My Journey. My Story: Shifting Perspective to Living, Being, Teaching Authentically

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Abstract

The following project is an autobiographical, narrative account of my life and my investigation of the correlation between a person’s authenticity and the quality of their teaching practice. Over the past year, I critically reflected on my personal journey towards authentic being, living and teaching by asking several deep questions: What does being authentic mean, look and feel like? What does authenticity have to do with education? Why would and how could living authentically affect the quality of one’s life and profession? How can a person educate others, be a role model, practice and preach what matters to them if they do not know who they are or what they believe in? Within this paper you will find background information as to why and how becoming authentic mattered to me; the connection between authentic being and best practice; and the effect authenticity has had on my personal and professional practice. It is my hope that My Journey, My Story inspires others to dig deep and be their true, authentic selves.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to the two most important people in my life — my Mom and Dad. Without your support, I would not be where I am today. You have shown me what two people with love, commitment, perseverance and hard work can accomplish in spite of arriving in Canada with only two suitcases in hand and not a word of English. You are my inspiration, my heart and the reason I am who I am today.

Mom, I am blessed with your emotional support and the way you accept me for who I am. You believe in me no matter what obstacles I encounter or “mistakes” I make. You have given me space to learn from my errors and become the person I am through your support. Without your continuous encouragement and “being tough” through hard times, I would not have been able to move forward.

Dad, because of your logic, tough love and modest common sense, you were always able to put my problems into perspective and tell me the truth, whether I liked it or not. Most importantly, you always told me that whatever I decided to do, I should make sure I was happy. Happy I am and I hope you are happy too. I miss you each and every day and wish you were here to share this with me and Mom, as a family, as the three we always were.

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Preface

The process which ensued for my Master’s in Educational Leadership (MEDL) project surprised me. At first, I planned to investigate Formative Assessment (FA) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in an academic writing style for an academic audience. I wanted to understand how these two strategies would fit into my non-academic course, woodworking. However, having been introduced to FA and AI as a student in my CIEL (Certificate in Innovative Educational Leadership) and MEDL programs during the past two years, I was amazed by the effects they each had on me. Because of my experience, I began to investigate FA and AI with a new perspective. No longer was I interested in the strategies alone but now I was interested in understanding how they were incorporated in my program and why I was affected by them in the way I was. In my opinion, after much reflection and research, it was the authenticity behind how these two strategies were incorporated into the program.

My experience in graduate studies was enlightening because I didn’t expect to be involved in the learning process and be fascinated to own my learning. In contrast, I expected to read, write and regurgitate information just as I did in earning my Bachelors of Education. My past experience as a student did not support my thinking and my understanding with my strengths. The instructors were usually the experts who showcased their knowledge and I was there to soak it up like a sponge. However, not this time.

As the CIEL and MEDL programs continued, I critically reflected on my experience with the correlation between the methods my instructors used in how they orchestrated the courses. I recognized they were not only teaching FA and AI but they were also role modelling it naturally without having to explicitly say it. I don’t recall hearing ...and we just used an example of formative assessment on you. This is a tool you can use in your practice. Or, me telling you that
you are good at \([x, y, z]\) is Appreciative Inquiry because I am not focussing on your weaknesses.

I felt my instructors were authentic in their teaching and believed in FA and AI. They understood the value of each without having to defend or define either.

My instructors were positive, forward thinking and capitalized on each person’s strengths in the program. Having someone, a teacher, focus on my strengths was uncomfortable at first because I was trained to have a problem-solving mindset. I would think *How could I improve or help others improve if I don’t know what to fix?* Yet, doing the opposite, focussing on my strengths, I felt strangely enough, possible. I felt smart, I felt capable to venture into academic territory I never felt I belonged in or thought I could achieve. I’m a hands-on person with big ideas who needs to be active in my learning. Documenting, writing, researching are skill sets I am not confident with. However, the foreign feeling of feeling possible enabled me to use my strengths and see opportunity in front of me. The positive encouragement my academic instructors gave me, a shop teacher, provided me the support I needed to work in this environment.

I appreciated my instructors supporting my learning rather than talking *at* me. I appreciated my instructors not giving me stuff to regurgitate back for the sake of doing work. I felt the work I was doing was meaningful for me and my practice. I was working in a structure of expectations but freedom to work with my strengths and with time. This was enlightening! Everything I was feeling and doing as a student in my CIEL and MEDL programs were the very things I always wanted to instill in my students in my classroom. This is what being and doing better as a teacher encompassed for me.
Formative Assessment (FA)

One resource used in my CIEL program was Dylan Wiliam’s (2011) book *Embedded Formative Assessment*. This book enabled me to understand what FA was and guided me in how to incorporate it into my practice. Once I understood FA was a “tool” or “process” (p. 38) used to assess “where learners are in their learning, find out where they are going, and find out how to get there” (p. 45) I knew I had to take a risk by trying it in my class. The effects FA had on me were enough for me to believe in its methods.

Incorporating FA was a risk because it was a new concept I didn’t know how to use and I didn’t fully understand how it would work in a woodworking class. I had two assumptions holding me back. One, I assumed FA was only applicable for academic subjects such as Math, Science and English. Second, incorporating FA felt like an addition to my teaching load which I was already feeling unfulfilled with. I was looking at FA with the question *How could I carry on doing what I am doing, plus incorporate FA on top of it?* It seemed daunting to add FA into my practice which wasn’t going to make my practice instantly better. However, through my research, I quickly began to understand what Black (1998) clearly notes in his article *Formative assessment: raising standards*.

*There is no “quick fix” that can be added to existing practice with promise of rapid reward. ...On the contrary, if the substantial rewards of which the evidence holds out promise are to be secured, this will only come about if each teacher finds his or her own ways of incorporating the lessons and ideas that are set out above into his or her own patterns of classroom work (p. 46).*
I was alone, working in my silo at the back of the school as the only shop teacher, which did not provide me with anyone to collaborate with or specific FA “shop” examples to follow. I was unable to see how I could incorporate FA into my course or understand FA in terms that made sense to me.

Margaret Heritage’s (2007) article *Formative Assessment: What do Teachers Need to Know and Do?* clearly outlines key elements and core practices teachers need to do and know in order to dovetail, not add, FA into their work. Her condensed lists explain essential points in enough depth enabling FA to be attainable in any classroom. The piece I needed to wrap my mindset around was FA is not “in competition with teaching, rather is an integral part of teaching and learning” (p. 140).

Concisely, Wiliam’s (2011) describes the five elements to FA to be:

1. The provision of effective feedback to students;
2. The active involvement of students in their own learning;
3. The adjustment of teaching to take into account the results of assessment;
4. The recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of student, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
5. The need for students to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve. (p. 39)

Once I understood the idea behind these elements and found a way to incorporate them into my “patterns of classroom work” (Black, 1998, p. 46) I felt I could use FA in my non-academic woodworking class. My perspective of FA shifted from being an addition to my teaching to a way of working smarter not harder *with* my students.
Black (1998) reviews common teaching practices that keep students at arm’s length from learning, in spite of a teacher’s best efforts. One example in the article reviews the “link between intrinsic motivation and the types of evaluation” (p. 40) Israeli students are taught to expect. In the study, students were divided into three groups; each received one of three types of written feedback over the course of three sessions.

The “comments only” group improved their scores by one third between session one and two, remaining at the higher level for the third session. The “grades only” group wavered between each of the three sessions by declining, improving and then making little improvement overall by the last session. The “comments with grade” group visibly showed a steady decline from the first session to the last with no improvement.

Black (1998) indicates the results from using the three common types of feedback are in line with other literature. For example, “task-involving” feedback is more effective than “ego-involving” feedback and the “preoccupation with grade attainment can lower the quality of task performance” (p. 40). By removing the focus on grades by “involv[ing] pupils in their own assessment changes both the role of the pupil as learner and the nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil” (p. 43) with the responsibility for learning on the pupil.

Working towards shifting the pendulum from teacher-task-mark-centred to student-teacher-centred will take time. Resistance to changing “accustomed routines” is difficult for all because “change is threatening, and the emphasis on the challenge to think for yourself (and not just work harder) can be disturbing to many” (Black, 1998, p. 44). Teachers will find it difficult to let go of control and/or implement new ways of learning that require replacing poor practices – i.e. replacing the focus of lots of tasks with more time for conversation. Subsequently, students will feel uncomfortable with the shift in focus, as well as, responsibility for them to think for
themselves. Nevertheless, the results of realigning the role of teacher/student with more efficient assessment practices, is worth the investment.

For assistance in how to incorporate FA into my practice, I reviewed sample techniques Wiliam’s (2011) provides. I didn’t use his examples as prescribed steps (a method I used in the past when I searched for the “perfect” lesson plan or project to fix my practice). Instead, I used his examples in the same way my instructors role modeled in CIEL and MEDL. They each provided a structure of expectations but allowed flexibility for each of our learning styles and strengths. Therefore, I utilized Wiliam’s (2011) strategies as a framework for my practice but was mindful to incorporate the strategies within the context of my course with the strengths of my students.

One technique I employed had my students look at samples of past student projects (Wiliam, 2011) that illustrated a wide range of quality from their peers. I had never incorporated this in my past because I assumed students understood quality and understood or had the same definition of quality as I did.

I displayed past projects, but made a point to facilitate discussion that questioned my students throughout the exercise. For example, I asked them a series of questions: Compare projects A and B, What are the differences between the projects?, Which project is of higher quality?, Why do you think project A is better?, Does time, effort and craftsmanship have anything to do with the quality produced?, If you were to mark this project, what would it be and why?, Are there recommendations you would give the student?, How could the student improve?, What makes project B better?, How do you think the person worked on this project?, What kind of a person would you assume these two projects represent? I probed students to identify and ask themselves questions in an environment that was safe – not right or wrong - open and
supportive with time. I wanted each student to be the centre of the exercise by owning their opinions and find ways to understand what quality meant on their own terms. The course was no longer about me or a forum for me to impress others with my skill level. I was there for their learning and their growth.

While being challenged to think outside my comfort zone during graduate studies, I was also discovering my authentic-self. Through discovering my authentic-self, I was uncovering my intentions – morals, values, beliefs, wants and needs – which were not only for my personal life but also for my teaching practice. I was decluttering my personal life and decluttering my teaching practice of non-essential practices which were not working for me.

While decluttering, I uncovered a fear I unconsciously harboured that prevented me from incorporating FA into my practice: I didn’t know how to incorporate it authentically and was scared to come across forced or fake. Students would know if I was coming across forced or fake, therefore, leading my efforts to fail. Failing was not good.

When I dug deeper, I realized my fear was because all this time I was the centre of my classroom. I was clinging to all pieces: I was evaluating student work with marks and long comments without their input; I was answering student questions before they had a chance to respond; I was fixing their projects rather than allowing them to problem solve on their own; I was haunted by the pressure of the clock to complete everything needed before it was too late. I was controlling and doing so much for my students, yet, keeping them at arm’s length from learning because I was scared that the class would collapse otherwise. However, when I began considering FA more, I realized I was not including them as partners in the learning process (Heritage, 2007) which is why the “quick fixes” I would incorporate never enabled me to do or be better in my teaching.
Through decluttering and understanding FA more, I identified my three encompassing intentions: Quality not Quantity, Relationships and Care. When looking at each more in depth, I was able to articulate them further. I identified, for myself and my students, I valued quality not quantity in our work; we were to aim for excellence not perfection together; we were to improve our current skill sets together; we were to not compare our work to anyone else; we were to each own our work; and be proud of the work we achieved individually and together. My intentions were filled with “we”, “ours”, and “together”. No longer was I looking at the class being about me. The class was about us working together which is what FA encapsulates. By believing in my intentions, as my graduate program instructors did, enabled me to dovetail FA into my practice without the fear of it being forced or fake. I cared about my students and I cared about the work we did together.

I learned to question their questions with the intent of getting deeper, past accepting the tip of the iceberg responses, to help me understand where they were in their learning, as well as, help them become more critical thinkers. FA was to help my students learn and help shape my teaching practice to support them better. Magically, it did.

*Appreciative Inquiry*

Another magical strategy I used in my teaching practice, which I never had in my past practice, was Appreciative Inquiry (AI) because, again, of the positive effects it had on me as a CIEL and MEDL student. By articulating my intentions, it enabled me to have an image in my mind that guided me in my behaviour. I was projecting an image of who I wanted to be ahead of myself (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). I was a person who saw opportunity for myself and others around me.
In my past teaching practice and life, I functioned with a problem-solving approach. I would identify what students were doing poorly and then highlight the list of things they needed to work on. In my own life, I would identify my faults and look for solutions to fix them in order to be better and do better. However, once I was influenced by AI as a student, I saw the detriment of my problem-solving approach. Through the use of problem-solving, I was focussing on the problem rather than the intended outcome of the solution that “rarely result[ed] in a new vision” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 37). I was in a vicious cycle of being submerged in negative thoughts that rarely produced growth or positive change.

“AI assumes that every living system has untapped, rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this “positive change core” directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 70). According to Rogers and Fraser (2003) AI “is based on the heliotropic principle: that people and organizations move toward those things that give them energy and life” (p. 77). I wanted to be the light that provided a positive, safe environment for my students to grow, just as I was investing energy into creating a mindset of my own that was developing my authentic-self.

As I discovered my intentions and began working with them in my class, unbeknownst to me at the time, I was working with a set of conditions for success. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) describe the conditions as:

- **Process integrity** where the means and the ends are the same;
- **Human change integrity** where organizations are in Ghandi’s words “the change they want to see”;
- **Perseverance in change** by being persistently open to learning, discovering new possibilities for understanding and performance, and sharing our best
with others to raise collective standard of living within our organizations and on the planet;

- **Narrative-rich communication taps into the organization’s inner dialogue** – the stories that members tell about themselves and their organization (p. 74).

I was experiencing a change in my practice because my authentic-self knew its intentions and ultimately knew what to do. I had integrity and was being the change I wanted to see. Through challenges, I persevered through it all by working with my students and valuing our relationship. I found myself not overthinking or *trying*. I was just being true to myself and my intentions.

I took time to cultivate an environment where I valued my students and kept them at the center of my teaching practice through the use of FA and AI. I was creating an outcome that was “magical” (Hall & Hammond, 1996, p. 3). Hall and Hammond may have described the power we experience from using AI as “magical” but this is something I said often when I recognized its power in my classroom and life. AI generated “excitement and enthusiasm”; created a “buzz” that was “electrifying” (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, p. 79).

**Autoethnographic Narrative**

I struggled with how I was going to write my Master’s project. I found myself *trying* to fit into the academic expectations I thought I needed to fit into. My expectations had me *trying* to write in a language and style that was not comfortable for me and had me *trying* to fit into a template that was also not me. However, as I continued using AI on myself and to hone my authentic-self, I chose to focus on my strengths. I knew I was a passionate person who had a story to tell. A story that is unconventional to the style and project normally produced in this
context, is nonetheless, a valuable one. I was feeling brave and felt it was time to step off the path I was traveling on for much too long. Therefore, writing an autoethnographic narrative was natural and the only way I know how to write - write from the heart with voice, my voice.

Autoethnographic narratives begin with a personal story, in this case My Journey, My Story. My Journey, My Story is about me finding my authentic-self and I needed to honour the process by also being such in my Master’s project. I concluded that my project needed to be an extension of myself and a medium for me to create, mould and express who I am.

By being the researcher –practitioner, I have consciously embedded myself in theory and practice by uncovering reasons behind my actions, past and present (McIlveen, 2008, p. 1). I knew that uncovering My Journey, My Story was necessary in becoming better and doing better. Tamas (2009) notes that “the only book that is worth writing is the one we don’t have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us… writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written it… a book stronger than the author” (as cited in Lather, 2007, p. 4). It was when I began looking, listening, feeling and then articulating my process I knew I was on the right path and I needed to trust the process.

I found a kindred spirit while reading Tamas’s (2009) autoethnographihc story. She illustrated how “using [our] painful experiences as a source of learning, growth, or activist survivor mission” made our losses “appear personally and socially useful and meaningful” (p. 1). There is validity in using our experiences, or in my case and Tamas’s, “turn[ing] trauma into knowledge” (p. 2).

A key issue I had difficulty with in writing My Journey, My Story was keeping true to its messiness. Life is messy and doesn’t always roll out in a chronological format that enables us to
follow clearly. My life is no different from others. Despite my messy, entangled life, I produced a story by a process McIlveen (2008) describes:

*should meld theory and autobiographical reporting of experience so as to: a) be faithful and comprehensive rendition of the author’s experience (i.e. fairness, ontological authenticity, and meaningfulness); b) transform the author through self-explication (i.e. educative authenticity and catalytic authenticity); and c) inform the reader of an experience he or she may have never endured or would be unlikely to in the future, or of an experience he or she may have endured in the past or is likely to in the future, but has been unable to share the experience with his or her community of scholars and practitioners (p. 16).*

I believe I have followed McIlveen’s (2008) process which will enable you, the reader, to “construct lessons for [your] own sphere of practice” (p.16).

