Another interesting process that I noted was one where the students noticed that I did not understand something and interpreted it for me. Carol was telling me about how they shared drugs. She said:

Well, it was basically who’s got the stuff? You have it, well basically we’ll match you, you know. You know what matching is. You don’t know what matching is? Like they have a joint and we have a joint and then like we will all smoke it together and we’ll have 2 joints.

Carol enjoyed explaining this to me. She was sharing her language, part of the drug culture with me. She was surprised that I did not know that expression. Sometimes we forget that words and phrases that are part of our everyday life may be completely foreign

to someone who has a different culture or lifestyle than we do. I learned so much about the drug culture and their world of experience, their “reality,” through the new language that these students taught me.

Jason made an important distinction for me when we were talking about his mother’s new husband. He had attacked this man out of anger and was describing this to me. I assumed that this person had in some way treated Jason poorly. Jason said, “No, no he seemed like he was a good guy and stuff but to *me* he seemed like he was invading.” Jason could tell that I misunderstood him and thought the step dad had done something wrong. He clarified by saying that the problem was not in his step dad who was a decent guy, but rather in himself at the time, who felt invaded and usurped.

John was telling me about his difficulties with his mother and how he was always trying to build a relationship with her. John was able to clarify his feelings for me:

- T: That is such a strong image saying don’t abandon me, don’t reject me. I don’t know which it was.  
J: It was more of a don’t reject me.

I was searching for the right interpretation and John was able to reject the one and accept the other. After he chose the rejection theme, he went on to tell me why that was the appropriate description for his experience. This was a very useful discussion that gave me a clearer sense of his phenomenology.

Sam was talking about how using drugs did not have the same effect that it used to after several years of heavy using. Here is the dialogue that followed:

- T: You built up a tolerance?  
S: Well, no it wasn’t that because I would go past my tolerance, way past my tolerance, but it got to where it just didn’t help. I don’t know what it just didn’t work anymore. No matter how much I used, no matter how much I’d drunk it didn’t work anymore.

Sam corrected my use of the word tolerance. He had *not* built up a tolerance to drugs. In fact, that word did not fit into his using history at all. He used drugs until he passed out many times. He was trying instead to point out that even if he had the physiological effects of the drugs, it was no longer pleasurable in the way that it had been before. This was an important distinction that came about because he was listening carefully to what I was saying and wanting to give me as true a picture of his experience as possible.

The final process I present here is one where I interpreted what the student says and they confirmed that I got it right. This was useful not only in letting me know that I was understanding them accurately, but it let them know that they were being understood. I think this was one of the important ways in which we built a certain intimacy in our interview. When we are talking to someone about our personal life and we can see that they are “getting it” I believe it builds a certain level of trust, and a willingness to explore things that are even more intimate. At one point, Karen told me that “when I tell my story I usually leave out certain things just because I don’t like to talk about them.” And then she shared those things with me. I believe this was only possible because she felt safe, cared about, and understood.

Jason was describing his reaction to his cousin’s death.

J: As soon as that happened with my cousin, childhood stopped.

T: You weren’t a kid anymore.

J: Yeah. That is how I felt. I wasn’t a kid anymore.

When Jason said that his childhood stopped, I rephrased it by saying that he did not feel like a child. Jason resonated to that comment strongly. It was a connecting moment for us. It was similar to the following exchange with Paul. Paul was talking about his drug use and how extreme he became. I interpreted his behavior for him in a way that sounded right to him:

- T: You were like, I am going to be more fucked up than anybody else and then I will be the cool one.  
P: Yeah, that is exactly how it was.

Simon, too, was able to let me know that I captured his feelings well. He was talking about how he would reject his father when his father would call to see if he wanted to come for the weekend:

- T: But you wanted him to think...  
S: To think I actually had something big to do  
T: Like I'm important.  
S: Yeah, I have important things I have to do like I really want to go do this. You're just nobody to me.  
T: You can't hurt me.  
S: Yeah, yeah. That is what it felt like, like that is what I planned on trying to do to him.

This is another example of Simon not only confirming my understanding of him, but taking it further and more deeply understanding why he behaved the way he did.

