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The Bio-Psycho-Social Model Of Healing Narratives: Sifting Through The Abstractions Of A Nascent Mind

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THE BIO-PSYCHO-SOCIAL MODEL OF HEALING NARRATIVES:
SIFTING THROUGH THE ABSTRACTIONS OF A NASCENT MIND

AN ACADEMIC MEMOIR

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS TO GRADUATE WITH HONORS

By FLANNERY HARPOLE

MAY 2004
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
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Abstract

This thesis explores the effects of significant events in my life that have shaped my personality. By writing about events in a narrative format, I have used techniques of creative writing to illustrate elements of interest in a clinical psychology approach. Using the Bio-psycho-social model, I divided these events into vignettes that were placed under one of these categories: biological processes, psychological processes, or socio-emotional processes. Using this style helped me to tease apart events and work through them as a person would be required to do in pursuit of a Masters in Counseling Psychology. In using both a clinical format and creative writing, I distanced myself from highly emotional events in my life and looked at them from an elevated perspective, allowing a natural transition from merely remembering events to actually understanding, accepting, and embracing their impact on my life. This thesis solidifies the needs that I had, as an incoming student to Carroll, to identify and overcome the nameless instability that lingered after high school. This academic memoir shows the emotional process of self-discovery that is essential for any person pursuing clinical therapy.
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Know the truth and it shall make you odd.
-Flannery O'Connor

People who write about things over and over in the same ways aren't getting any better. There has to be growth or change in the way they view their experiences.
-Jamie Pennebaker
Introduction
In the first class that I took at Carroll College in the fall of 2000, I had no idea that I was taking the first steps of both a professional and personal journey. Now, at the end of my four years, I realize that this combination of professional and personal exploration created my deep attraction to the field of Psychology.

Psychology classes, which provided an academic framework for personality analysis, seemed to be designed to help me examine all the different tensions in my personal life. As I found out in my Theories of Counseling class (Cory, 2001), I did not have to completely understand “my issues” before pursuing graduate school, but I was thirsty to explore my problems. I would later learn that this was also an ethical responsibility if I wanted to become a counselor or therapist.

The more I studied psychology, the more it seemed to hold the answers to the nameless confusion I felt about myself. Personal therapy is not required for all therapists, but most fields of psychology strongly encourage professionals to undergo personal therapy as one aspect of developing greater skill in the field. I believe personal therapy, required or not, is the responsibility of the therapist. Not exploring issues can cause many unnecessary stressors for both clients and therapists. A therapist who has not dealt with his or her own issues and carries around buried and emotionally charged problems has “blind spots.” Blind spots are defined as vulnerabilities and personal prejudices (Cory, 2001). When emotions are left un-addressed, they are uncontrollable, and may manifest in different ways, including feeling angry towards a client. Triggers can be unavoidable for even well-meaning therapists if they have not at least started to explore their own problems. No one is without prejudices and everyone can benefit from exploring them. Clients can also be harmed or driven further into their pain by being
reacted to negatively by a therapist. For example, if a therapist has a buried dislike for homosexuals, and a homosexual client is depressed because he or she has a fear of rejection upon "coming out," the therapist can do serious damage by reacting poorly to the self-disclosure. Negative reactions can affirm the client’s self-disgust and drive the client deeper into feelings of inadequacy.

I independently pursued avenues that I thought would bring me to a better self-understanding, but I needed more structure. I needed to create an environment in which I could distance myself from emotion-laden events, while still acknowledging them and working through them. I believe in holistic healing: body, mind, and spirit. I do not believe that there are areas of my life that I can ignore. If I were to understand my perception of the world, I would have to explore all the different aspects of myself. This thesis became the vehicle for beginning a more systematic self-exploration.

For this thesis I have combined the Bio-psycho-social model with memoir style writing. The model frames my personal experiences and allows me to apply the abstract concepts of psychology to a specific case study—my own life.