Recognizing the mindset I was in - wanting to be real, authentic and surrounded by others like-minded - I found myself gravitating to personal stories that moved me -stories I could connect to in a personal way. I knew if I found meaning while reading others’ autoethnographic voices pour from the pages of their stories, then there was a chance My Journey, My Story would affect others as well. However, as Berger (2001) expresses in her autoethnographic process, her concern, as mine, was if our personal narrative, “a form of writing that is considered to fall under the umbrella of autoethnography” (as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 46), was appropriate for an academic audience. Although concerned, I was comforted by McIlveen’s (2008) explanation of how “there are few regulations on how to write our an autoethnographic narrative… as it is the meaning of the story that is important… along with the use of archival data (e.g. memoirs,
photographs), concurrent self-observation and recording (e.g. diary, audio-visual)” (p. 15). My peers, my advisor and my gut encouraged me to think outside the box of conventional academic projects and I did.

Conclusion

It was critically reflecting on the positive experience I felt as a student in my graduate programs that enabled me to see the value in sharing my experience. Seeing my instructors’ authentic selves teach authentically using basic teaching strategies, FA and AI, made me a better student. In turn, it allowed me to see what I needed and wanted to do in my practice to do and be better as well.

Before you immerse yourself in My Journey, My Story, I want to leave you with an excerpt from one of my favourite authors, Parker Palmer. Palmer (2003) expresses what I think and feel with a gifted eloquence I wish I possessed. Rather than massacre his words, I bring you full circle to why finding my authentic-self is relevant in my being and doing better in my classroom and life. Yes, FA and AI are tools I incorporated into my practice, but it was finding me, the real me, that ultimately enabled me to be the teacher I always wanted to be and the person I need to be in my life.

*Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convulsions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in the mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge- and
knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.

In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them though a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, as congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.

We need to open a new frontier in our exploration of good teaching: inner landscape of a teacher’s life. ...Intellect, emotion, and spirit end on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well (Palmer, 2003, p. 1).
Inquiry Question/Hypothesis

As I was having dramatic shifts in my thinking, evolving into a person I was always meant to be, I began noticing a difference in my practice when I returned to the classroom. I kept reflecting, journaling, questioning, evaluating and trying to understand the many changes I was going through and how these changes were affecting my personal and professional lives. I began to wonder how and why my practice was changing so rapidly and becoming everything I wanted it to be as I was doing less and getting more. I began to wonder about the connection between my personal and professional practice and how they affected one another. I began to wonder how me becoming more comfortable with myself and less fearful was impacting my teaching practice; I began to wonder if and how our personal morals, beliefs and values affected our practice. I began to wonder if who we are and what we project of ourselves on to others ultimately reflects the quality of our teaching. I began to wonder if I was on to something or if I was going crazy because had I never encountered these types of questions or connections when I was earning my Bachelors of Education. When I was being taught how to teach, it was about the content not people; it was about what we were doing, not who we were; it was about fulfilling course requirements, outcomes, marks, report cards, not understanding our morals, values and beliefs.

From my experience this past year, I can earnestly say that there is a connection, a very valid and purposeful connection between who we are, who we project on to others (ie. students) and what our morals, values and beliefs are. Happily, I am not crazy because others agree and validate my questions. Others validate my conclusion in that we teachers do matter as individuals and it is important be our authentic selves if we are to be effective in the classroom.
Tools and strategies do not work on their own. The person behind the tools and strategies is what will cause the greatest impact on our students and our life.
Introduction

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of wisdom.”

-Aristotle

Throughout my adult life, I have been uncertain and unsatisfied — with my own personal performance in life and relationships and later with my effectiveness as a teacher. I yearned to be better, do better. I wanted personal happiness and stability. With my students, I wanted to have certainty that I was giving them instruction that engaged and inspired them. What would it take to achieve such a thing? Fortunately for me, the means to delve into this notion came along at a pivotal time and I was able not only to identify strategies, but also to dig deep and take action for change.

The purpose of this study is to understand and identify the specifics needed in order to do and be better — professionally and personally — with lasting and meaningful effect. Early in my career and while in the midst of personal changes in my life that left me numb and scared, I looked for quick fixes to make me and my life better. For example, the perfect lesson plan, the perfect project, the right clothes, the right haircut, the right car. However, I am no longer interested in investing time searching for quick fixes, easy answers, and band aids that provide relief for a time. I am only interested in investing time and energy in finding deep, long-lasting, lifelong happiness that leads to not only being an effective teacher, but an effective human being who is fully, unabashedly me. It is through my need for depth and realness that my project focuses mainly on one word: authenticity. It’s a powerful word that I have come to understand inundates each piece, each pore, each action, each connection we have in our lives. Authenticity
is powerful, and frankly, is the essential piece that most of us lack. Because of my lack of authenticity, I struggled professionally and personally for many years.

Before I get into the meat of my project with authors, quotes and books that catapulted me into this magical, beautiful place and to justify my project, I need to provide context. I need to share with you where, how and why my journey began, which will provide the relevant connections to my professional practice.

Also, I must note two things. Firstly, I must warn you that my project straddles a fine line between education, work and, to my surprise, therapy. You see, at first I didn’t think writing an autoethnographic narrative was an appropriate format to use in a Master’s project. However, I have come to understand that in order to be authentic we must look at ourselves, look into ourselves, understand our own thinking and our own patterns to get to the heart of who we are to uncover our soul, our inner voice. This process ultimately leads us to being better, doing better in all areas of our lives, which for me includes teaching. This process is deep, dark, painful and not for the faint of heart. However, going deep and coming through with shifts in perspective and feeling new, reborn and cleansed is worth every tear I have shed and the pain I have felt in my heart. Without this process, I would have remained in that toxic, unhealthy and unhappy illusion-filled state and would not have been able to connect, influence and be the effective teacher/person I have always wanted to be. This project has enabled me to take that much-needed step to see the forest for the trees.

Secondly, I must admit at first I had a hard time seeing the clear, natural connection between my personal life and my practice. It’s funny for me to think now, having gone through the journey (and still going through the journey because it never ends), that I might question the validity of the connection between personal and professional practice, as well as, authenticity.
Because of my personal journey, the steps and stages I undertook, I get it now! I enthusiastically get it now! It all makes complete sense to me, which is what I intend to show you in my project. My intention is to open your eyes, if they are not open already, to the importance in finding one’s authentic self and living, being and teaching as one’s authentic self to do and be better in the classroom for our students. In my opinion, no lesson plan, no project plan, no unit can make our practice better. Only we can by investing in ourselves.

To help contain my project and prevent it from running all over the place, I will focus my scope mainly on the past 13 years. Why 13 years, you ask? Because that is when I earned my Bachelors in Education from UBC with a major in Technology Teacher Education (TTED). I officially began teaching immediately thereafter. From the time I started teaching I always wanted to do and be better in my classroom for my students, but I never had the time, focus, direction, tools or mindset to really begin figuring out how — until now.
Background

Where & When my Shift in Perspective Began

DATE: August 2011

The very first week of my journey towards earning my Masters of Education in Educational Leadership (MEDL) through the Certificate in Innovative Educational Leadership (CIEL) program, it all fell into place. It was magical. I felt this deep heaviness in my chest, my mind was mesmerized with the topics and conversations we were in the midst of and, most importantly, I felt I belonged. I was in a place of passion and intensity and I knew it was the right place for me. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to go back home, home to my house and life because it finally made sense: I identified that I had been living a very unhappy life.

While sitting in the room with my new cohort of colleagues, I reached a state where I was looking at parallel universes. I was seeing the life I was living and the life I was meant to live.

Thin Line: The life I was meant to live – happy, real, me.
Thick Line: The life I was living – unhappy, sad, trying, thinking too much.

In August 2011, these two parallel lives, the authentic and illusion began coming together and intersecting at critical points, causing me to have Aha Moments and realizations that these two worlds existed. I was living a divided life. My eyes were opening and my soul started calling. My inner voice was growing louder and louder.

I was awakened to the notion that I had two lives I could choose to live — a life that is real and whole or a life for others that was not me. I could see and feel these two worlds colliding,
intersecting because I was questioning, feeling uncomfortable, extremely happy and yet distraught.

I had reached what Sharma terms a “Choicepoint” (2004, p. 104) — a fork in the road where a person has the opportunity to choose which direction to take. It was my turn now to evaluate where I was in my life, both at home and in that particular moment, in that room with my cohort, where I felt so deeply passionate and real and happy.

I can’t recall a time I had such an intense revelation, or being able to vividly articulate and identify such a precise moment until that first day. My fellow colleagues, the instructors, the format, the delivery of the program, the mindset I was in and the time and place I was in my life — ready — fell into place like puzzle pieces. When I stopped looking, I was found and all the pieces came together — without effort, pause or question — it just was. My Dad would always say to me “Wendy, no matter what, make sure you are happy.” He reiterated this several times during my childhood and his words, his voice, the nugget of wisdom he shared, found an enduring place in my memory.

I can say that during all the hours, days and months prior to starting the CIEL Program on August 8, 2011, I wasn’t happy. After that day, I knew I was going to be happy and I was going to take steps towards being happy, to make up for the previous four tumultuous years. My life finally began that day. So much of what was to unravel was painful and difficult, but it was also oh so real and liberating. I have to warn you, the process is not for the faint of heart and requires courage but also for one to be ready. Faking is not permitted and will only halt real growth.
SECTION 1: PERSONAL LIFE

Part I:

Family Background

i. My Childhood.

DATE: 1986-2011

As a child, I was never home alone because my parents arranged that my Mom would work during the day while I was at school. When I was finished school, my Mom would come home from work and my Dad would switch by heading to his job as a welder/machinist/fabricator at CAE Machinery. It was on weekends we would always have dinner together, go out together, go for drives (my Dad loved to drive), talk about things together as a family. We were a family built on our relationships and being together. In 1986 they bought their first home which was 900 square feet. Living with my parents in a 900 square foot home from the time I was in Grade One until I earned my Bachelors of Education, was tight to say the least.

The first home my parents bought in 1986 in East Vancouver.
In my opinion, I lived a very lucky adolescence that was sheltered from the realities, one of which being death. I was lucky in the fact I had two very loving parents who wanted better for me. They both wanted me to have a better life than they had and they wanted me to have more than they had when they were growing up. I think this is a common desire European parents have for their children. My parents were both home, they both worked hard, they both parented me and I was never left without. I was never spoiled but was given what was needed and taught, without being told how to be.

**ii. My Parents.**

**DATE: 1977**

Picture this, two newlywed immigrants arrive in Vancouver, BC, Canada in 1977 with two suitcases, unable to speak or understand a word of English. I still remember the story they often shared of when they arrived in Vancouver. The first place they ate was at McDonald’s on Lougheed and Boundary Road, on the border of Burnaby and Vancouver. When they were asked for their order, they pointed to the menu where the pictures hung, where they are still hung to this day.

My parents, Branko and Laura Blaskovic. These are their passport pictures taken in 1977 when they immigrated to Canada.
My parents had little in their hands but wanted a better life for themselves and the family we were to become with my birth in 1979. Through work and taking risks, they taught themselves how to read; write and speak English; they worked every day of their lives always doing their best; they were money savvy even without much. From my perspective they had a practical way of being that made sense. They role modeled what hard work, common sense, modesty and family could do without having to say it. Their actions, values and beliefs spoke louder than words and I absorbed every part of it by watching, listening and being with them.

As I grew up, we discussed issues as a family; they included me in major decisions and gave me a chance to understand the process of thinking and talking things through as a family. For example, when I was ten years old, my Dad was injured at work. There were many forms over the course of many years that had to be submitted to WCB (Workers Compensation Board) and I was the one who filled in his paperwork. From the time I was ten until approximately sixteen; I was the one who communicated for my Dad to WCB. This was an important task for such a young person.

Another example is when we decided to move in 2000. We discussed moving as a family; they involved me in the decision making and even the banking options. I remember to this day sitting at the kitchen table with my Dad calculating and comparing various mortgage rates, monthly payment plans, costs and deadlines. I was the one punching numbers into the calculator, writing our options neatly in my organized manner while he gave me information and a variety of possible options. We then evaluated together what was the best option and told my Mom when she returned from work. My Dad and I also picked the lot we were to buy without my Mom because she was at work. We scoped the location we all agreed we would like to live,
spoke to the realtor and then placed a deposit before heading home. I was involved in everything.
Part II:

Major Life Changes

i. The Beginning

DATE: 2007-2012

In the midst of my professional life providing me with various opportunities for experience and growth which was positive and challenging, my personal life was also on a rollercoaster providing me with challenges beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

In April 2007, at the age of twenty-seven, I bought my first home which was on my list of things to do. I accomplished this with the support of my Mom and Dad.

My home. (2007-Present)

The day I moved in, my Dad came along for a few months in order to help me renovate the basement so I could use it as a mortgage helper. Living with my Dad was an experience in itself to say the least. We were not very close in the way we could easily laugh, joke around and
understand each other well. Rather, we were very much alike (stubborn, sensitive, scared) but too headstrong to ever admit it to one another or anyone else. We could be saying the same thing, but argue the other was wrong and we were right. However, we did have a strong bond not even my Mom could understand.

When we talked about building, fixing, renovating, anything hands on, we were on the same page. We were good friends who could see eye to eye without struggling. We both understood one another well during those times and we, most importantly, got along very well. Therefore, having him live with me for two months was like the title of our favorite Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, but most importantly, priceless. Once early July came, my Dad left to return home to my Mom in Port Moody, BC. He left not because finished helping me with the basement, but because he was ill.

**ii. The Start of the Illness.**

**DATE: August 2006**

In 2006 my Dad was having severe stomach pains, pains he made note of to me at my grandparents’ 50th wedding anniversary dinner in Croatia. He kept saying he couldn’t eat anymore; the food was just sitting and going nowhere. This was a concern to me because my Dad loved to eat. My Dad had a love for food no one could deny and he always managed to find room for more, especially good food. But this time, it was different. When he was telling me how he felt, I knew there was more behind it. The tone in his voice, the look in his eye told me that this was not normal. He looked concerned and perplexed at what was going on. As the
weeks and months progressed, he visited our family doctor in the hopes of getting better. At the
time, he was diagnosed with gall bladder stones and needed to have them removed.

![Image description](image_url)

This picture was taken at my grandparents’ 50th Anniversary dinner in Croatia. This was when my Dad
shared with me he didn’t feel well. Deep down, something told me this wasn’t good.

iii. The Shock.

**DATE: July 2007**

A few weeks after my Dad left my home in Kamloops, BC, he finally had the operation
he was desperately waiting for. The routine operation of removing gall bladder stones, which
was to lead to a healthy life, quickly shifted to the unthinkable. During the operation, doctors
found my Dad had gall bladder cancer and it had spread to his liver. By the time they found it,
he was already at stage four in the deadly disease. Here we were - my Mom, my Dad and me -
hearing that my father, one third of my family, was diagnosed to die. Hearing the word cancer
felt like a bomb, the unthinkable curve ball you never imagine, blowing my life away. I was in shock. I was stunned. I was mortified. I was devastated. To this day, I don’t know how I managed to drive myself home from the hospital after hearing the news because all I could do was cry uncontrollably.

When I saw my Dad wearing ‘elf’ socks, I had to take this picture. Even while in the hospital, we always tried to laugh. (August 2007)

My family consisted of me and my parents. That’s it. I am an only child with only my parents in Canada and everyone else in Croatia. We have travelled to Croatia every few years for a few weeks, but my family, my only real family, was what I had in front of me. We were tight, close and relied on one another from the day I was born. As I heard the dirty word cancer falling from the lips of the doctor, our world, my world, shattered to a million pieces.
iv. Changing Roles in my Family

DATE: 2007- Present

As the weeks and months progressed, my view of life changed dramatically as I watched my Dad change physically. I was muddled with deep, painful emotions I didn’t know how to deal with and, therefore, did not deal with. The more sadness and hurt and pain I felt, the less I knew how to handle them. I kept pushing them aside and burying them deep because I had to keep going. I couldn’t keep going, moving forward with my job, my relationship, my home, if I was crying and feeling and just being. Once again, I retreated to what I did best - control. I controlled everything around me because I couldn’t control what was happening to my Dad, to my Mom, to my family. The things like work, my home, my yard, my relationship were things I could control and use as a distraction.

I was now an adult looking at my father who was transforming from a person I had always seen as a strong and capable, a Dad who protected and supported me, to a man now in need of so much help. He was changing ever so quickly from the person I once knew, to a frail shell that needed help with everything – eating, getting up, moving and getting dressed. My role in life was evolving rapidly and my view of life, my life, what my life was turning into without my permission or consent or consult, was tearing me apart. I went from being a daughter to a caregiver and a combination of roles for my Mom I never imagined. I was her support, rock, parent, facilitator, coach. All of a sudden life got hard and complicated.

My Dad’s mind was sharp, but his body was becoming increasingly frail in the same way I was becoming emotionally frail. All of a sudden I saw my role in this family, in this world, in this life, changing. I was no longer the little girl with two parents I always thought I would have
until I was in my 60’s, 70’s and maybe 80’s. I was now an adult watching my Dad die, powerlessly.