As my participants shared their stories with me, I began to get a strong sense of the importance to them of telling their story. Skinner et al. (1999) talk about narratives as a way for people to reconstruct their story in such a way that the negative events become sources of growth and ways toward increased self-perception and understanding. I found this to be true for these students. Each one has done things that are seen as negative and “wrong” by most interpretations. However, when they told their story, they did not necessarily say that their behavior was good or constructive, but they created a frame within which a person could understand well how they got there. In addition, for each one, there was a strong sense of how they got here now and how they overcame adversity. They constructed the stories they told me as a way of defining themselves and showing me who they have become. Many of them ended their stories by saying that they are finally someone that they can love and respect. Or at least, they are moving

forward in that direction. For me, it is clear that not only do I deeply respect each of their journeys, but my own personal story has changed in hearing their stories in ways that were unexpected to me. Such is the telling of stories. Every story we hear changes our lives in more ways than we can know in the moment. The more we tell our story, the more we begin to integrate all of the events and begin to see where we came from and how we got here. Then we are left to choose where we are going next.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Conclusions

This dissertation is concerned with adolescents in recovery from drug addiction. In the conclusion section, I summarize the findings from this research. First, I discuss the use of narrative and narrative poems as a research tool. Next, I review the use of the poems to present the phenomenological experience of my participants and the conclusions from the poems. I, then, present the findings from the three strands of analysis: risk factors, treatment and post treatment experiences, and identity development. Finally I discuss some limitations of the study as well as its implications.

#### Narrative as research tool

In this research, the participants' stories are the primary source of data. These stories were told to me during an extended interview. The premise of this research design is that in telling their stories, the students would be constructing their identity and making meaning out of their phenomenological experiences. The stories were indeed a rich source of data that gave me a strong sense of the narrator's world of experience. Using those stories I created a narrative poem in which I retold their stories back to them in poetic form. This turned out to be more than a methodological member check. In fact, it felt more like a therapeutic experience for the participants. Seeman (personal communication) described it as "research as therapy." He believed that the poems took their stories to a new level of insight and understanding. When the students told their stories, they were focused on describing a sequence of events. The poem, however,

organized those events and gave them a meaningful frame. In addition to new understanding, the poems were non-evaluative and focused on understanding where they came from and who they are becoming, much like a therapeutic setting. To conclude, the use of narratives was extremely fruitful in terms of learning about adolescents' phenomenological experiences. The narrative poems were a useful tool both for a methodological member check and a therapeutic experience.

### Phenomenology in the poems

The poems were used to present the phenomenological experience of my participants. Through the power of imagery and creative expression, the poem is an experiential way of expressing their world. Hopefully, when someone reads each poem, he or she can get a strong sense of how it felt to be in that world and to live that experience. After each poem, I discussed some of the main themes of that story. I summarized those conclusions at the end of all of the poems. I concluded that the students used drugs for several reasons. First, the drugs provided an escape from pain. Not being high was painful and anything that could take those painful feelings away was highly desirable. Feeling numb was better than feeling "reality." Drugs had the added benefit of making them feel physiologically more powerful and confident. This was especially potent for these young people who had been ignored, shamed, and abused. Their sense of themselves sober was one of worthlessness and powerlessness. This physiological sense of freedom and control replaced those painful feelings when under the influence of drugs. Finally, drugs provided a tight network of close friends who, for the first time, had a sense of belonging and caring for one another. This strong peer group helped maintain the drug use by providing a context for use, providing drugs, and protecting the members from getting caught. All of these findings are evidence that in

the phenomenological world of these 10 adolescents, most of the positive experiences of their lives came from the use of drugs. These findings suggest a new way of thinking about adolescents in recovery. Instead of seeing them as dangerous deviants who are using drugs to seek thrills and break laws, we can begin to see damaged souls that are yearning for some peace and friendship. Only through listening to their voices, voices that have been ignored and silenced, we can begin to hear what they have to say. Only then can we begin to understand how we can help them rebuild their lives in a constructive way.