I knew that writing a memoir would bring me intimately close to the issues I feared to address while simultaneously forcing me to analyze how I really felt, so that I could “own the experiences” and not let the experiences “own me.” So for a semester I wrote about all the experiences that triggered discomfort in me, but without a model, my thesis seemed incomplete. I wanted to find a model that would incorporate mind, body, and spirit to help me arrange and develop the life stories that were surfacing as troubling or confusing issues in my own life—for instance, my experiences with an uncle who sexually abused me, and the restrictions I felt from my own need to please others.
Ultimately, I chose the Bio-psycho-social model of human development because it was holistic and categorical, so that I could tease apart the stories of my life instead of lumping them together under personality formation. The Bio-psycho-social model would allow me to explore the different areas of my perceptual development. Overlooking any aspect of the Bio-psycho-social model allowed me to blame people or conditions that were not the problem. I could not blame my need to please for my subsequent sexual abuse and I could not blame sexual abuse on my desire to please people. In order to write about these problems, I read several memoirs to gain insight as to how my vignettes should be written. The vignette style of storytelling was very fitting for my thesis, so I adopted it. Then, I wrote seven vignettes and placed them into three separate categories of this model: biological processes, cognitive processes, and socio-emotional processes. Although it is difficult to determine definitely where to place each vignette because the categories are overlapping, these categories make the important themes much clearer. Therapists who use the Bio-psycho-social model do not expect clear lines between any of the categories. This overlapping model is depicted in the figure below.

My basic goal in writing this thesis is “self-actualization.” Self-actualization is a term coined by Abraham Maslow, describing people who are achieving their fullest
potential for confidence, health, and happiness. There are processes that can aid in a person’s journey to this goal.

Psychologist Jamie Pennebaker did extensive research with Holocaust survivors, who showed remarkable improvement when talk therapy was used to explore personal history (2002). The survivors showed remarkable improvement (Pennebaker, 2002). Then Pennebaker furthered his experiments by asking people to write about their experiences. The addition of writing generated even greater improvement in Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) symptoms (2002). Pennebaker's research made huge inroads into validating the process of healing through written self-disclosure. Using Pennebaker’s methods, I have experienced the power of healing from traumatic experience through writing and, more importantly have started the process of optimizing my potential. I am only beginning my journey, and by no means do I expect to stop exploring my own personal perceptions. This thesis marks the start of a life-long project.
Case History

A case history establishes a foundation of knowledge about a client in order for a therapist to gain some insight into the client’s needs during the session. For clients who are not able to verbalize their needs, a case history helps the client and therapist begin a dialogue. Case histories are the foundation of knowledge about a client. For this particular piece, my case history will educate the reader about the details of my life that I feel contributed to the forming of my perspectives.

I am going to graduate from Carroll College in a matter of weeks and for the first time in my life, since I began school at age seven, I will not return to school again in September. I am twenty-two years old. The four years that I have been at Carroll have passed as quickly as I was warned that they would. Every year I have been at Carroll, I have felt surer of myself than the previous year. My boyfriend, Andy, and I have lived together for almost two years. Our friend Ellie lives with us too.

Before I lived in Helena, I lived in the small town of Avon. Avon is thirty miles west of Helena. I was born just outside of Avon on my great grandfather's property. My dad rebuilt our house when, in 1980, he moved from Oregon with his nine Percherone horses that comprised his small horse-logging operation. My mom met my dad on our family property. They both remember that incident as "true love." My mom delivered me in a snowstorm in December. My dad and the midwife were the only other people present at my birth.

My dad, a Carroll graduate, got out of horse logging and returned to college for a creative writing degree. My bother Derry, my only sibling, was born two years after I arrived. My family moved to Ireland in 1985, a year after Derry joined us, so that my
Dad could finish school at University College Galway. My first memories are of the houses, the stone walls, and the endless fields of green grass in Ireland. Even though I had already started school in Ireland, when we returned to Avon I missed the cut-off date to start school and had to wait until I was seven to begin first grade. It didn't bother me to go to school later in the U.S. since my Irish schooling was a different experience.