Through his last year, the same year we found out he had cancer to when he passed away (July 2007-July 16, 2008), both my parents tried protecting me by not sharing details or filling me in on their day to day challenges. Although I was an adult, twenty eight at the time, they still treated me like a child, which frankly, angers me to this day. Because of their best efforts to protect me, which I understand to a point, I felt and still feel betrayed because I wish I had known more. If I had known more, I could have done more, I could have been there more, could have been more for him when he was still here. Instead, their protection distanced me during a time I could have, should have been more.

“The soul always knows what to do to heal itself. The challenge is to silence the mind.”

- Caroline Myss

v. Grateful.

DATE: JULY 2008

Five days before my Dad passed away, my parents came to see me at my home in Kamloops. I hadn’t seen my Dad for quite a few weeks, but spoke to him on the phone regularly. On the phone, he sounded very much himself and my parents both tried very hard not to worry me by keeping things as normal as possible. However, during the last couple of phone calls I could tell by the sound of my Dad’s voice that things were not okay. I could tell he was slurring his words more and wasn’t as clear as he used to be. It bothered me deeply, but I had no one to talk to about this so I kept my fears hidden to myself.
The day I saw my Dad in my home, I was stunned. I was in shock. He had transformed from the man I had seen a few months earlier to a shell that was thinner than me. He had gone from approximately two hundred pounds to a slight one hundred and thirty. He had also developed jaundice from the effects of the cancer on his liver. He was very yellow, very skinny and very weak. The sight of him broke my heart into a million pieces.

During my parent’s stay, I had a glimpse of the life they had been living back in Port Moody. I saw my Dad unable to walk alone because he was so weak; I saw the lack of appetite he had and the need he had to sleep more and more. Seeing him in that state was devastating to me for several reasons. One, he was my Dad. He was my Dad who I always looked up to as being strong, capable and independent. Now, in such a short period of time, he had become weak and dependent on my Mom’s help. Second, I had no idea. I had no idea he had deteriorated so much since I last saw him that it broke my heart. Third, I couldn’t help him now and I wasn’t there to help him when I could have. He was helpless, I was helpless and my Mom was helpless to what was happening to our family.

It was July 15, 2008, a few days after they had arrived, when we decided to head back to Vancouver. We decided I would drive them and stay for a while to help because my Dad’s health had worsened while they had been visiting me. Also, my parents lived in a large home with stairs to the bedroom so my help was definitely, finally, needed. One of the last memorable moments we had as a family was my Mom and I carrying my Dad up a flight of stairs while he sat in his wheelchair. We had such a difficult time carrying him up that we almost, all three, fell down the entire flight. There’s a dent in the wall at the base of the staircase I still look at when I visit my Mom. That day, and to this day, we still laugh at ourselves for being as crazy as we were.
At two o’clock in the morning on July 16th, my Mom came to wake me asking me to call the ambulance because my Dad said it was time. I was so stunned I ran to their room to double check if I had heard her correctly because he had said for the longest time that he never wanted to go back to the hospital. He knew if he was to go back, he wouldn’t come out alive. But that morning, that day, he said it was time.

I immediately called 911. It was a busy night so it took the fire department quite a while to arrive. When they did, it took five firemen to bring my Dad down the stairs. We even laughed then saying it took only my Mom and me to bring him up but it took five men to bring him down. We tried to laugh and enjoy every moment we could as a family despite what was happening.
We spent all morning, all afternoon and all evening with my Dad by his side. As the doctors gave him blood transfusions to help him feel better, they took my Mom and me aside to explain what the next steps would be. We, we all three knew, what the outcome was going to be that day.

By the evening, the doctors stopped giving my Dad transfusions and he began to deteriorate and fade away quickly. He knew exactly who we were but his breathing, his energy, his body were shutting down. It was when they gave us a private room and when we shut off the lights my Dad passed away in his sleep. My Mom and I were by his side, holding his hand the whole time. I am so grateful and lucky to have had the chance to tell him everything I ever wanted him to know and hear, and be by his side after not being there through the weeks and months before. I made sure he knew I never hated him, I loved him dearly and all I wanted to do was make him proud. He said I did.

July 16, 2008 at 10:20pm, I lost my Dad and my Mom lost her husband of thirty one years. Now, it was just the two of us.
Part III:

The Relationship

i. Getting Over a Past Hurt.

DATE: January 2007

In January 2007 I was finally coming to terms with a past relationship which ended in July 2005. Getting over the end of that relationship had me at the lowest of lows I had ever been because it was my very first real relationship. To add insult to injury, I was dumped over the phone.

I remember at the end of the school day when I started my full-time position in the new school year in a new secondary school, once the students left and the shop was silent, I felt deathly alone. Silence had never hurt so much. I would cry instantaneously when I recognized its deafening void. Through reflection, I recognize my day at work was a distraction from the feelings I had from the ending of that relationship. Once the distractions were gone – staff, students, me running around the school being busy - I was left feeling excruciating pain. I would go home after work, sit in a bath tub and cry uncontrollably for hours and hours. I couldn’t articulate thoughts or words: the feeling of being hurt would pour out of my eyes. I was beyond sensitive and beyond the lowest of lows.

ii. The One that Changed Me

DATE: August 2007-February 2012

It was at the beginning of January 2007 when I felt I was coming out of my misery and seeing the light finally. I felt better, I felt lighter, and I felt brighter. I had my hair cut into the
style of the moment (the inverted bob); I was blonder than ever; found and bought my first home in a new city; and I was ready to start dating again.

In August, a month after my Dad was diagnosed with cancer; I met someone who eventually moved in with me eight months later (April 2008). I was very happy at the start, the first three months of the relationship, but, I quickly found myself unhappy and confused. The relationship was up and down constantly with several big blunders I didn’t deal with fully. Each time infidelity or disrespect occurred, I held in the feelings I felt and didn’t truly act/react because I was scared. I was scared of being wrong, I was scared of being irrational, I was scared of being the crazy girlfriend, I was scared of being labeled the crazy woman, and I was scared of doing the wrong thing. Yes, I had my moments where the anger was too much to contain. I yelled, screamed and shared how I felt. However, my yelling and screaming or stifled feelings never had me follow through by sticking up for myself and giving myself what I deserved and needed. Somehow, out of survival or just plain fear, I accepted the severe blunders of infidelity and disrespect towards me by stepping over them. I was scared to accept what was really going on, how unhappy I was by taking steps to a better life.

I was unhappy and scared to listen to my gut; scared to be alone during a time my father was ill and scared to make the wrong decision. I kept thinking to myself this was just a phase, just me overthinking things, just me being irrational during a time of unthinkable change with my Dad’s illness. I was on a rollercoaster for four and half years even after knowing in the first three months of the relationship, I was not happy.
iii. Her vs. Authentic-Self

DATE: January-February 2012

Quickly after starting the CIEL program in August 2011, I had a glimpse of what it felt like to be happy, passionate, *real* and *full*. I had a taste of the person I longed to be, found the person I was supposed to be and it felt beyond wonderful. When I would think of the life I was leading back home in Kamloops, I dreaded every thought. My stomach would sink and I would be in agony at the thought of having to return home to a house occupied by someone I wasn’t happy with. Everyone in my cohort was eager to return home to their family and friends and yet, I was sad. I was sad to leave the people I had grown so fond of and a life I so wanted to remain in. When I returned home, I was no longer the same person. I hung on to the old me, *her*, because I didn’t know what else to do. But I knew I was different. I knew I had changed.

Gradually as the months progressed, I grew increasingly, severely unhappy. I would avoid going home after work by detouring to the grocery store or shopping mall to waste time. I threw myself into a routine of going to hot yoga after work because it was a time for me to be alone for two whole hours before heading home. I stopped cooking, I stopped making lunches, and I stopped catering to him like I had done all the years with him. I would go to bed fully clothed head to toe – socks, sweatpants, t-shirt, lulu lemon jacket zipped up – because I couldn’t stand being touched and didn’t want to be touched. I would make excuses for my bedtime dress saying I was too lazy to change or I was cold or I was too comfy. I found myself shrinking and hiding from him. I hoped he would get the message to move along on his own rather than have me do the hard part.
iv. Now or Never: The Fork in the Road.

DATE: February 14, 2012

“It’s not selfish to love yourself, take care of yourself, & to make your happiness priority. It’s necessary”.
-Mandy Halo

It was in early February 2012 I found myself crying uncontrollably as we drove home from eating at a pub that had the best wings in town. All of a sudden I couldn’t contain my dread so I just started crying while saying repeatedly, over and over, I wish I wasn’t me. I didn’t know where this voice was coming from, but it was coming from a place I had no control over. The words kept coming out of my mouth and spiraling in my head while I cried. Eventually, because I was still her, still scared of the truth and trying to control, I stopped crying, sucked it up and carried on for a few more days. It wasn’t until Valentine’s Day I broke down after reading his card. As I read it, I didn’t have words or energy or ability to fake reciprocation as I had done for so many months before. The only thing I had left was to tell the truth because my head was spinning from the stress. My stomach was in such severe knots where I felt if I didn’t speak, I was going to rupture an organ.

It was on February 14, 2012 I ended my relationship with him and began a new one with and for myself. I was at a “Choicepoint” (Sharma, 2004) - a fork in the road - that day and I decided to choose me. I didn’t choose him or think about what others would think about my decision. For once in my life I did something for myself. It was extremely difficult for me to leave him because in order to move forward, I had to hurt another person to set myself free. Knowing I would have to hurt someone else had stopped me from leaving him before. However, when I look at it now, I was sacrificing my happiness and hurting myself all those years by not
being true to myself. In the end, I believe, because I sacrificed who I was by being the person I thought I *should* be throughout the relationship, I cracked into a million pieces.
SECTION II: PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Part I:

Teaching Career

i. How my Teaching Career Began.

DATE: 1997-1998

I officially began my teaching career at the age of 21. I was young, fresh, eager, but also a deer caught in the headlights. Looking back, I had no idea what I was doing. I jumped into the profession with both feet having very little “teaching” experience. When I began, my only prior knowledge came from reflecting on my experience as a high school student. I looked back at the teachers I enjoyed working with and asked myself why they made an impact on me, as well as, why I wanted to be in their classes. To this day, I can still recall names of the teachers I hold close to my heart because of who they were and how they treated me — Mr. Roberts, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Rogers, Mr. Richmond, Mr. Gobin, and most importantly, Mr. Leupold.

There’s a reason I remember the names of the teachers; they all made me feel good. Each one of them left a positive stamp in my memory bank because of how they treated me, how they spoke to me, how they made me feel in their classroom. They each treated and spoke to me as a human being — not as a number or a body filling a seat. They interacted with us in the class, they laughed, they joked around, they cared about who we each were and took time to listen and ask meaningful questions, such as, how are you doing? When they asked me questions or spoke to me, I felt important; I didn’t feel beneath them or little. I felt respected, I felt valued and I felt comfortable talking to them because they were also real people. They were genuine and they didn’t try to be anything but who they were. Because of the combination of who they were and
how they interacted with me and the class, I was left with a blueprint of how to begin my teaching career.

Mr. Leupold taught my favourite subject of all time: drafting. The hands-on, precise craft of artistic design appealed to my perfectionist nature. I found I could draw plans I had in my head, put them on paper and communicate them to others who understand its language. I had an ability to visualize, interpret and see a house floor plan, and then understand if it had enough windows, if the kitchen was large enough, if the lighting was in the right place, all with the information just being on paper. This ability excited me and I knew I wanted to utilize this in my career or life. Unlike my Mom, who had to have a house built to understand if the drawings were correct, I was more like my Dad, in that we naturally understood and just had this skill set. It was as if we had a shared innate ability that was embedded in our DNA.

After high school, I enrolled in Capilano College because, frankly, I was clueless as to what I should do or what I wanted to do. I followed the herd of my friends and we ended up taking a variety of courses, all the while looking for direction in what we should be when we grew up. I knew I didn’t want to take a variety of courses that inhaled my parents’ money, my time and my energy. I was a practical person, thanks to my parents, and I knew I wanted to invest my time in a program or path that would lead to a job. Not just any job, but a job that would last, be secure and, of course, pay well.

By chance, on a whim, I decided to visit my favourite teacher, Mr. Leupold, after I had finished an early class at Capilano College. We chatted about how I was doing and what I thought about doing for a career. It was then he shared his opinion, after teaching me for four years that he thought I would make a great shop teacher. He said I was always helpful in class, he could see I enjoyed being with people and I had a knack for designing, creating and working
with my hands. Because of our conversation and his recommendation in that I should look into
BCIT’s Teacher Technology Education (TTED) program, the rest is history.

ii. Teaching Experience.

DATE: 2001-Present

The span of my more than ten year professional career provided me with a variety of
opportunities for growth, challenge and experience I never imagined might occur, even with all
the worrying and planning I habitually did in my life.

Having grown up in the lower mainland (Vancouver, BC), my first full-time position
took me up north to Dease Lake, BC. School District No. 87 (Stikine) was a place I had never
considered or dreamed of being. Heck, I had never even heard of the place, except to watch
Global News weather reports noting minus sixty degree weather in that region.

Dease Lake was the complete opposite of Vancouver; it was isolated, had a population of
approximately 500 people, and experiences snow from October to May. Even with the cold
weather and extreme differences between the neighbourhood I grew up in and the place I ended
up working in, I had the best four years of my career (and life) in Dease Lake! It was an
unexpected, unplanned change in lifestyle. The community welcomed me in a way I had never
experienced before. They accepted me, a stranger, in their community and made me feel I was
part of a family. The students were wonderful and taught me as much as I taught them. The
staff were not only staff, but also my friends. The relationships I was able to build in Dease
Lake made my experience that much more powerful and fulfilling. However, I still had a
nagging feeling I wasn’t facilitating the learning process for my students. I knew I was missing
something but couldn’t put my finger on it.
After Dease Lake, I was a substitute teacher for a few months, which was difficult because I felt alone and lonely. I had no collegial family, no relationships to build with students or class to call my own. I hunted for a continuing position for months until a one semester position for an industrial arts teacher in a small town in BC was advertised in the local paper. I hesitated to apply because the posting was not long term and the posting took me away from my family again. However, following the advice I have given many students — you don’t know unless you try — I threw my application in the ring. The next thing I knew, I received a phone call, was interviewed and offered the position on the spot. Voila, the semester I accepted turned into an eight year full-time position filled with opportunity. I taught woodworking, Career and Personal Planning (CAPP), Math 9, Art 8, Word Processing, managed the Work Experience program, and then took a three-year District Teacher position as the Trades and Transitions (T&T) Coordinator, which opened my eyes to the administrative side of the educational system. My experiences with teaching a variety of courses and maintaining a variety of roles provided me with perspectives I could never have imagined.

### iii. Wanting Better.

**DATE: 2001-2012**

From the beginning of my teaching career, I wanted to do and be better. It was just something I had in the back of my mind because I *knew* I was missing something or not getting the big picture. The interactions and relationships I was able to build with my students were very good due to the way I followed the examples set by my high school teachers. However, I always wanted more. I wanted to not only have positive relationships with my students, but to also teach them skills that had them learn. I wanted my students to want to be in my class and leave
having learned skill sets that would support their future. I had no way to judge whether I was achieving this goal. Without knowing what to do or where to start, I did all I knew — I continued with my style of teaching while looking and hunting for quick fixes, such as inspiring lesson plans and projects, to make me a better teacher.

I would spend hours on the internet, flipping through books and magazines at Chapters, filling binders full of lesson plans received from professional development days, but I never felt satisfied. I would try a few of the things I found prescriptively, but would never feel any of it was right. I can’t say I ever found the perfect project plan which excited my students to produce great work or the perfect lesson plan which enabled me to be a better teacher. It was all just stuff in the end.

For the most part, through my teaching career, I resorted to doing what I knew best — building relationships and searching blindly for something to help me improve my practice where I felt I was facilitating efficient and effective learning for my students. However, my continuous search left me empty handed. It wasn’t until events in my personal life (i.e. the death of my Dad, my unhappy relationship, the start of my graduate program) forced me to open my eyes to the path, remarkably enough, to improving my practice: being authentically me.
Part II:

Defining Moment in my Teaching Career

i. Classroom to Office: Warning Sign

DATE: September 2009

During my shift from the classroom to the district position of Trades and Transitions (T&T) Coordinator, I not only gained perspective on operations at the school district level, but I, most importantly and unexpectedly, learned about myself as I began to unravel.

When I earned the T&T position, I was thrilled. I thought I was moving up, I thought I was doing what I was ultimately meant to do and I thought I was becoming the person I thought I was supposed to be. In the back of my mind, I also wanted to make my Mom and Dad proud of me. Having “moved up”, I was trying to make them happy and proud of me, which fueled my actions as well.