### Three strands of analysis

Risk factors. The literature talks extensively about risk factors and how they can predict who is “at risk” or vulnerable to drug use and abuse. In this study I give a more personal face to the risk factor literature. I tell the stories behind the statistics. My participants fit the profile of adolescents at high risk for drug abuse. When children are not connected at home, at school, with peers or in their community, they begin to feel alone and worthless and often seek comfort in drugs that are available everywhere and enticing on many levels.

Treatment and post treatment experiences. Overall, the students had extremely positive experiences in their various treatment centers. They were introduced to AA, spent most of the time in process groups with peers, and were in an environment that did not rely on authority and power to control them. Instead, it was a relationship-based model. Any of the students who went back to their old school knew that they would relapse immediately. Each of them found their way to RHS. Like their treatment experiences, RHS used the AA model, used peers as the main support system, and used a relationship-based form of discipline instead of a power-based one. These are the

elements that seem to work extremely well with these adolescents. Treatment centers have figured this out. Lynn has figured this out. And yet most communities do not provide places where teenagers can have these kinds of healing experiences. I believe that RHS is an important post-treatment model that is highly effective in responding to the needs of these adolescents. My hope is that more communities will begin to create such places for these young individuals to flourish.

Identity Development. In this study, I used Erikson, Kegan, and the narrative approach to understand identity development in these adolescents. Erikson's lens gave us a sense of the participants' struggles to differentiate and develop a sense of who they are as a single unified identity. In using Erikson's model, it became clear that these young people had missed some of the important developmental milestones. It is essential for them to achieve those milestones in their recovery process. Kegan added to the focus on individuation the need for communion or agency. Using Kegan's model we see that when a child does not have the opportunity for agency, she will turn to finding communion. It seems that through communion a person can begin to discover her sense of agency. Finally, using the narrative approach, I discussed five processes that occurred during the storytelling. In these processes we saw how the participants' stories changed as they told their stories to me. Their stories were their way of defining and redefining their sense of self.

## Limitations

In this section, I discuss some of the limitations in this study, which include a lack of cultural diversity in the sample, the fact that all the students are in the same setting, and the uniqueness of the setting.

One of the limitations I faced is that the students at RHS are mostly from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of middle to upper class Southern United States. Although this study helped me understand this group in more depth, it may not have as much relevance to inner city youth, adolescents from impoverished backgrounds, and adolescents from other regions of the country and the world.

Not only are the students mostly from similar backgrounds, but I interacted with them only in one context, their school. I only saw these students in their school setting, which did not give me access to many other aspects of their lives, which are important parts of their stories. Thus, their stories may not represent adolescents in recovery more generally, but may be more limited to adolescents in recovery at RHS.

Another limitation is the fact that there is no other setting like Recovery High School. Although no two settings are alike anywhere, still, RHS is a new and innovative program with only a handful of similar schools like it in the world. This is a limitation in terms of being able to generalize these findings to other adolescents. However, I believe I make a strong case for trying to create more places like RHS where teens can have a safe and nurturing environment while they try to hold on to their sobriety.

### Implications

This study has significance for clinicians and educators working with adolescents in recovery, for researchers interested in using narratives as data, for the participants learning more about themselves, and for me personally as a developing clinician, researcher, and human. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a resurgence in the

problem of adolescent drug use and abuse. Also, treatment programs can be affective in helping teenagers get clean, but when the teens return to their previous settings, most often their schools, they are likely to relapse even after the most extensive treatment. In order to understand their experiences more fully, it has been helpful to have insight into their perspectives of their lived experiences. I found that a useful method for getting at this information was through listening to their stories.

Clinicians and educators could use findings from this research to related more meaningfully to struggling adolescents. I hope I was able to express their phenomenology in a way that penetrated into the hearts of others in the way their stories entered mine. Only when we can be truly compassionate and understand their experience from the inside can we truly be helpers in their lives.

For researchers, the use of narratives was explored in terms of the content of the stories, the process of the telling, and the constructing of the self through the stories. All of these levels have provided rich data both in terms of this specific study and in using this methodology in future research.

For the participants and for myself, I hope that this work has lead to a greater understanding of how we construct our lives and our selves. I hope it empowers the participants to continue toward a meaningful sobriety. I know that I have been enriched and energized by becoming intimately acquainted with these resilient and inspiring individuals.

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