My school in Avon was composed of eight grades in three classrooms. There were three grades to a classroom. When I started school I had spent very little time with the townspeople of Avon. School in Avon was a challenging social experience because my parents were on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from the other families in Avon. Many of my classmates were reluctant to befriend me when they found out that I was not a "Christian." I felt judged and inadequate and, from first grade, I started to say things to please people, rather than telling people how I really felt. I developed what I now call a "pleaser" personality. I kept my liberal opinions to myself and tried to mold myself into the person that the other forty-eight kids in my school thought I should be.

Although my family was "weird," no one turned my parents away when they donated their time to the school. My mom ran the Booster Club, taught art classes, and went to every school board meeting. She even ran for the school board. The likelihood of her getting elected was improbable enough as a woman, but impossible considering her divergent political beliefs. In addition, her articulate, well-educated English was not the dialect of Avon.

My dad also volunteered to teach creative writing at the school. Week after week, he would run seminar style classes for the kids in all three classrooms. I always felt so much smarter than my classmates when I answered my dad's questions just the way I
knew he would want to hear them answered. After discovering how easy it was to have friends in school, which I accomplished once I began saying what they wanted to hear, I realized that everybody was generally more pleasant when they heard what they wanted to hear. I never out-and-out lied to my parents; I "embellished the truth." My dad had always said, "There is nothing wrong with making a story interesting," and I loved to "please" people. Even though I was a well-behaved kid, I still took liberties with the truth.

The summer I was twelve, I worked for my co-ed basketball coach on his ranch during haying season. For the first two summers that I worked for Joe and Patti Bignell, I cooked for their haying crew and watched their three and then four children. I learned all about working really hard seven days a week. I was told it built character. I thought "building character" was a way of saying that no job in the world would ever be as hard as haying, and that I couldn't wait to work just forty hours a week in an air-conditioned building.

It was also fun. My brother worked with me for two years. He hated haying, and to pass the time on his tractor made up songs about how much he hated it. He carried a camel pack full of water and in the sweltering heat he would suck a bunch of it into his mouth and let the water roll down the front of his shirt as if he were drunk, letting it soak his clothes and cool him down in the baking sun. Sometimes, when he was really bored, he would spit water at the hot exhaust pipe protruding from the front of his 1942 tractor, letting the misty steam engulf his face as the water hit the exhaust pipe. I loved watching him work; he always got his job done, even with distraction. I, on the other hand, could never admit that I didn't like working hard. Joe was a great employer because he related
everything to basketball and life. We cleaned out the hayloft of Joe's barn while he screwed down plywood, and spray-painted a basketball court on the floor. We got up every morning before work and played basketball for an hour.

When I graduated from eighth grade, only one other person graduated with me. After Avon school, I traveled sixty miles roundtrip to Deer Lodge to attend Powell County High School every day. My parents never had strict rules, but I knew very clearly what would disappoint them. I tried to act as I thought I was supposed to. I competed in basketball, softball, and track. I skied all winter long, and for three years I taught skiing as a PSIA certified ski instructor. I also sang in the choir, minimally participated in drama, and was a member of the peer mediators group. However, I broke my track record as a "good girl" by dating a boy named Andy, who turned out to be "trouble maker." I liked him because he was interesting. He had what seemed to me to be a tough life, and that had caused him to think about the world more than the other kids I knew. We mainly talked on the phone because I lived so far out of town. I spent hours on the phone in Avon, and our phone bill tripled when I started high school. I was always a very talkative and social person, which had been difficult in Avon. As a "drama queen," I always felt there was something very sensational going on in my life and I told everyone about it. Part of that came from my delight in telling good stories. Gossip ruled my small school, and if the gossip was really good, then everyone wanted to know. Gossip was another way to please people, to have friends.