I took this picture of myself on my fist day, in my new office, as the District Trades and Transitions Coordinator.
I was working in an administrative role with my own office, my own budget, my own phone extension number and business cards. I travelled the school district visiting our secondary schools, writing reports, working with a variety of staff and managing my T&T portfolio. It was exciting! I had so much responsibility at my fingertips I never imagined having and, therefore, thought was wonderful. However, with all the added responsibilities and freedom to create my own schedule and manage my own portfolio, on the flipside, I was getting increasingly dissatisfied and very unhappy. I thought I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I was trying very hard to stay in control of my unhappiness rather than silence my mind and listen — listen to my inner voice, listen to my soul, listen to life.

Over time, I grew increasingly frustrated, alone and lonely working in my silo of an office and my car. I was driving alone, easily accumulating 2,000 kilometres per week as I visited students, teachers and classrooms that weren’t my own. I had no deep connection to people and had no team — no group of people to collaborate with, grow the portfolio, or share support. My days consisted of being fixated to a computer screen, that inert, lifeless object that was a barrier to people, the real relationships and real conversations I craved so badly. My days consisted of being on the road, meeting with other teachers and schools when they could fit me in. The rush, the scheduling constraints, the lack of time we all had in our overwhelming jobs was not “filling my bucket” (Rath, 2004).

The first time I heard the question “How full is your bucket?” was from an elementary school teacher in my cohort during the first week we began our CIEL program. When she explained it was an initiative to help elementary school students be more supportive, positive and to provide opportunities to be empathetic, I thought it was brilliant! Since then, I’ve used the
term “fill my bucket” often because it so clearly illustrates how I feel — my bucket is full, empty, or draining with a hole in it.

As I was immersed in my “dream job” that was meant to make me happy and my parents proud, I was feeling more and more empty than I ever had before. My work ended up being about doing things, pushing paper and, literally, playing a role, a character. I found myself acting in ways that weren’t me because, frankly, I didn’t know who I was. I was trying very hard to fit in with my new board office lifestyle, fit in with my fellow board office colleagues, trying to be smart and intelligent, trying to fit into a job I thought I was supposed to do and a role I was supposed to play. I was trying to be happy, trying to say the right things, trying to be the right things, while increasingly deteriorating inside. My soul was dying as I continued to plough through a life I didn’t understand and wasn’t, ultimately, me.

ii. Symptoms

DATE: May 2011

At the end of April 2011, I threw a birthday party for my boyfriend at the time, investing a huge amount of time and energy to fill it with good friends, snacks, lots of baking, lots of decorations.
I wanted to give him happiness because, in hindsight and through reflection, this is what I wanted in return from him. I spent several days buying decorations and looking for the perfect gift. I prepared appetizers and baked his birthday cake. Everyone who came commented on my efforts and thought I did a fantastic job. Without knowing it, they were “filling my bucket” with praise, appreciation and attention I so desperately craved because I was empty. My boyfriend wasn’t filling my love tank, my job wasn’t filling my bucket and I didn’t know how to fill or maintain my own bucket.

At one point in the evening, a friend turned to me and said “Wow, you must really enjoy doing this. This looks great Wendy!” I quickly responded with an enthusiastic smile and agreed like I always did. Baking, creating, party planning are all things I thoroughly enjoy doing. However, as I was answering her question, an internal voice I hadn’t heard before or perhaps hadn’t heard from in a very long time was simultaneously asking a series of questions. *Do you enjoy doing this? Do you really enjoy doing this? What’s the real reason you’re doing all these things for him and all these people?* As the questions mingled in the back of my mind, I began to wonder what my answers were. However, I quickly shoved them aside because I had work to do at the party and was scared of the truth. I quickly regrouped and focused on what I could control, which was to entertain and make everyone feel at home, welcomed and full.

Six days after the party, out of nowhere, on a Friday morning, I had a severe panic attack at work. I remember sitting in my small office, alone, typing a flyer for an upcoming event I was organizing for students in the district. As I sat there, I felt disturbed, uneasy, queasy and wrong. I felt dizzy as I stood up to shake off the foreign feeling, trying to push it aside and convince myself it was nothing. But then my heart started pounding rapidly, my breath grew quick and shallow, thoughts of death and dying spiralled out of control in my head. I sincerely thought I
was dying. I thought I was having a heart attack. My senses were on overload and I had no control or understanding as to what was going on with me except I knew I was scared — scared of dying, scared of dying before my Mom, scared of leaving my Mom alone to have to have to go through this all over again after recently losing my Dad. In the midst of fear, I was simultaneously trying to understand where this episode was coming from and why.

Before, during and after the panic attack, I was trying to be “Wendy” — the strong, put together, perfect, organized, healthy, smart, hands-on, over-achiever, perfectionist, baker, cook — the “Wendy” everyone expected because that’s all they ever saw of me. I was the “Wendy” that did it all and could do it all even in the midst of my challenges and life changes. I kept thinking to myself How could I fall apart if I was so together in everyone’s eyes, the eyes I wanted to please and be approved by? Falling apart would be wrong. Falling apart would be weak. Falling apart would show a crack or chink in the armour I crafted so well that I didn’t even realize I had created it. The public perception of who “Wendy” was, the persona I was trying so hard to honour because it “worked” for me for so long, was turning out to be the crux of the problem. I wasn’t really “Wendy”. I was someone else. I was her. She, this “Wendy”, was an imposter. She was in my body, using my voice and pretending. Since coming to the realisation, coming to terms with this imposter, I cannot ever go back again; I cannot ever succumb to being her or living her life again. She was a complete lie. The panic attacks were symptoms of my lie.

I felt crazy during the panic attack and for several months thereafter as vibrations, like mini-earthquakes, taunted me, reminding me that they were still there, ready to hatch at any time if I wasn’t careful. In the hopes of curing myself and coping, I took herbal supplements from the health food store (Gaba, Vitamin B, Zen Theanine), went to counselling to voice my concerns
and yoga to stay active while being “calm and mindful”. I place quotations around calm and mindful because that was my intent, but I never truly succeeded. I was doing and clinging to quick fixes in the hope that they would be enough to help me understand what was going on and ultimately “fix” me. There was a part of me that hoped I wouldn’t have to go to the depths of my soul and actually look at what was really going on. When speaking to one counsellor I could only come up with typical excuses I’ve heard on television shows or read in books. For example, I would say I was still grieving my Dad’s death, or I was worried and upset I would die before my Mom and concerned about what she would do. I would also blame my job or my relationship.

Looking back, I was scared and trying to convince myself the reasons were normal and understandable. Yet, I, an inner voice, also wanted the truth. I wanted to be real, but I couldn’t be honest with myself by playing hard with the issues that my subconscious, my soul was yelling at me to uncover because I was scared at what I would find. I was afraid of the level of pain I would have to swim through because I had buried so many layers of feelings over the years; it was an eternal abyss of pain I couldn’t identify clearly. Yet, if I wasn’t going to willingly come to terms with what was going on in my life, my subconscious, my soul was going to force me to. If I wasn’t going to play by my soul’s rules, I was destined for counselling or something more extreme.
SECTION III: EVOLUTION TO AUTHENTICITY

Part 1: Overlap

i. Personal & Professional: Divided No More

DATE: 2007-2012

Between 2007 and 2012, I was on a roller-coaster with severe highs and severe lows. During this time, I can clearly identify ways my personal and professional life intertwined together, crossing paths. My professional life provided me with various opportunities that taught me lessons about where I fit into the professional world. My personal life challenged and shocked me in ways I never imagined too. The tension between these two facets – personal and professional - and my unwillingness to acknowledge the discourse caused the onset of my panic attacks. If I was to do better and be better in the ways I wanted to, I had to be honest with myself.

The experience of shattering into a million pieces was extremely difficult because I didn’t understand; I couldn’t understand what was happening due to the coping mechanisms I had developed in order to stay afloat. I had created unhealthy patterns to sustain the lifestyle I had lead. I found I was always giving to others; doing for others; buying others’ affection and attention by doing for them; caring about what others thought of me; scared of not meeting their standards; being busy for the sake of being busy so I felt and looked important; scared of not being liked, loved or good enough; saying yes more than no; fixing people; hanging on tightly by controlling all or as much I could that was around me; trying to do it all without help to not seem needy, weak and vulnerable. All the while, smiling and saying things were good.
I realize now, over the years, I had created thick, tall walls to protect me from getting hurt by others, yet, ultimately, I was only hurting myself. She, her, was hurting me.

Looking back I see how my actions were destroying me internally. By hanging on tight, “being tough” like my Mom would say and not allowing myself to feel through the highs and lows, I pushed all the feelings I had away where they could haunt me at a later time. The time had come as my subconscious, my soul was screaming at me with the symptoms of dizzy spells, sadness and panic attacks. Palmer (2004) shares how his depression was his “soul’s call to stop, turn around, go back, and look for a path” (p. 37). If he ignored his depression, his soul’s call, it could have led to “a deep desire to end [his] life” (p. 37). If I was to ignore my panic attacks, my soul’s call, then it could have led to stress leave from work or intense psychotherapy where I would be no good to anyone.

“When we don’t listen to the signs and our inner voice then we kill ourselves with each step we take.”

– Palmer, 2004, p. 37

Palmer’s (2004) words helped me realize I wasn’t filling my bucket (Rath, 2004), fueling my soul with things I needed. Rather, I had fallen into a pattern where I would consistently give, give and give myself away expecting other people’s actions and words to fill me; make me feel whole, worthy with their praise and acknowledgment by the “great” work I would do or the things I would accomplish. It seems silly I thought pleasing others and living to their expectations would make me a better person. Rather, if I was to apply boundaries, listen to my needs and wants, then I would not only be a better human being for myself, but for others as well. Investing in myself would have made me better for all.
Through critical reflection, I began to see how personal and professional lives are not separate entities that we can compartmentalize. These two entities are inseparable because between these two “worlds” we are still us; we are still the same person who ultimately brings the same values, morals, beliefs, feelings, and experiences to each, together, all the time.

I have heard repeatedly we are meant to leave our personal lives at the door before entering work and leave our professional lives at work before heading home. Well, I tried this and frankly, for me, it didn’t work. The more I tried to be professional and proper and leave my personal life at the door in fear of looking weak, incapable, unsound, I in turn, became unhinged. The more I tried to compartmentalize these two areas of my life, the worse I became.

In the end, in my mind, we are who we are and we bring more pieces of ourselves into these two realms than we think. Embracing who we are and the gifts and talents we bring should be encouraged and celebrated more often than it is in our professional and personal lives.
Part II:

Moving Forward

i. Exponential Curve

DATE: February 2012:

By doing something for myself on February 14, 2012, my life changed instantaneously and a domino effect was put into action. My life didn’t take a 180 degree turn where I was me, happy and whole the very next day. However, over time it exponentially did and I continue to.

Between February to June 2012, I went through a rocky transition that taught me a great deal about myself. The difference this time was I was more receptive; I had removed a toxic element, distraction - the relationship - from my life which allowed me to breathe easier and see things more clearly. By the time July 2012 came around, the exponential curve started to turn up and I was on my way to a better life which had me more present than ever before.

The drawing above illustrates the exponential curve my happiness, my shifts, my Aha Moments took. The early section (February-July 2012) notes I was chugging along like the little engine that could. By July 2012, my experiences grew exponentially with each shift, each mind shift, and new perspective.
ii. Questions

**DATE: July – December 2012:**

During the second half of 2012, July onward, I began having rapid shifts in perspective with a different mindset I had never considered before. A switch was being turned on repeatedly to the light bulb swinging over my head when I made connections. I was experiencing more and more déjà vous moments that gave me comfort in knowing I was on the right track, the right path. The déjà vous moments felt like my parallel lives – my old life (her), and the new life (me) – were crossing paths more and more often as they began connecting at a common, real, authentic level. I was seeing her (the person that inhabited my body and my voice for all these years) intersecting with me, the real authentic me. I was very uncomfortable, confused, stumped for a long time as me and her converged and collided. I felt lost at times.

Once I realized, for myself, that the life I was leading wasn’t my life, I had questions that lead me to investigate how I affected the world. *How could I ask, or most importantly, expect people I work with, people I encounter daily to be real and authentic with me if I wasn’t?* The multitude of questions spiralled out of control - *How could I teach, role model, practice and preach the things I value to my students if I wasn’t being authentic and real? How could I expect my students to be real, authentic, and vulnerable if I wasn’t? How was I to help them on their journey of authenticity in becoming real, happy individuals if I wasn’t brave or courageous enough to go through the process myself? What if I was more authentic in my classroom, with my students? Would being authentic create a safe classroom where students felt they could be themselves, where students could uncover who they are, what their strengths are because I was more clear, intentional and real in my practice because I was more real with myself? Reflecting*
on my journey and the things I had to come to grips with in uncovering a more real, intentional, put together Wendy, could only help those in my classroom and life, right?

iii. Deeper Questions

DATE: November 2012

The big questions propelled me on to a path I never thought I would go. The snowball of questions kept coming and more realizations as to who I was, where I was going and what mattered to me, what mattered to the authentic Wendy, became the central focus. The personal journey I was on lead me to a path that intersected and traveled on the same lines of my professional life. The personal and professional lives I lead were clearly intertwined together day in and day out. There is no way to distinguish one from the other because at the meat and core of it all, we are who we are in everything we do; our wants, needs, beliefs, values, morals are the foundation we carry with us everywhere we go in every situation. The authentic person we are, if we are lucky to know and live by our authentic selves, is the North Star or “moral compass” (Sharma, 2004, p. 39) that guides us through the rough seas. It is our guide that will keep us stable during situations that challenge us.

Once I was able to distinguish the difference between her – the person that was never me, the false sense of self who occupied my body, used my voice and invaded my thoughts - next to the real, authentic me, I was able to see, I was actually able to clearly visualize the separation of unauthentic and authentic.
The stormy skies started to part where I could see the possibilities and questions that brought me to wonder *What if I was to be more authentic? What if I knew myself more, was me and only me through my interactions? Would being me lead to a more authentic life filled with energy, purpose and realness that could aide in my teaching?* Does it not make sense to think if I wanted to be with people who were true to themselves, passionate, happy, real, then I had to be the same? I believe yes. Being the way I was – living a life for others, going through the hoops of day to day life, saying what was wanted – in retrospect, I was going to attract the same types of attitudes and people. Attracting negativity and illusion was something I didn’t want in my life anymore and couldn’t stand for. I wanted better for me, I wanted better for those around me which included the students I taught and the school I worked in.
A result of me being more *me* than ever before, I had an intense repulsion to negativity. When I would encounter people expressing negativity, I had to walk away because it made me feel ill and/or angry. It was toxic. I didn’t know how to handle such deconstructive energy anymore because it wasn’t a part of my life. It wasn’t a part of my perspective or in line with my thinking anymore. I no longer saw life being half empty. Life was full, full to the brim with opportunities, possibility and greatness. Continuing to dwell on the negative only depleted valuable energy away from the positive that was present.
Part III:

Rapid Shifts in Perspective

i. Making Connections

DATE: 2007-2012

Between 2007 and early 2012, I went through a process I can only describe as a beautiful disaster. I say beautiful disaster with a smile and a sparkle of pride in my eyes because although it was painful, it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. Whenever I have hurt and hurt deeply, I always remember coming out of the pain, the process, the darkness stronger, better, wiser than ever before. I knew there was a reason for all the pain and heartache.

“When something bad happens you have three choices. You can either let it define you, let it destroy you, or you can let it strengthen you.”

-unknown

As I traveled through the highs and extreme lows of 2007-2012, I knew I was going to come out of it smarter and better for it. However, in the midst of the madness, I questioned when the lesson, the time was ever going to come when I was going to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I was hoping and wishing and praying for just a pinhole of hope at the end because one thing happened after the next to only hurt more and more – the passing of my Dad, my Nono, my Nona, my relationship, my job, my Mom’s hurt, my unhappiness. I would try getting up after each punch, yet all the while, to be punched down again and again. I kind of knew then, but understand now, that those punches were lessons that needed to be learned.
I realize now, when I was knocked down, I wasn’t meant to get up. Being knocked down was a time I was meant to feel the pain, to listen to my soul and be mindful, accept and learn. Yet, each time I was knocked down I would get back up doing what I knew best; I would control things around me by using my work, my home, my unhappy relationship as distractions, the excuses in place of what I was really feeling. A great point James (1993) makes is that “external order seems to give permission to internal disorder” (p. 81). The more I immersed myself in work, cleaned my home even though it was already clean, created make-do projects that would occupy my time and mental space, the more I created excuses to avoid having to stop, feel, and deal with my feelings. The external order I controlled created internal disorder (James, 1993, p. 81).

As soon as I read “Feelings are like rainstorms: they have a beginning, middle and end. And as you complete each one of your feelings – whether those feelings are of anger, sadness, resentment or disappointment – you will move through the layers to remember the golden Buddha within you” (Sharma, 2004, p. 156), I felt at peace. This was a visual I understood and enabled me to work through my feelings by allowing them to shape me, mould me and move through me. Storms, like emotions, come and go and when they come, we must feel them through in order to allow them to pass and for the skies to clear for a brighter day. We need to be open to “releasing the negative energy so the positive can surface” (James, 1993, p. 73). By not dealing with our emotions, the storms, they only lead to “dis-ease” (Sharma, 2004). I was full, overflowing, with “dis-ease” (Sharma, 2004) which led me to being completely, utterly
unhappy. My aura, my path, my life was clouded and the panic attacks were symptoms created because I was not dealing with my feelings and not being me (Palmer, 2003, p. 37).

“When the soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning. If the soul’s capacity for creativity is not honored it will wreak havoc instead.”

-James, 1993, p.105

It was noting Sharma’s (2004) explanation of the “Integrity Gap” (p. 156) and “Recycling” (p. 157) that made all the punches that were knocking me down make complete sense. “The process by which nature or the universe of God or Infinite Intelligence – whatever label you want to put on the source of all creation – prods you to close your Integrity Gap is known as “recycling”“ (p. 156). People, situations, challenges continue to recycle through a person’s life, getting tougher and tougher each time, until we learn the lesson that we are meant to learn. I was being recycled the same challenges each time escalating in intensity. For example, while in my unhappy relationship because I wasn’t learning or doing anything about it. Each time infidelity or dishonesty or my gut yelled at me, I chose not to listen because of the fear I held within me. Each lesson, each challenge got harder until severe symptoms, panic and anxiety attacks forced me to take a step for myself - the step I was meant to take all those other times.

“Whatever way you choose to put yourself in a closer balance with yourself and environment, you will be flooded with information”.

-James, 1993, p.126
ii. Exhaustion to a Breakthrough.

DATE: November 25-30, 2012:

My Nona, my Mom’s Mom, passed away on November 25, 2012 from a long bout of cancer. When we received the phone call I was luckily in Vancouver visiting my Mom after taking part in a conference that week. The moment we received the news, I was on the phone with our travel agent making arrangements to fly to Croatia as soon as possible. Picture this: we received the call my Nona had passed away on a Saturday night; Sunday afternoon we left Vancouver to hop, skip and jump to Croatia. We arrived in Croatia on Monday; Tuesday we were planning the funeral; and on Wednesday we attended the funeral. Too say the least, we did lots of travelling, had a tremendous amount to do in a short period of time, on very little sleep while drinking lots of Minas (Turkish coffee). My Mom and I were buzzing through each step together, side-by-side.

Wednesday night, after the funeral, when our family members left my Nona’s apartment, my Mom and I sat at the kitchen table in a daze. We sat in silence for a while until I came to a significant revelation out of nowhere. A voice in me said I’m exhausted. Being exhausted after everything we had been through in the last few days was to be expected, however, my realization of being exhausted meant more this time. I felt a sinking feeling, a shift, a way to articulate my exhaustion I never could before. I was exhausted from traveling but I was actually exhausted of the life I was leading. I was exhausted of the life I was trying to uphold by trying to be all the things I thought I was supposed to be by meeting all the expectations I was trying to meet. I was exhausted of trying and living a lie.
December 2, 2012 journal entry: A few days after I realized I was exhausted I began to critically reflect and articulate my feelings.

As I tried to articulate my exhaustion to my Mom while we sat at the table, I could feel every muscle in my body ache because my body was screaming *Finally! Finally you recognize*
the stress you’ve put us under. Finally you are acknowledging us, your body, your soul that this is what you have been doing all along. Not being you!

The next day, my Mom and I had more work to do regarding my Nona’s property and her finances. We had a total of ten days, a very short amount of time, to rectify my Nona’s belongings before we had to leave. The marathon of doing continued for days as we woke up early and stayed up late running around from office to office.

Through the ten days in Croatia, at my Nona’s apartment, being with family I so desperately craved to be with propelled my emotions and thoughts even more. Being with my Mom, hip to hip, comforted the process as we connected with friends and family we don’t have in Canada. When my Dad died, it was just the two of us and a few of his close friends from work who attended the funeral. When my Nono died in March 2011, my Mom was by his side in Croatia while I was in Kamloops not able to attend. I never felt complete having been alone without the family support I wanted and needed during those difficult times.

Growing up and living in Canada has given me a lifestyle and opportunity but has been a lonely place without having a core, solid, supportive, intimate family I so deeply desired. I was envious of my Italian friends in high school because their homes were always bustling with brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles. Their homes were alive and close. Mine was close but very small. Finally, being in Croatia with everyone for my Nona’s funeral, I began putting the pieces together which brought me closer to my Dad than ever before. Being in Croatia to work with my unresolved, pent up feelings of having lost him in 2008 helped me open up.
iii. Minas, Palacinki and Journaling in Croatia

DATE: November-December 2012:

Coming to terms with the time change, nine hours difference between Vancouver and Croatia, wasn’t easy for me. I would wake at 3:30am or 5:00am to be wide-eyed and ready to go. But, out of respect for my Mom’s need for sleep, I would quietly crawl out of the bed we shared, close the door and enter the kitchen to make Palacinki (Croatian for crepes) for breakfast. The recipe was simple and I could remember the steps and complete them with very little noise which could potentially wake my Mom.

During these many mornings, I would wake into a routine of making Palacinki at 5:00am, turning my iPod on, blasting music to fuel my soul, and most importantly, found the perfect opportunity to journal. I found myself journaling pages and pages of feelings which allowed me to come to a series of Aha Moments. These Aha Moments flooded my mind in the early mornings fuelled by the exhaustion I felt and the massive amounts of strong Minas buzzing through my veins. I felt alive, I felt crazy, I felt moved, I felt ready to accept and process everything I was going through in my life – death, relationships, decisions I had made in the past, questioning who I am.

I had only brought my M. Ed journal on the trip because I was hoping to do some work while away. Since this was the only journal I had, I began using it for my early morning reflections. However, I soon made a connection in that I was using my M. Ed journal for my personal thoughts. I was writing personal experiences in the journal I meant to only use for my current teaching practice. Coincidence? I think not.

As I continued to purge my thoughts in my M. Ed journal during the early morning hours while my Mom slept in the other room, I came to many Aha Moments that connected me to my
Dad – connected me to the things he would always say to me as a kid. I remember him always saying, *Wendy, whatever you do, make sure you are happy; Wendy, whatever you do, make sure to think about all the options and do things with reason; Wendy, why are you smiling like that? Be natural!; Wendy, why are you standing like that? Be you!; Wendy, I don’t think you’re happy.*

He had an abrupt way of saying things to me that only hurt my feelings because I was *trying* so hard to be natural, *trying* so hard to be me and *trying* so hard to make him proud. But the more I *tried*, the more he would comment about what I wasn’t doing right which would hurt me in a way that only kept me doing what I was doing. I knew he meant well and I knew he was only doing his best, but now I know what he meant all the times he would tell me to be *natural*. He saw I wasn’t. He knew I wasn’t.

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December 2, 2012 journal entry: The day I figured out I was living a lie and my Dad was right all along.
My Mom on the other hand, was, and still is, very supportive of me. She would get upset at him for always “telling me the truth” as he would say. But she knew, she could tell, she could feel that it hurt me deeply. She would defend me every time and try putting a spin on the negative comments that would help me hurt less. She was the buffer between his truth and me just wanting to make him proud.

It was one morning while journaling I had the light bulb turn on so bright, so big and so powerfully, I connected to my Dad’s comments and what he meant. He was right! He was right in that I wasn’t happy, I wasn’t me, and I wasn’t natural. I was in fact, living a lie!

December 2, 2012 journal entry: The moment I realized my Dad was right all along.
iv. The Need for Real.

DATE: November 25-December 10, 2012

Every summer when I visited my family and grandparents in Croatia, I would dive into their photographs. I would dive in and filter through photographs of my family, my relatives, and my parents when they were young. I loved looking at the past because it touched me in a deeply. It filled the old soul I always felt I had. I thrived on their lifestyle of friends, family and simplicity - all things I didn’t feel I had in my life while growing up in Canada.

This time, while in Croatia for my Nona’s funeral, I did the same thing. I opened all her albums and boxes of random photos that spanned eighty plus years. I laughed, I cringed, I cried as I flipped through photos of everyone I knew and/or had lost. My emotions were coming to the surface and shifts in my thinking were occurring like never before. As I looked at the photos, I started to recognize a common theme that touched me; the photos were real. The people in the photos were real. The people were natural and beautiful beyond belief.

The photos captured a realness I never noticed before. They screamed loudly causing me to feel in ways I never felt before. I could hear, I could sense so much more in looking at the photos that had me connect to a need I wanted and wanted so desperately without being able to identify for so long. I wanted to be real too. I wanted to feel, to hear, to touch, to be with real people who were themselves. Be with people who were genuine, who were passionate. I was exhausted of not being real; I was exhausted of not being me while living a life I thought I was supposed to live. I was exhausted of pretending and being a person I so clearly wasn’t. I wanted realness and depth so badly from myself and those around me.
The photos to follow are the ones that struck me the most. These photos gave me a path, a sign, a need, a contrast to the life I was living to the life I was meant to live. The photos made me feel real.
The moment I saw this picture of my Mom, I could hear her laugh. I could hear her deep, loud, enthusiastic, real laugh come alive through the photo.

The moment I saw this picture of my Nona, I realized she was more than just my Nona. She was a passionate woman that had a side to her I never considered or thought she had – Beautiful and strong.
The moment I found this picture, a picture I took many years ago, I tingled seeing the love and playfulness my grandparents had for one another. The photo screams love.

I took this picture of my Nono when I was twelve years old while visiting my grandparents one summer. He was building a window frame for a client and I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him. This was the day I saw passion and craftsmanship rolled into one.
I can see the mischievous gleam in my Nono’s eyes and hear his smirk as he takes a sip of wine.

I can feel my shoulders hunkering down as I sit in the rocking chair pouting at the camera. Real emotion, from me, caught on film.
This is my most favorite picture I have of my Dad. I can hear his smirk and feel his smile radiate to me in a way I cannot explain. This photo is powerful and moving.

When I found these photos of myself, I wondered where this girl went. Where did my smile, my innocence, my realness go? It was then I realized that this is the girl, the person, I wanted to be again.
v. My Sign, My Guidepost.

DATE: December 8, 2012:

It was our second last day in Croatia before leaving for home, my other home, in Canada. The weather was cold and we hunkered ourselves in the warmth of the apartment. I had a need to read but in our rush to pack, I hadn’t brought any books with me. I started hunting for a book in my Nona’s apartment; a book we would have left during one of our summers there. As I looked, I came across Robin Sharma’s (2004) *Discover Your Destiny with the Monk Who Sold his Ferrari: The 7 Stages of Self-Awakening*. I slowly read the first few pages and then became hooked as the signs drew me in.

*You are far greater than you ever dreamed of being. And no matter what you are experiencing in your life right now, trust that all is good and unfolding in your best interests. It may not look pretty, but it is exactly what you need to learn for you to grow into the person you have been destined to become. Everything occurring in your life has been orchestrated to inspire your maximum evolution as a human being and bring you into your true power. Learn from life and allow it to take you where you are meant to go – it has your highest interests in mind.*

*(p. 1)*

How could I not be drawn into this book when the first page, the first paragraph, outlined where I was and who I wanted to be? I felt heard, intrigued and drawn in. I found myself reading nonstop for six hours. I highlighted words, lines, paragraphs that touched me; I smiled at the mirrored stories and images I had gone through and was going through.
Having Sharma (2004) explain the purpose of suffering is to “crack the shell that covers our hearts and empty us of the lies we have clung to about who we are, why we are here and how this remarkable world of ours really functions” (p. 3) gave me comfort in knowing my cracking and shattering into a million pieces was part of the process. I had to trust the process. He went on to explain once we are emptied of our hurt, our sadness, our disillusionment, we can be refilled with what’s real to us on our own terms. I was in the process of being emptied and refilled.

Through reading Sharma’s (2004) book (and later, various articles and books from Parker Palmer and Jennifer James), the dovetailing of personal, professional, authentic living became even more apparent to me.

As I peeled through the pages of Sharma’s (2004) book, I began to realize I was already in the process of awakening my soul by taking steps he outlined to self-discovery. It was just days before finding his book I had realized that I, Wendy Blaskovic, was living a lie.
Unbeknownst to me, the first of the seven stages to self-discovery is realizing you are “Living a Lie” (2004, p. 104). Then I found the second stage was called the “Choicepoint” (Sharma, 2004). “Once you see that you have bought into the illusion the crowd wants you to believe is reality, you will have a choice: continue to live as you have always been living- and in so doing, resign yourself to a life of unhappiness and mediocrity – or… step up to your biggest life” (p. 105).

I had already accomplished stage one on my own without knowing and now, reading Sharma’s book, I knew I was on track. I was at a “Choicepoint” (Sharma, 2004) in deciding whether to continue my unhealthy, unhappy life or live the life I was meant to live. I decided to keep moving forward as all signs pointed in this direction. As I digested each of the following:

*Stage 1: Living a Lie (the Stage of Self-Betrayal)*

*Stage 2: The Choicepoint (The Stage of releasing Control and Breaking Your Claims)*

*Stage 3: Awareness of the Wonder and Possibility (The Stage of Seeing with New Eyes)*

*Stage 4: Instruction from Masters (the Stage of Learning, Failing, Preparation)*

*Stage 5: Transformation and Rebirth (The Stage of Emptying and Refilling)*

*Stage 6: The Trial (The Stage of Testing and Confirmation)*

*Stage 7: The Great Awakening of Self (The Stage of Fearlessness) (p. 216)*

I found myself moving through each, again, without knowing I had already began. It may sound silly, but I believe it was my path, my destiny, most importantly, finally letting life guide me to
where I needed to go that determined the way I found Sharma’s (2004) book. Things happen for a reason and if we listen, we find the reason(s).

As I continued to read Sharma’s (2004) “5 Daily Devotions” (p. 217) I had a good chuckle because the first devotion notes “Rise each and every morning at 5am. Those who get up early are those who get the best from life” (p. 217). Again without knowing, I had been waking up at 5am making Palacinki and then journaling my thoughts. I was already following his instructions. The remaining four devotions I found I was doing naturally as the days and weeks evolved.

2. Set aside the first sixty minutes of your day as your “holy hour.” This is your sacred time to do the inner work (prayer, meditation, journaling, reading from the wisdom literature, reflecting on the state of your life) that will help you live your highest life.

3. Display a standard of care, compassion and character well beyond what anyone could ever imagine from you. In doing so, you will be doing your part to aid in the building of a new world.

4. Display a standard of excellence at work far higher than anyone would ever expect from you. Abundance and fulfillment will flow back to you.

5. Devote yourself to being the most loving person you know and thinking, feeling and acting as though you are one of the greatest people currently on the planet (because you are). Your life will never be the same and you will bless man lives (p. 217).
I found the more mindful I became of how I had been swallowing my feelings causing internal “dis-ease” (Sharma, 2004), the more I was confronting the things I was resisting and growing as a human being. The more time I spent getting to know myself without the distractions I had used in the past (work, cleaning the house, being busy for the sake of being busy) the more at peace I became with myself. The more at peace I became with myself, the more attuned I became with a voice within me I hadn’t heard before, or heard in a very long time. This voice was providing me with guidance and a sense of intuition I had only dreamed of having.

Reading and absorbing Sharma’s (2004) story, steps and instructions, I began to live a life more fully, more aware and more me than ever before. My feelings changed, my perspective shifted in monumental ways where I believe my aura, my persona, my being changed so drastically that others began to notice. It was magical. Sharma’s (2004) book was all the evidence I needed to give me courage and instill bravery into the painful, yet, wonderful experiences I was to have and the person I was (am) to become.

“...reflection is the mother of wisdom. We must carve out time each day to ask ourselves why we are here, how we are living and whether we are making the highest use of our gifts that life has given us”.

- Sharma, 2004, p.117
Part IV:

Putting Theory into Practice: Magic

i. A Fresh Start

DATE: September-October 2012

In May 2012, I was told my position in the district was going to change which caused me great disappointment. I was told I was to return to the classroom part-time as the woodworking teacher and maintain my T&T Coordinator role part-time as well.

Upon being told of the change, I felt I was being demoted. I felt I was being pushed away for some unknown reason because my T&T program had just had its most successful year ever. I recognize my feelings were magnified because I was in the midst of personal challenges as well. The combination of personal and professional changes had made me more sensitive than usual. However, without knowing it at the time, the change was exactly what I needed for a fresh start in both areas of my life.

ii. At Home: Back in the Classroom

DATE: September 2012

Being back in the classroom, being back in the woodworking shop, being back with staff and students I found me happy again. When I was in the district position, I didn’t have the opportunity to do what I truly loved doing and doing what I loved that filled my soul. Being back in the classroom gave me the opportunity to see and feel what I had missed without knowing how much I missed it all.

“You don't know what you have until it's gone.”

-anonymous
In the district position I was intimate with my office chair, desk, computer screen, reports, my car and emails. These were all things I couldn’t grow a relationship with. As soon as I returned to teaching and teaching in the shop, I felt alive, I felt possible, and I felt at home. Finally, I had classes of my own to grow and relationships to build with people. I had people to talk to; I had students to support; I had a chance to work with my hands and create projects that I missed dearly. When I found joy again, the exponential curve shot upward quickly.

iii. Taking Risks

DATE: September 2012

In September I found myself focussed on wanting my students to learn. I was determined to have them learn because I wanted to prove to myself I could do more than build relationships. I did everything I could in my power to make sure I was doing my best to have them learn.