There were many times when gossip backfired on me (as it tends to do), and all my "friends" would seem to hate me. I didn't have any close friends in high school. I had decent friends, but none of them shared my views on human nature, politics or
religion, and I have kept in touch with none of them in college. My connection to my peers came through gossip and sports. Sports activities themselves, however, were bittersweet because the varsity basketball team my senior year won only two games. Track, and more specifically javelin, was the only sport that ever went well for me; it was not offered at Carroll.

When I finally graduated from Powell County High School, I enrolled at Carroll College. I had the opportunity to travel away from home and I found myself afraid to leave the comfort of my family support, even though for a long time I talked about going to school in Seattle at the University of Washington. Coming to Carroll was the best choice that I made for myself in my teenage years. Over my four years here, my need to prove myself to my family has decreased. I have learned a great deal about relationships, and I no longer use drama as a way to attract people's friendships and approval. Most of all, however, I have faced my demons: I now no longer allow men to be inappropriately sexual towards me, and I no longer feel that I have to constantly please others or prove myself. I have also learned how to trust in others and myself.
Biological Processes

Biological processes are the first category identified in the Bio-psycho-social model. Biological processes are defined in this model as the changes in an individual’s physiology, such as height, weight, motor skills, and hormones. There are essentially two parts to these processes. External changes such as height and weight are the more obvious aspects of biological processes. Internal changes, however, have a significant effect on many of the autonomic (automatic) systems in the body. Hormones, as an example, are known to control circadian (sleep) patterns as well as hair growth, mood swings, sexual feelings, and pain signals, just to name a few.

In order to give a clear understanding of the various ways in which physiology affects behavior, I offer the following selected list of physiological functions affecting behavior. Healthy sleep patterns have been shown to have a direct impact on a person’s physical and mental health; sleep deprivation can cause hallucinations, difficulty concentrating, disorientation, and irritability (Rosenzweig, M.R., Breedlove, S.M. Leiman, A.L., 2002). Another example of biology affecting behavior is the stress response, an involuntary action of the autonomic nervous system in which levels of Adrenocorticotropic hormones (ACTH) increase (Rosenzweig, M.R., et al., 2002). Prolonged levels of stress hormones, such as circulating levels of cortisol, create a greater tendency for fight or flight (2002). A further example is hypoglycemia, the inability for the body to stabilize blood sugar, which is linked to many behavior problems ranging from rage to hallucinations (2002).

Androgens, released during early childhood, have been shown to significantly alter behavior. Recent studies reveal that children from ages six to ten experience a large
surge of androgens that create feelings similar to sexual attraction. Because of these androgen surges, children become familiar with sexual feelings long before they are capable of sexual acts. This physiological process helps to explain why children are often disgusted when they associate their parents with sex. If children were taught about sex prior to this androgen surge, then they are more likely to perceive that information as interesting and not “gross.” Well-intended parents who wish to educate their children about healthy sexual feelings are oftentimes met with resistant and children who are not comfortable discussing the topic. Not surprisingly, children who are uncomfortable with talking about their sexual feelings are often reluctant to report sexual abuse.

Biological processes, both internal and external, affect behavior constantly, but biological functions are often overlooked when trying to understand human behavior. In order for this thesis to illuminate aspects of my behavior, it is essential to look at the role physiology plays. The epiphany I experienced during Dr. Perkin’s, my physiopsychology professor, lecture on those androgen surges helped me to realize that I needed to incorporate a biological model in my thesis. I could not figure out why I had never told my parents about sexual abuse even though everything they had tried to teach me would have guided me to talk to them. Social factors alone did not adequately explain my reluctance; androgen surges do help to explain the question that puzzled me. The following vignettes: Little Rock’s and The Kiss, are the two stories that I have placed under "biological processes" to reflect my early response to unwanted sexual attentions, which were influenced by internal physiological processes.
Little Rock’s

At thirteen I had no idea about the ramifications of growing breasts, except for the fact that they messed up my basketball shot, clearly served no useful purpose, and required extra and uncomfortable clothes. The experience of ogling male eyes on my chest was rare since I lived in a small community with few peers and spent most of my time with my family.