For the first three weeks I had my woodworking class focus on measuring – how to measure, the difference between Metric and Imperial, identifying how to use each system, understanding fractions, with tips and tricks. We all agreed that measuring was important and they all said they knew how to. From my experience, I knew that when students said they knew how to do something, it didn’t necessarily mean they knew how to do that specific skill. Here was my chance to use Formative Assessment (FA) strategies in my course to understand what my students knew and how I could support their learning.

We began with a written pre-test to provide me, and the class, a base point of their level of understanding. From a class of thirteen students, two were strong and the remaining students were very weak. I was disappointed but not shocked. I quickly adapted my teaching repertoire
to help them feel confident and gain the necessary measuring skill sets required to work in the shop.

Embarking on FA was risky for me because I was leaving behind most of the routine I had utilized in my past practice; but I realized that it was my past practice that was not giving me what I wanted. Although it wasn’t fulfilling my needs at the time, it was comfortable and I knew it well. Now, I was leaving my comfortable practice behind for something I had no idea how to do.

With trepidation and curiosity in every lesson, I mindfully walked in knowing that this was new to me and my students. If it didn’t go as well as I had hoped, it was ok. They were learning, I was learning and we were all learning together. Every time I tried something new, I made my students aware that we were in it together. I shared my vulnerability and asked my students to help me through the process because I needed and wanted to be better. By me being honest with them and sharing my fears, they saw me as a human being.

As the three weeks progressed, I tried the following activities and strategies, which were out of my comfort zone. However, because of my new mindset – a growth mindset that wanted betterment not perfection – I was able to be gentle with myself through the ups and downs.

**Blackboard/Lecture.**

At the beginning of the measuring unit, I drew each ruler on the board, pointed out the differences, pointed out how to identify parts and pieces, decimals versus fractions. I provided a visual overview and familiarized the class with types and strategies used when measuring.
Package of Worksheets.

I created a measuring package that had students use a ruler to measure lines and shapes in Metric and Imperial. I wanted them to get comfortable with each system and be able to visually see the differences.

One-on-One Help.

As students worked through the package, I walked around and checked their progress. I learned quickly from my teaching experience that if I asked the class as a whole how they were doing, they would all respond with “fine”. However, I knew better. As I walked around, I asked each student how they were managing the work, as well as, asked each to demonstrate a specific question. Each step, each question I asked, helped me dig deeper to identify each students’ level of understanding. Some were doing well and some needed more help.

Quick Quizzes.

Every two or three days I gave the class a quick five point quiz to gauge how they were doing. This kept them on their toes, and again, provided me with feedback.

Hands-on Measuring.

By week two, I decided to spice things up by giving them a hands-on measuring competition because they were getting restless with all the paperwork we were doing in a hands-on shop class.

One morning, I gathered thirteen random objects from the shop (i.e. a stool, a hammer, a hand saw) because I had thirteen students. I placed one object on each work table, created quick
instructions for each object noting what part to measure and in what unit (Metric and/or Imperial). Finally, I created a handout for the students to write their answers on.

Each student began with one object with two minutes at each table. Every two minutes I signalled them to rotate to the next object until they had completed all thirteen.

Because this was my first time orchestrating the activity, the activity ended our class. I collected their answer sheets and then marked them during lunch to get a good idea who could measure accurately, quickly and in different units.

_Measuring Activity Results._

After having completed the previous worksheets/package, me providing quality one-on-one help, I was perplexed at the results of the hands-on measuring activity. No one in the class showed improvement! They were all at the same level or slightly above or slightly under.

_One-on-One Again._

The students were getting increasingly restless because they wanted to get into the shop to start building. I was also getting increasingly frustrated because their measuring was not improving despite my various attempts to help. I was doing more facilitating and supporting with a variety of strategies. I was enjoying the work I was doing, but I was perplexed as to why my students were not improving.

Although frustrated, I was not going to give up. I decided to push forward by attempting one more strategy. While students were working on a few more worksheets, I pulled each student out into the quiet shop to check on their understanding. Most demonstrated they understood how to measure and those who didn’t, I worked to help them understand. I drew
rulers, asked lots of questions, had them identify parts and pieces without me spoon feeding. I was mindfully using FA by asking questions, providing time for students to respond and answer in a safe environment. Working with each student one-on-one, I felt confident they all understood the concepts better. Therefore, to prove their increased understanding, I decided to give them a final test to wrap up the measuring unit.

Final Measuring Test.

The final measuring test had a combination of math and hands-on questions, as well as, past questions they had already answered throughout the three weeks. The students groaned at the test and completed it reluctantly. I collected the tests and quickly marked them because I was eager to see the results. To my dismay, the results were dismal!!!

Once I finished marking the tests, I compared scores taken from the first few exercises and nothing had changed. As a matter of fact, many of the students had done worse on the final than they did at the beginning of the unit!

I was heartbroken. I was devastated. I felt like a failure. Here I was, three weeks into a hands-on course, still not in the shop building, trying, experimenting, and taking risks all for the purpose of helping my students learn. No change, no improvement, no nothing. I went home that Friday feeling low and questioning everything I had done. I couldn’t understand how all my methods – teaching to all skill levels and styles with one-on-one help – didn’t make a difference.
iv. Roadblock: Which Way to Turn

DATE: End of September-Early October 2012

After seeing the dismal results from their measuring test, I decided to take a break. I felt I lost perspective of what I was doing and needed to take a much needed step back.

Taking inventory of where I was in the course was something I never would have thought of or would have considered doing in my past practice. However, because I was more calm, grounded and less frazzled by the stuff I used to be consumed by (marks, tasks, projects, doing for the sake of doing), I was able to ask myself questions to get back on track with what mattered to me. I asked myself: Why do you enjoy being in the classroom? Why do you enjoy building, creating, using your hands? What do you want to instill in your students?

My questions then moved specific to the situation I was in with my class: How are you going to change the direction of your class to achieve what you want to achieve but not to the detriment of your relationship with your class? How are you going to make this a win-win for all?

With the internal conversation I was having with myself, I recognized a “Choicepoint” (Sharma, 2004) in my teaching. I had an opportunity to choose between being the cure or the disease of a situation. I chose to be the cure. By asking myself What makes me happy? Why do I teach? Why am I here? The answers were easy. I loved building, creating, taking a plan on a piece of paper and making it come to life from my very own hands. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to enjoy my job, my time in the school and classroom. I wanted to enjoy my time with my students and I wanted the very same for them too.

I didn’t want to struggle by having my students upset with me or because they didn’t do well on the final measuring test. There were more important things out there and other ways for
them to learn. It was with all these wants I decided to turn the ship, my class, around and focus on what mattered.

v. Letting Go.

DATE: End of September-Early October 2012

Once I realized I had a narrow view of what learning entailed and I let go of *trying* to have my students learn within the parameters I was giving them, I noticed a difference in my class.

My students may have had difficulty with the measuring unit, but it didn’t mean they didn’t learn and it didn’t mean they weren’t going to learn throughout the semester while in the shop. I was going to support and facilitate their learning while in the shop through other methods and other mediums. Desk work is one thing and I knew the shop was a project based learning environment that was going to encapsulate all subjects into one. My students were going to learn many things, one of which was measuring while building. Their projects were going to be the results of their understanding. They were going to know their skill level quickly.

In order to support their progress, I created a safe environment for them to make mistakes and learn from them. Overall, the environment embodied my intentions of Quality not Quantity, Care and Relationships. I wanted quality not quantity from my students, therefore, I didn’t push for multiple projects to fill a grade book. I valued the quality of work my students produced not the quantity of projects created. I supported them in taking time to do their best, learning from their mistakes, learning how to problem-solve, while feeling good in the class. I encouraged and reminded them often that it was okay not to rush because they were so used to having to work quickly without thinking. My purpose to the course was different.
vi. Aha Moment.

DATE: October 2012

It wasn’t until October 2012, a month after being back in the classroom; I was able to identify a drastic shift in my thinking, teaching style, and surprisingly, my students. It was then, I realized the connection between finding my authentic-self and how it could free me, allow me, influence me in doing better and being better in my practice with my students. I was amazed.

As I began to teach my own classes again and find joy in my life by creating projects and doing what I loved, I was becoming more me. I felt more solid, more grounded, more mindful. I was coming out of my dark tunnel to see the light of possibility and positivity. As my mindset and perspective shifted, I began to notice my thoughts and intentions more and more. Soon I was critically reflecting more on my practice and what was going on in my life at the time. As I wrote, reflected, and became more aware of my changes, I found my students were changing too. It was magical.

It was by removing unnecessary thoughts and patterns in my life, I found myself clearly defining intentions in which I not only practiced and preached inside and outside of my classroom but intentions I believed in deeply. Every day, every class and every interaction with my three intentions enabled me to focus on what mattered and mattered to me. Once they saw I lived and breathed these intentions, without nagging or stuffing it down their throats, they adapted and started to do the same. Magic.
Part V:  
Teaching Strategies

i. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Formative Assessment (FA): Working Hand in Hand

DATE: September 2012 - February 2013

I was doing less busy work and getting more results than ever by using FA. When I first heard about AI, I was skeptical. I couldn’t wrap my head around how focusing on the positive and letting go of the negative would lead to improvement. I was trained to problem-solve which required looking at what’s not working and then finding ways to fix it. Frankly, I thought AI was absurd. How was I expected to help my students by focusing on what they were doing well?, How could I help my students improve if all I did was say great things and not tell them what they were doing wrong? How would they know what to work on? These questions rattled through my head as I tried to understand the logic in this method.

Overtime, as I reflected on my experience as a student in my CIEL and MEDL program, with teachers who practiced AI, I began to understand how to balance the focus on what’s working with the things that need improving. AI is a balance, a shift in perspective, to seeing the glass half full rather than half empty. By investing energy in appreciating the fullness and learning how the glass got to be half full, enables us to capitalize on strengths. This is how I see myself, my life and my students. We all have things we lack, yet, rather than focus on what we lack and feeling bad, I focus on what we do have which leads to opportunity. FA and AI worked hand in hand in my teaching practice, magically.
ii. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on Myself

DATE: 2005 – Present

Two years into my full-time position teaching woodworking, I felt a need for a change in my teaching assignment. More than half of my teaching load was instructing woodworking with the odd Math 9 or Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) 11-12. As I started to dabble with other subjects, I realized how passionate I was about preparing students for their future. Teaching CAPP, Leadership 11-12 and then eventually Portfolio 12, I was soon immersed in preparing students for their life after high school. With these courses I worked with senior students by bringing local businesses into the school to share the expectations employers were searching for. Due to my meticulous nature, I enjoyed word processing and helping students create resumes, cover letters and hearing about their future plans. No matter how outrageous I may have thought their plans were, I was still happy to help them along and provide them with opportunities to explore.

As I became more immersed in teaching life skills classes, my desire to teach woodworking was fading. I started to feel badly for my students because I didn’t think I was really teaching them woodworking skills. I was, and still am, a “jack of all trades”, a type of “MacGyver” who can take a piece of string, gum and a paperclip to stop your kitchen sink from leaking. I had a passion for building from a hobbyist’s point of view, however, I didn’t have technical or craftsmanship type of skill sets that I assumed a true “craftsman” would have when teaching the same class. I didn’t have industry experience to use in order to prepare my students for employment opportunities in the field of trades. I was just a teacher who made do with what I had and had great joy in doing what I did. With my focus on the lack of the skill sets I possessed, my glass was half empty.
I voiced my concerns to the principal at the time not expecting my teaching assignment to change, yet, it did. My principal took it upon himself to help me by creating a Work Experience position where I would coordinate placements for students, as well as, teach Portfolio 11-12, Leadership 12, AVID 9 (Advancement Via Individual Determination), along with being the AVID Coordinator for our school.

Since I was the only one of two shop teachers in the school district, the district decided to post my position in hopes of finding someone to replace me. Shortly after posting the position, a person with amazing qualifications was hired. On paper, he had what I wished I could give my students – real trades skills for home or job site.

When the new school year began in 2008, my old work space, the shop, was now occupied by my replacement. I was in a classroom down the hall immersed in my new world of teaching job-ready, employment skills. I didn’t have time to venture back to the woodworking shop, however, my old students quickly came to find me and begged me to return. I was flattered but couldn’t understand why because they were being taught by someone who had more to offer than I had in the shop.

Over time I became aware that my replacement had a fantastic set of skills on paper but lacked the ability to teach students or relate to people in general. He expected our students to already possess mature, professional, job-ready skill sets in hand, rather than see them as young people in need of care, support, guidance, understanding and humour. He failed to see students as good people. Because of his inability to see the students as young people to be moulded, guided and supported, he blamed them continuously. In my opinion, his lack of empathy and people skills worked against him causing students to do the opposite of what he wanted. I was sad for the students and sad for our school.
My role in the district continued to evolve. I went from being the shop teacher, to Work Experience Coordinator to District Teacher for Trades and Transitions (T&T). In 2009, my T&T role required me to organize events, compile applications, sort paperwork, travel to our schools in the district while supporting staff in each school with the T&T portfolio. With these changes, I saw the glass being half full, so I thought.

At the beginning of my T&T role, I thought it was great. However, in retrospect, within one year in the role, I became exponentially unhappy. After two and half years into the position, I had my dreadful panic attack in my office. If this wasn’t a sign, I don’t know what was. Yet, even with the panic attack, I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. I couldn’t understand or articulate why I was so unhappy and why I had the panic attack because got everything I wanted. It was being immersed in a variety of life changes with deep muddy feelings which disabled me from seeing what was really going on.

My third year, 2011-2012, in T&T was my best year. The district had seen more growth, more school and students participation in every event and initiative that was available to them. If anything, I thought I was going to be asked to become Vice Principal especially since I was on track to completing my Masters. However, the opposite happened. Once I was told, not asked or consulted, to return to the woodworking shop, I felt I was being demoted. I felt I was being pushed down the ladder like in the game of “Snakes and Ladders” or being knocked off the game board “Sorry”. It hurt and added to the anxiety I had just slowly started to deal with.

When the new school year started, September 2012, I found myself calmly walking into my revised role by taking one day at a time. I started to focus, somehow for some reason, on my students rather than the content of my course. I started to hear myself and think about my strengths more than my weaknesses. This was very unusual. Typically, I would have invested
more time and energy into my shortcomings rather than my strengths. Therefore, me taking note there was a shift in my thinking was wonderful.

I soon realized years earlier when I had said I was finished teaching woodworking, I focussed on the skill sets I didn’t have. I focussed on the technical aspects and the expectations I created in my mind of what a good, effective woodworking teacher would be. With this mindset, I quickly concluded I didn’t fit the bill and turned my back on the one thing I simply enjoyed doing. Then when someone with the qualifications was hired and wasn’t doing all the things I thought were needed to be a good woodworking teacher, I realized I wasn’t looking at the skill sets I did have. Being back in the shop with a comparison to refer to, I saw the skill sets I always had and what I could offer my students. You know what I found? My glass half full.

• I had passion in the creative potential woodworking had;
• I loved the smell, the feel, the possibility of the material;
• I loved incorporating technical skill sets with art. Almost like “ying and yang”; Structured yet fluid;
• I lived, breathed and loved the concept of form, function and design. The whole idea ignited something warm and passionate in me;
• I loved the fact I could put my personal touches into my work, making them my very own;
• I cared about the work I created and put time into what I was doing;
• I enjoyed being with students, working with students and empowering them to be sufficient, independent and skillful while having fun;
• I wanted to be a positive influence, have a positive place for them to come and just be themselves;
• I wanted them to feel as good as I did when I was in the environment;
• I wanted to be happy and I wanted to create a place for them to be happy as well

Once I was able to identify what I enjoyed about woodworking, teaching and being in the position again, everything came together like magic.

My intentions for the class became clear. I practiced and preached everything I loved about the course because I believed it and I lived it. Everything I said with and for my students was real. Nothing I said or expected of them was false or a hoop I created for them to jump through. My perspective shifted to being appreciative and seeing what’s right rather than not, I was able to be more me, more authentic and more effective than ever before. Magic, my glass was more than half full.

Looking back when I was told I was going to return to the shop, I was devastated. However, it was the very thing I needed to remind myself of what truly made me happy. When I returned to the classroom I realized I was laughing again, smiling again, and feeling passionate again. These were all things I was not doing or being months and years earlier while in my T&T role. I recognized my position of working with paperwork, driving and working in a silo, was deteriorating my soul. Working alone, not having the opportunity to be hands-on, creative, fostering relationships with great people – students and adults – was a large reason for why I was unhappy.

The combination of my T&T role, my unhappy relationship, the death of my Dad, and the lifestyle I was leading, I wasn’t myself. I was operating in survival mode trying and acting to protect myself. I was doing and saying things I thought I was supposed to and I thought I was happy. However, my soul knew I wasn’t. My soul yelled at me by giving me a sign of panic and
anxiety attacks, telling me I needed to recognize what was really going on by digging deep to allow myself to exist happily. What I was doing wasn’t being natural and the time had come to stop. By stopping the madness and listening to my voice, I was able to shift my perspective. I was able to shift my perspective so much that I became more effective for myself and for others. My glass was overflowing.

iii. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with My Students.

DATE: September 2012 – February 2013

I was trying to work with students one-on-one more and more because I knew it would help me understand how they were doing, where they were at and where they were going. FA was giving me so much more than I had ever expected. In my past practice, I used to think that FA was another “flavour of the month” that would cause me to worker harder, but instead it gave me more quality time with my students by doing more with less.

While students were working on their projects, I would pull them aside and have discussions with them about their learning. We would discuss their progress and I would listen to what was going well or not going well for them. I asked them general questions about the course; whether they were enjoying their time, if they had any suggestions about what could make it better and had them evaluate their progress on a scale of one to ten or other random scales. To my surprise, their comments about the course were always positive. They enjoyed the freedom I gave, liked I was building with them, and loved having music. As for their personal evaluations of their work, they were always much lower than what I would have marked them. When they evaluated themselves I would prod further to find out why. I would ask why they thought this, I would ask for examples and then ask them what they would need to do to in
order to improve their mark. Towards the end of our conversation I would share two positive things I noticed in their work or work ethic and then make a recommendation, similar to “two stars and a wish”.

In my previous practice, I would use a problem-solving approach by focusing on the things students needed to improve on because I thought this would help them excel. What was I thinking? How could I think that pointing out what’s not right would empower them to move forward and improve? However, I recognized I thought this way because a) this is what my Dad did with me and b) this is all I knew. I know I my Dad didn’t intend to hurt or make me feel bad by telling me my short comings. I believe he genuinely wanted the best for me and wanted me to improve just how I wanted my students to improve. However, because of how he was brought up, just like how I was brought up, he did what he knew. He did the best he could.

What shifted my perspective regarding AI and gave me understanding, was my experience in the CIEL program. My experience, by having my teachers utilize AI with me, I began to see how my thoughts about my skill level had changed and how much more positive I was about my abilities. Through my first-hand experience, I was able to do the same for my students because I wanted them to feel good, to feel possible, and to feel empowered.

As I listened to each of my students during our one-on-one chats, I mindfully shared two positive things I noticed in their work, along with one recommendation. I made sure to limit my recommendation to one even if I had a dozen in my head. I didn’t want to overwhelm them or discredit the positive things they were doing. Also, I would always say “I recommend…” or “I noticed…” I would never say “You need to improve on…” or “That part of your project is…” I made sure to soften the not-so-good things I saw because my purpose in the class was to support their learning, not crush or hurt their feelings. I understood how it felt to have my feelings
crushed when all I was doing was my best. When my best wasn’t good enough, I recoiled and gave up or shied away from doing better and being better. Therefore, by keeping things light and positive, we always left our conversations on a positive note where my students knew what was going well and what they could do to improve; one thing at a time.

By focussing on my intentions, believing in my intentions, keeping my intentions at the forefront of my practice and being me, I was doing more for and with my students than ever before. Magic.
Part VI:

Intentions into Practice

i. Dovetailing Practice with Intentions & Authentic-Self

DATE: September 2012- February 2013

I found myself utilizing several FA strategies to help me check if my students were learning and where their struggles were. I kept morals, values and beliefs at the forefront of my work while dovetailing FA in my practice, along with, AI. Doing both of these made my teaching practice everything I always wanted it to be and more.

I wanted my students to know how to measure; yet teaching them on paper through seat work clearly didn’t work. However, I knew they would practice measuring without realizing they were by working in the shop by working on real projects, as well as, naturally use a variety of skill sets at one time. Why and how? Because woodworking is a project-based course that utilizes English, Math, Science, Art, communication and problem solving all wrapped up into one without having to teach each component alone or identifying each skill. The subjects and skill sets all happen simultaneously, magically.

It was by taking steps to honor my inner voice and validate my feelings; I was able to change my thinking. My thinking shifted nonstop in such a fluid, non-judgemental fashion that it allowed me to adapt to situations quickly and calmly. I was able to identify the intentions I believed in, I wanted in my own life and I wanted to give others because I valued them. Through all these mental shifts, I was able to shift in my practice and understand what mattered most to me and to my students. They saw, they felt, they heard me being real and genuine with them. I was able to tap into their core human needs, the same needs I have, by not acting or creating make-work projects for them to satisfy an IRP all fit into my mark book. They knew I was there
for them and only them. It was when I gained their respect and built a solid relationship with them on trust, they were open and willing to let me in.

I came to terms with all this before reading Palmer’s (1990, 2003, 2007, 2009) work. It was when I read Palmer’s various articles and books, I realized I was on the right track and someone understood what I felt, what I thought, what I saw was lacking in the educational system.

ii. What I Did

**DATE: September 2012 –February 2013**

*Taking Time to Care*

I found myself taking time each class to talk to each student to ask them how they were doing because I genuinely cared. I found myself telling them every day at the start of the class I cared about them, I cared about the work they were doing and I cared that they were doing their best. I encouraged them to not compare their work to mine or anyone else’s. They were to work at their skill level and simply work to improve on their skills sets because that is all that mattered.

The more I recognized the change in pace I had created in the class, bringing it down to core values, the more vivid and important my intentions for the class became. I created two posters to showcase my intentions in the course for all to see. One board noted “Aim for Quality not Quantity” and the second board had the famous Chinese proverb “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a life.”
When I discovered my intentions, I created these two boards to guide me in my teaching practice. I placed them above the chalk board for all to see. I wanted my students aware of my goals and be active members of the process. We were together.

I displayed these two boards at the front of the classroom for my students to see every time they sat down to start the class. The first day I had the posters up, I made a point to explain why I had chosen these two phrases.

I shared with my students that “Aim for Quality not Quantity” was what I wanted them to focus on when they worked in the shop. I wanted them to work with their skills and put time into doing great work they could be proud of accomplishing.

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime” was my intention for the class. I wanted to teach them skills they could take and use on their own without having to be dependent on me. I was going to teach them the basics – measuring, shop safety, tool and machine use. Once they learned how to use the basics confidently, the skills were theirs to keep for life. My purpose thereafter was to support their learning, support their ideas and be there to help.
When I finished explaining the rationale behind the two posters, I remember watching the look in their eyes turn to amazement. They couldn’t believe I wasn’t going to stand overtop of them and dictate or halt their progress in the course. They couldn’t believe I was going to trust them to use the machines and tools safely and trust them to use their best judgement. They couldn’t believe I was going to be there to help rather than do things for them. It was magical!

*Empowering my Students*

As we were getting exponentially closer to working in the shop, I multitasked two components – machine safety demonstrations and testing, along with choosing the course’s first project. In the past, I would choose the projects but this time I was taking risks. I was giving up control by giving students the opportunity to have a say in the class for a multitude of reasons. I wanted to foster student ownership in the work they were doing, as well as, I wanted them to feel they had a say in the course because they mattered. Finally, I wanted to relinquish the massive amounts of control I had always strived for because the course wasn’t about me. I wasn’t there to show my students how skilled, knowledgeable and wonderful I was. I wanted them to have a say, I wanted them to be empowered and I wanted to help them along their journey by creating a structure of expectations with freedom.

To take a break from the safety demonstrations and tests, I had students find project plans they thought would be ideal for the class to execute. I took part in the activity and threw in my ideas because from past experience I had an inkling that most of the projects they would find were beyond their skill level. Students would think they could build china cabinets, coffee tables, television stands. As predicted, I was right. Despite this, I took all of our ideas and spread them out where we could see. We discussed the pros and cons of each, narrowed down the popular
projects and finally came to a consensus to build a patio chair. The chair was simple enough to construct, yet challenging because it put many skill sets in their hands that they said they knew but really didn’t know.

The students were a mix of grade eleven and twelve, fairly mature and just a great group of people. They were itching to build and I knew if I went along the way I used to teach – demonstrating each step, explaining how to – that they would get frustrated. So, as I had shared with them earlier, my intent was to teach them to fish, not give them fish. Therefore, they had the basic skills in their hands – measuring, machine and tool use, safety, project plans, material to build – and they were free to build.

I didn’t let them run wild in the shop. I gave them structure, guidance and parameters, but freedom to move at their own pace and at their skill level. When they needed help on a machine, I helped. When they asked a question, I replied with a question to have them think through to the answer. When they wanted advice, I gave them honest, constructive feedback in the form of a “recommendation”.

Role Modeling

Through my new found classroom management skills, I wasn’t putting out fires and building everyone’s project because they needed me and I needed to show them how much I knew. Instead, magically, I had time to build the patio chair alongside my students, at the same time. As I built my chair, they watched and saw how I cared about my project. Without me having to identify or announce what I was doing, my students observed the time, the care, and the steps I took in building my chair. Also, when I needed help, I asked them for help because we were all learning together.
There were times I stopped the class and called them over to show them a few tips that worked for me when building and/or problems I encountered. Their response to me involving them in my project was amazing. Several students commented how they enjoyed me working with them, helping them and sharing the process with them rather than standing back as the “know it all teacher”. Many of my students commented on how they enjoyed the freedom to work at their own pace, to follow the plans the way they understood them rather than having to wait for me to approve steps or use of the machines. I reminded them often in that I trusted their abilities and knew that they would only learn by doing it on their own while making mistakes. I wanted them to learn, not be perfect.

In September all I wanted my students to do was “learn” but because of my narrow view of what learning entailed. However, when I realized my narrow view and took a step back, I allowed them to learn on their own with my support. It all started to fall into place, like magic.

Practicing and Preaching Expectations

A way I have come to connect my journey in finding my authentic-self to my teaching practice is with a question I have tumbled through my head numerous times: How can we, teachers, expect our students to have passion in their work, be their best selves, be their true selves, have a positive, proactive attitude, place effort and work ethic in the classroom if we, the teachers, are unable to do what we expect of them?

After three years of being out of the classroom, 2009-2012, and proceeding on my authentic journey at the same time as my M.Ed. project, I became a different teacher and person when I returned to the classroom.

• I identified my intentions;
I functioned with more mindful, purposeful awareness of my integrity;

I detoxed the unessential and was left with the essential;

I reviewed how I used my time, where my efforts were placed, where my energy was being used, looked at how I was spending my money;

I felt my feelings releasing dis-ease;

I chose to be a smart consumer not consumed by society/social media;

I minimized my use of social media;

I subscribed to proactive websites for daily inspirational reminders;

I surrounded myself with positive components – people, positive messages and positive thoughts;

I applied appreciative inquiry to myself;

As I took mindful action of my personal life by detoxing nonessential toxic elements, I began to identify what mattered to me. By doing this, I provided more room for my new found energy to be placed in the things that mattered to me. As I defined intentions, lived and breathed my intentions, they permeated; seeped into everything I was doing in my life, including work. My relationships with my students, colleagues, professionals and strangers started to become all the things I had longed for and wanted but never had because of the clutter.

Physical Environment

I was practicing and preaching my intentions – Quality not quantity, caring about my students and what they did in my class, as well as, cultivating meaningful relationships. The aura of the class was good, but I knew I needed to work in an environment that made me feel
good and was a place I enjoyed coming to. Selfishly, because of my need, I created a physical environment I enjoyed, which ultimately, my students enjoyed too.

I am a neat, tidy, clean person who is open and proudly, OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). I have difficulty working in a messy space with no purpose or reason. Before I start anything, I need to have things in order and work in an orderly manner; therefore, the shop was always clean.

I’m also a fan of music. I play music in my car, in the house, while I’m working on a variety things, like typing this paper. Music makes me feel good and allows me to have fun even when the work may not be. Since creating, building and working in the shop is a passion of mine, adding music is only natural. Having music play in the background as I move about and create feels good which is why I invested in a stereo system for the shop.

When music played in the background during class time, it grounded everyone. Students were more focused, relaxed and engaged in their work. There were times I would stand back and just watch the students work, and again, it was magic. When I would stand back I was amazed at their work ethic and effort so much so that at times I found myself tearing up with joy. They were asking each other for help, reading the project plans and problem solving on their own rather than coming to me for everything. In the past I would spoon feed them the answers or do the project for them because it was easier. This time, I was creating so much more with less. I was worrying less, I was doing less (marking, planning, prepping), yet I was supporting more and empowering my students more than I ever had in my teaching career. Magic.
Part VII:

Lifelong Steps to Authenticity

“I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing”.

-Agatha Christie

i. Defining Moments

DATE: February 2012- Ongoing

When I finally spoke for myself, when I finally defended myself and acted on behalf of myself, everything changed. It was magical. The panic and anxiety attacks stopped. I was thinking, feeling, being more me than I had ever been and it felt good. Don’t get me wrong, from February 2012 to the present, I have continued to go up and down but in a different way compared to other times. This time I was growing, cracking, questioning, figuring things out for myself and figuring out who I am and what I want. I was coming to terms and changing, shifting perspectives but seeing situations, seeing myself in a different light. It was beautiful, it was fresh, and it was inspiring but also scary.

Speaking and acting upon my truth, unusual events began falling into place. People started coming into my life at the right time and place I needed them. My job changed putting me back in the classroom in a place where I was happy. Books and articles miraculously showed up, without me looking or trying to find them, highlighting exactly where I was in my life and discussed things I needed to read and do. Through my readings and inquiries, I, without effort, started to take control of my life without being controlling in the way she controlled. The new Wendy, me, began thinking for myself and asking what it was that I needed to be happy. By
doing this, I started to examine the things I accumulated – stuff in my home, the thoughts I was thinking, how I was using my time and spending my money. I was all of a sudden shifting, again, without effort, to a simpler life for me.

I wanted a simpler life without fluff, without fake, without stuff. Deep down to my core, I wanted real – real people, real relationships, real feelings, real thoughts, real conversations, real change. I was repulsed by TV, Facebook, advertisements, gossip, technology, negative comments, toxic people I had allowed to take up valuable space in my life. I was eliminating the toxic and becoming more grounded and healthy.

“The less I needed, the better I felt.”
-Charles Bukowski

Recognizing the journey to authenticity I was on, I found the validity it had in my project. I stopped searching for what I thought I was going to write about or should write about on Google Scholar. I stopped searching for things I could label and then fit into a structure of a Master’s thesis I thought should be. Yes, FA and AI are valid and I definitely found myself incorporating them into my practice. However, my project was so much more and so much deeper.

Becoming more responsive to my growth mindset and my inner voice, I was able to silence my insecurities. The silence allowed my inner voice to speak more loudly and clearly enabling my methods to become natural and bringing me to a place of authenticity in my practice.

I find it difficult to explain the steps I undertook, the steps I continue to take, because they are not factual in the sense of data, science and procedures that can be concluded as flawed,
true or challenged. My steps, my stages, my procedures are fluid, real, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and most importantly, personal. I can only share what worked for me and how I went about my journey. Sharma’s (2004, p. 216) and Babauta’s (2007) *Simple Manifesto* gave me direction as to how to become more mindful and therefore, ultimately, a better person and better teacher.

The following is a list of what I incorporated into my life over the course of my journey. The list consists of the actions I took, and still do, to continue my journey in strengthening my true authentic-self.

**ii. Actions**

“Incredible change happens in your life when you decide to take control of what you do have power over instead of craving control over what you don’t”.

-unknown

I reflected critically by asking myself routine questions to delve deeper into understanding myself and the root causes for my actions and feelings. For example, I would ask myself *Why?*, *Why not?*, *What’s going on internally?*, *What am I not saying or telling myself?*, *Why do I feel how I do?*, *What is the real reason I am doing “X, Y and Z”*, *What kind of person do I want to be?*, *How do I want to impact people around me?*

I found taking time to question myself, like I have learned to question my students more and more through the use of FA strategies, has opened me to investigate my thoughts and feelings routinely before I push them aside like I once did. The results of pushing my feelings and actions aside, only hurt me which clouded the person I truly am.
“In order to move on, you must understand why you felt what you did and why you no longer need to feel it.”

-Mitch Albom

To accompany my critical reflections, I maintained a journal which provided me with an outlet for the feelings I would have normally bottled up in the past. Putting pen to paper, drawing out the patterns out of my mind allowed me to separate myself from my feelings. I found myself able to stop the vicious spiral of internalizing my fears, my doubts, my assumptions, my interpretation and see them for what they are.

“You are confined only by the walls you build yourself”

-unknown

After writing in my journal, I would review my entries to understand, feel and accept my thoughts without judgement. My thoughts and feelings are just thoughts and feelings. I have the power to control them and do what I want with them. I could dwell or be proactive by finding opportunities for better.

A lyric from Coldplay’s song Clocks plays in my head on a regular basis when I find myself in a challenging situation - “Am I a part of the cure? Or am I part of the disease?” When I think of the question and ask myself whether I am the cure or disease, it always points me in a direction to make a difference for myself and/or others.

“You can’t have a positive life with a negative mind”

-unknown
I gave myself permission to feel; to feel hurt, pain, angst, guilt, anger, sadness, passion, frustration, happiness that I have tried to control and restrict in fear of looking unstable, emotional or weak. I now cry, yell, scream, laugh, jump for joy. I feel.