My family and I had just returned to Avon after two years in Ireland. We had spent many a fond hour in the pubs in Galway, where whole families gathered. In search of a pub-like atmosphere, my parents and their friends started going to Little Rock’s Bar on Friday night to meet with friends and catch up on the week’s happenings. By early evening, my family and friends filled the bar, listening to the Irish music played by many musicians including Mike on the fiddle, Jim on the concertina, my Dad on the Bodhran.

I was a gregarious child. I wove my way in and out of people, begging my parents for quarters to play the video game in the back corner of the bar. It was only 6:30 P.M. or so on that particular night, and I had already talked to almost everyone in the place. The shower of words I poured out in response to any question endlessly entertained my parents’ friends. I lapped up their adoration, filled to the gills with their loving attention. However, with the attention span of a thirteen-year-old, I quickly grew bored.

After I had talked to everyone, I drifted over to my Dad, to see if I could weasel some more quarters out of him. Dad was talking to his good friend Charlie, so I settled into people watching, which is still one of my favorite activities. My eyes landed on a peculiar man whom, unlike everyone else, I did not know. He looked like a painter or
construction worker in his grungy cut-offs and roasty red sunburn. His shaggy blond hair hung down almost covering his face. He seemed an eccentric type, which was not uncommon in my parents’ circle of friends. Had I paid close attention to him, I probably would have noticed that no one held a conversation with him for very long. The subtlety of adult etiquette, however, was lost on me. My dad wandered off to play music, so I decided to introduce myself to this stranger who was being friendly with all my friends.

“Trouble,” as he insisted his name was, suggested that we sit down at a table and visit. This was perfectly natural. He seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say, but I didn’t understand where the conversation was going. I was oblivious to his subtle sexual innuendos. I think that I was still telling him what my favorite subject in school was and other basic demographic questions when he interrupted to ask my age.

“Thirteen,” I answered, as if it was obvious. Well apparently it wasn’t. Trouble replied, “You’re still a bit young. I would have guessed by those breasts of yours that you were older. Why don’t you track me down in a few years when you’re sixteen? I’ll make it so it doesn’t hurt.”

After a minute, when I registered what he was talking about, my stomach sort of dropped. I felt disgusted that I could have brought on attention like that. I sat in the bench seat with the din of voices buzzing around me, feeling a little sick and reinforced in my hatred of breasts. I must have made Trouble a little uncomfortable with the look of blank confusion on my face. He disappeared out the door shortly after.

My mom appeared at my shoulder, and said it was time to go home. I must have shown some signs of uneasiness because she asked me if I was OK. I couldn’t figure out how to tell her what had just transpired, so I said that I was fine. I curled up on the cold,
partially reclined front seat of our van and hugged myself, while my mom ran into Safeway to get some last-minute groceries. I lay awake for a long time after the thirty-minute drive back to Avon. I hoped that I would never see Trouble again.

I must have thought about that night thousands of times before I could acknowledge what had happened. His words reached far beyond that small sheltered world where I lived, and jolted my trust. As time passed, I tucked away the experience with Trouble. I didn’t lose trust in adults after all. I seemed basically unchanged by the whole incident. A little bump along life’s way was not that damaging, especially when I was surrounded by so much security. Yet the peculiarity of Trouble’s actions made me realize that life wasn’t perfect, and that other people wouldn’t simply give me what I wanted or expected them to give.
The Kiss

I loved going to my Aunt Marta and Uncle Ian’s house for dinner. Their home was warm, glowing, and filled with the aroma of Ian’s incredible cooking. Tonight we would feast on a couple different kinds of curry. A strange new band, *Chumba Wamba*, was playing and later we would settle into a movie on the big screen with surround sound. The only blip in this perfect scene was my Dad’s unspecified dislike for Ian when he called him, “the Charming Chancer,” which I didn’t understand at the time.