At one time I used to think that being vulnerable was a sign of weakness and showed fragility. However, I have come to embrace being vulnerable because, frankly, I am human just like you. I am a human being who has feelings I need to work with proactively in order to move forward and be stronger. I recognize if I don’t work with the feelings I have, they lead to “disease” (Sharma, 2004) and I am worse for it. I become constricted, unmoving and controlling of all things resorting to the person I once was - her. I never want to be her again.

“Never be afraid to fall apart because it is an opportunity to rebuild yourself the way you wish you had been all along”.

-Rae Smith

I gave myself permission to let go. I recognize that the she, the person I once was, would be so fearful that the only thing I had in my control was to control. I would have a deep need to be involved with everything and/or be the person who insisted in doing it all without asking for help. By letting go of past expectations of who I should be or who I thought I was supposed to be, I have given myself more room and space to focus on what truly matters by inviting others to help. I am no longer alone.

“Don’t waste your time looking back on what you’ve lost. Move on, for life is not meant to be traveled backwards”.

-unknown
I read books and articles that interested me and were related to the journey I am on — authenticity, mindfulness, fear, mindsets. By reading, I am continuously reminded that the journey I am on is the right journey. I am continuously reminded and surrounded by the process, the goodness and opportunities that provide me with just being authentic.

“Nothing impossible, the word itself says “I’m possible”!”

-Audrey Hepburn

I found inspirational quotes on Pinterest. As much as I detoxed the use of technology in my day to day life, I was drawn to Pinterest for how it lent itself very well to my journey. I wasn’t filling my time by looking at random images on the website, rather, I was finding quotes on Pinterest that interested me because of the design, the layout, and the visual interpretation of what the quotes were saying. The visual appeal added to the quality of the words and phrases I was digesting. I began gathering quotes that touched me on my Pinterest board which I entitled “Inspiration Station”. I have accumulated over two hundred beautiful, inspiring quotes.

“I’m going to succeed because I’m crazy enough to think I can”

-unknown

I am mindful of my thoughts and my thinking. I can see my thoughts float through in streams like the tickertape on the news. While the anchor person is talking, the tickertape of related news scrolls through at the bottom of the screen. My thoughts, my words, do the same in my head but now I am more aware of their speed and content. By just being aware, and nonjudgmental, I have put myself at ease.
“Trust your hunches, they’re usually based on facts filed away just below the conscious level.”

-Dr. Joyce Brothers

I stopped comparing myself to others because I recognize that there is no need. As my favourite cartoon character Popeye would say “I yam what I yam, and that’s all what I yam.” No more, no less and this is all that is required.

“The more you know who you are, and what you want, the less you let things upset you”.

-Bob Harris

I limited time I spent watching television, checking my emails, working, perusing the internet, my attention to tabloid news. I took control of my time and identified where my it was being used by questioning whether it was filling my bucket. By only doing this, I have given myself more peace and freedom. I’ve uncluttered my mind of useless stuff, providing space for me to use my time more constructively on the things and people that matter to me. Frankly, why should I pay attention to Kim Kardashian? Does she spend time wondering what I’m wearing, what I’m doing or who I’m dating?? No! Therefore, why should I invest any of my energy into her?

“I don’t know the key to success but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.”

-Bill Cosby

I evaluated my finances and cut back being consumed. I questioned the need I had in having certain “packages”, my use of energy (i.e. electricity and heat in my home), and the
things I would buy (i.e. clothing, make up, food). By becoming a smart consumer and not consumed, I started to take control of my financial life.

“Out of your vulnerabilities will come your strengths”.

-Sigmund Freud

I incorporated quick reads before starting or ending my day. Every morning before I would leave my home for work or go to bed at night, I would flip through Discover Your Destiny (Sharma, 2004), which I have become so fond of. As I flip through and randomly stop at a page, a line or paragraph pops out at me which focuses me on what matters. I have found that the rush, the immediateness of the things on my “to do” list become insignificant to what really matters in life. Flipping through the pages grounds me.

“Enjoy the little things in life… for one day you’ll look back and realize they were the big things”.

-Robert Brault

I detoxed my life of technology, people and habits that were not supporting my happiness or filling my bucket (Rath, 2004). I deactivated my Facebook account because I recognized that reading other people’s “fabulous Facebook lives” only made me upset. Looking at their lives on Facebook and comparing my life to theirs made me feel less than, sad, unhappy. Once I realized the correlation of Facebook and my mood, I decided to do an experiment by deactivating my account to see if it would make a difference. Happily, it has!

By not checking my Facebook account I have more time to do things that matter to me and I feel better about myself. I don’t have a need to put myself out there by posting pictures
and status updates so people can comment, resulting in “filling my bucket”. I no longer feel bad about myself and the life I lead because there is no comparison. My life is my life and it’s all mine.

“The reason we struggle with insecurity is because we compare our behind-the-scenes with everyone else’s highlight reel”.

-Steve Furtick

I work during my work hours and leave it in my office at the end of the day;

“I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m on my way”.

-Carl Sagan

I unsubscribed from websites that sent me junk mail which uncluttered my inbox. I now subscribe to websites that support my growth and instill me with positive reminders about being mindful, full and happy.

“Your mission: Be so busy loving your life you have no time for hate, regret or fear”.

-Karen Salmansohn

I reviewed the people I was in contact with or thought about frequently. I had to decide whether they were proactive in my life or not, whether they cared about me or not, whether I cared about them or not. Once I reviewed my list of “friends” I was able to take action by deleting their contact information from my phone, email, unfriend them on Facebook (when I
was still actively on), or block them completely from all access points. Doing this gave me more energy to focus on people I do care about and who care about me.

“Some people come in your life as blessings, others come in your life as lessons”.
-unknown

As you can gather, I started taking control of my life by looking at my needs, wants and values. I no longer allowed other people or things to dictate how I was going to live and think. This power was always available to me but because I was so full of fear and emotionally empty – fear of not belonging, not being accepted, not being loved, not being enough, not being who I thought everyone wanted me to be – I had no power. I had relinquished my power by allowing everything and everyone tell me what to do, how to feel, how to be. Now, I was learning how to make myself happy, give myself what I needed and what I wanted. I was filling my bucket.

“All I can do is be me. Whoever that is”.
-Bob Dylan
SECTION IV: FULL CIRCLE

Part I: Coming Together

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are”.

-E.E. Cummings

i. Conclusion

What happens now? How do I continue the journey of authentic living, being and teaching? The answers to these questions are quite simple, yet require dedication and perseverance from me and me only.

Being physically fit and healthy takes dedication to eat well; go to the gym regularly; and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Just as my body, it is up to me to continue exercising the authentic muscle I have started toning which is no different from maintaining physical fitness. In order to exercise my authentic muscle, I will need to: Be mindful of my thoughts, my actions and my intentions; Be aware of my thoughts and actions without judgement; Exercise compassion for others, but most importantly for myself; Live a simple, uncluttered life (mentally and physically) that focuses on what matters to me and my happiness; Listen to my gut, my heart, and my soul’s voice; Continue AI that appreciates and celebrates “what is right in the world” (http://www.dewittjones.com/); Slowdown in my daily life and pace my energy; Give myself time and space to think in silence, without distractions; Live a more balanced life by being aware of my time management and where I exert my energy; Reflect, reflect, and reflect; Write in my journal, investigate my feelings, thought patterns, actions and continuously ask questions, questions that open possibility and lead to better understanding; Feel my feelings by allowing the hurt, pain, happiness, sadness, anger do what it needs to do; Surround myself with people that
make me feel good; Continue being me in all aspects of my life because I am good enough, I am gorgeous, I am talented, I am all the things I used to wish I could and would be. I am.

Having become more mindful and in touch with my inner voice, I have found that I am much more intuitive as well as sensitive to the energy within me and around me. I find I feel and sense all that is around me in a different way. I sense energy levels from people as they speak and move. When others’ are in a hurried, spastic flurry, I have a desperate need to walk away because I cannot handle their aura. When a person’s energy doesn’t align with mine, I have found I need to, I must, walk away. Their energy becomes toxic to mine and/or reminds me of her. The person I once was, her, is someone I never want to be or be connected to again. Therefore, when I encounter someone who reminds me of that person I once was, I have to leave. I have to turn around and walk away because it makes me sick. My stomach churns; I feel sad for the person and am so grateful for not being that way anymore.

Encountering people who have the habits she had is a great reminder in showing me how far I have come. However, at this time, I cannot exercise patience or compassion for those people because, frankly, there is a part of me that is scared I may be sucked back into those toxic patterns again. Or, I cannot exercise compassion because I know there is nothing I can do to help them. There is nothing I can say or do to help them understand my new way of thinking or understand the lifestyle and mindset I have now.

My new found intuitive nature has given me boundaries that are like signals; warning signs. I innately know who to surround myself with and have an awareness of knowing where my energies will support my growth and my happiness. My life use to be a bucket with a big hole in the bottom where I would rely on others to continuously fill my soul with compliments, praise and words. Yet, when they stopped, everything they filled me with would drain and I
found I was left empty again. When I was empty, I would feel bad and then, unknowingly, hunt for people to notice me, give me attention, praise and compliments to continue the vicious cycle of filling my bucket so I could feel good again.

When I was in my unhappy relationship, I would often say “my love tank is empty”. I cannot take credit for this term, but it came from somewhere where it made complete sense at the time. I continually had to have my love tank filled because I was giving, giving, giving, hoping that he would reciprocate the actions and feelings I was giving him. I just wanted to be loved, appreciated and respected. The more I gave to him, the more I hoped and prayed he would give it back. I would cook, clean, buy gifts, throw birthday parties, tell him how much I appreciated him. Yet, he rarely ever reciprocated and when he did it came in drips. Now, because of my new mindset, I no longer have a bucket for others to fill. By going through my journey I am more self-sustainable, self-sufficient in a healthy, proactive way than ever before. I am more grounded and whole.

To remind myself of what or who matters to me, I surround myself with photos of family, and people who embody compassion, love, friendship and the power of relationships. I surround myself with art and music to ignite passion in my soul so I can do whatever it is I am doing with more than just robotic habit. I reflect on my experiences continuously and ask questions that dig deeper to find the roots of my patterns. I ask myself more questions, such as Why and Why not? Asking why helps be dig deeper and why not helps me to think outside the box. Asking why helps me change my perspective and see what was routine to possibility. Just because something has been done a certain way for so long doesn’t mean that it has to continue being done in such a way.
I see possibility in everything I do because of my shift in perspective. I’m not stifled by rules, expectations, most importantly, by fear. Before I would stop or get frustrated, but now I see open skies, opportunity, a chance for more growth. Anything is possible if you have an open mind to think outside the box and courage to create your own path without a roadmap.

**ii. Unauthentic VS. Authentic**

Authenticity is a muscle that needs to be exercised, strengthened, fed, and utilized daily for it to be in prime shape to withstand life’s challenges. Once a person has found their authenticity, understands it to the depth of one’s soul, they cannot go back. They can’t go back to the person they were or the lifestyle they led.

The parallel universe the authentic and unauthentic self runs is on a fine line. I equate it to looking into a mirror. You can see your body moving in sync, however, what’s inside - inside your mind, your gut, your heart are not in sync. These two images are exactly alike on the outside but internally they live by different truths. These two parallel universes of the soul move in synchronicity but act and exude a different aura like no other.

The unauthentic copies while the authentic is. The unauthentic pretends, while the authentic is. The unauthentic tries, while the authentic is. The unauthentic thinks, while the authentic is. The unauthentic exudes doubt and frenetic energy, while the authentic is calm, soothing, knowing. The unauthentic chases its tail and looks for quick fixes or band aids to improve, while the authentic looks within, lets the soul speak, and lets life guide. All in the all, the unauthentic is lost, while the authentic is without judgement and without comparison to any other.
iii. Full Circle

After all my shifts in perspective, I believe once we know ourselves, we are then able to connect and influence those around us. I have come to this deep understanding and connection by sharing my journey with others; the more I share, the more I voice and release the ideas from the confines of my head and I am able to make space for those connections.

At first I was in a muddy pit wrestling with key ideas, such as authentic being, my journey, shedding layers, being real, relationships, students, personal and (or vs.) professional responsibilities, students, teachers, colleagues, people, teaching, learning. I struggled to visualize a clear, simple picture of how they were interconnected to one another and to each other. I knew deep in my gut and mind they were, but as I traveled along this journey I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. I was so immersed in the process that I was getting in touch with each element at the same time, making it was hard to see the bigger picture. I know the ultimate picture is grand, beautiful and simple in its essence, but putting it into words has been difficult. All I can come to at this point in my journey is a Venn diagram, or the symbol for infinity or the “Mobius Strip” Palmer (2004, pp.45-49) so eloquently describes. I strongly recommend you take a read as he describes it in ways I could only wish I could share with you.
When we know who we are, when we speak our truth, when we speak from our souls, when we know our intentions, when we live with integrity, when we live without fear, it is then we are able to influence and be with those around us more fully and completely. This to me is what has enabled me to do better and be better by living, being and teaching authentically. My Journey, My Story.

Before I close this project, I leave you with my obituary. I wrote it two days after returning from Croatia on December 12, 2012 because it is an exercise Sharma (2004) encourages one to write. As I read “I want you to write your obituary” (p. 174) I knew I would, I knew I could and I knew I had to.

*I want you to dream big again and play with the potential your life is meant to be, my friend. This is an emotional experience; it may even bring tears to your eyes. But I want you to write with all your emotion and every ounce of your love. Open your heart to this exercise. (p. 174)*

And I did. It was by writing this that I was able to ground myself into the person I always wanted to be – me.
iv. Obituary

“Luctor et emerge”

(I struggle and I emerge)

- latin phrase

Wendy Maria Blaskovic died today. She was a person who continuously strived for excellence beyond her means and anyone’s expectations from the creative fire that burned in her belly and the authenticity she exuded. She had a brilliant mind with a vivid imagination that enabled her to take an idea, transfer it to her hands and put forth for all to see. She produced to give back, to give life, to give happiness to others because she believed that this was a priceless gift she could share.

No matter the project, when she had an idea, it came from her heart, soul and hands. Her Mom never doubted her abilities and always knew she could and would achieve whatever she had in her stubborn, determined mind. Her Mom was her cheerleader.

Wendy once said she didn’t know where this knowledge, her innate ability came from in just knowing how to create, build, mould, take an idea from her head and make it come to life. A part of her believed it came from her Dad. At least she hoped it did by somehow carrying his DNA. Carrying his DNA meant he was still a part of her even when he passed. Whether it was DNA or a knack for creating, she didn’t care much because she was enthralled in the wonderment of it all. The process excited her, fuelled her passion and made her feel alive like never before. She tingled with glee.

As a teacher, she pushed her students to achieve personal excellence because she wanted them to be proud; she wanted them to be passionate; she wanted them to feel good without
comparing themselves to others. They knew they were great people just as they were and she wanted them to know this for themselves too.

Her students flocked to her class because they knew they were human beings who were respected and cared for no matter what their real lives entailed. She wanted them to feel they had a cheerleader for them as her Mom was for her. She knew how it felt and she wanted to give them this much because they were never just a number or an anonymous student in her class. They were people.

As a friend, Wendy stumbled along while trying to find herself and understand who she was in the midst of all the faces and personalities. However, when she found friendships, she gave them her all – dedicated, passionate, warm and a (mischievous) partner in crime. Her friendships were about quality not quantity. It didn’t matter if she had five or five hundred friends. All she cared was they were real and meaningful.

As for loves, Wendy had many loves. Wendy was passionate, warm and desirable for her sense of humour and laughter. Boy did she ever love to laugh! She believed the best in people and believed they had the same intent and interest in their love for her. Because of this, she sometimes left hurt but never regretful. She tried, she gave, she took and continued on to leave many regretful hearts behind – theirs, not hers.

As a daughter, she loved her parents very much and was beyond grateful for their support. She would always say that if it wasn’t for her Mom and Dad she wouldn’t have been able to accomplish all she did. Her family, her only real family, Mom and Dad, were very important to her and she held them close to her heart despite when rolling her eyes.

She always wanted a larger family to connect with and did when she travelled to Croatia. It was there that she felt closer to her Dad and the life she should have lived. Her old soul felt at
home surrounded by cobblestone streets, buildings made of stone, the stories elders would share, smoking and drinking in coffee bars that lined the streets during the summer. It was a lifestyle she melted into when she was there. However, when locals commented on how she resembled her aunt Pina, she detested the similarity. When they said she looked like her Dad or Mom, she beamed with pride. She was theirs.

Wendy loved all things beautiful and craved for connection – connection to the real, to the authentic faces she met. She wanted it all and strived to have it all, especially, when she came into her own and realized what mattered in her life. It wasn’t about things or stuff or a list of accomplishments. All she wanted was to be loved, cared for, feel good, feel alive and live. The safe life she led up to her early 30’s was not one she called her own. It was later she became bold, bright and alive to the core of her being. She lived and she lived happier than she could have ever imagined. Her Dad would have been proud.
References