Ian, always the perfect host, would charm everyone with his stories of crocodile wrestling and scuba diving in Australia, his home country. He would charm me, whispering in my ear about my beauty and how special I was, as all my uncles should, I thought. His thick Australian accent was soothing and rich. Ian was more fun because he let me, just fifteen years old, drink more wine than necessary when my parents weren’t looking. He loved to take me hot tubbing and skiing. He was the greatest uncle any girl could ever hope for.

Ian seemed so much more interested in the things that most adults wouldn’t waste time talking with me about. He always talked to me about boys. “Have you had sex yet Flan?” he would ask me on a regular basis. “You should,” he would say, “it’s really fun.” How quickly our intimate conversations would cease when my parents or his wife entered the room.

We hot-tubbed after dinner. Ian rubbed my feet and legs for most of the time in the hot tub under the bubbles, while my dad told stories and my mom helped my brother freeze icicles in his hair from the steam rising like a suffocating blanket from hundred-
degree water hitting sub-zero temperatures. Hot-tubbing capped off another wonderful family evening.

It was time for my family and I to make the brief trip back to Avon, eight miles down the road. We stood on the steps of the house, completing the night with the ritual round of hugs and kisses to everyone. I hugged Ian, and leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. Instead, to my surprise, I found his large slimy tongue pushed through my lips and into my mouth.

Disbelief, disgust, and embarrassment exploded through my mind. I glanced around expecting someone to say something, but no one had noticed. As we went to the car, confusion clouded out the conversation of my parents. "Was that acceptable? That didn't feel right. Should I say something? Would that cause too many problems? He must have just been drunk. Maybe it was an accident. It's gross to talk about these things with my parents." The entire incident was too baffling for me to address. I couldn't focus on any particular feeling, so I pushed all feelings away. I never said anything to anyone. I slept restlessly for several days. Then I finally settled on his being drunk as the reason and pushed it out of my mind, where it stayed for a long time.

Only last year, at twenty-one, was I finally able to think about that night. It has taken a long time to get over. Now, I think I feel pity toward Ian for being so sexually disturbed. I don't hate him, but I am thankful that I will probably never see him again.
Cognitive Processes

Cognitive processes are the second part of the Bio-psycho-social model. Cognitive processes in this model are defined as the changes in an individual’s thoughts, intelligence, and language. Cognitive processes involve what Aaron Beck, a developer of cognitive therapy, describes as “automatic thought” (Cory, 2001). Beck discusses how language powerfully affects expectation, which shapes a person’s perceptions. He also explains that language usage can correct unhealthy internal dialogue, one of the keys to mental health.

Negative internal dialogue is one example of a cognitive process that adversely affects behavior. Using negatively connotation words to refer to oneself often creates the self-fulfilling prophecy (2001). Thus, Beck finds that the main variable present in depressive people is self-criticism (2001).

Another example of how cognitive processes affect behavior comes from the premise that thought creates language and language creates thought. Albert Bandura discusses this principle of “reciprocal determination” when he describes racial discrimination as a consequence of classically conditioned language use (2001). For example, the derogatory terms associated with African-Americans have been shown to create and sustain racial stereotyping. People who used racist language often cannot explain the reason for disliking a member of a different race; when asked for reasons they simply reiterate the idea behind a term rather than use words that would describe an individual (2001). Hence, language itself shapes perceptions of others and self.

As the above example shows, cognitive processes are one of the primary contributors to prejudice. The use of language creates belief constructs that can
unconsciously affect the way a person treats himself or herself and others. The following vignettes, *My Karma Ran Over My Dogma*, and *Basketball: From Pleasure to Pain*, demonstrate how these cognitive processes played a formative role in my perceptions. In my case, the language I used shaped my self-perceptions and contributed to my low self-esteem and my need to please others.
My Karma Ran Over My Dogma

Only two hundred or so souls graced our tiny town of Avon, Montana. The small, simple houses of the few dozen families who lived in Avon proper lined the northern side of the road that runs parallel to Highway 12 and a row of cottonwood trees along the Little Blackfoot River. In a town that size, I expected only love and acceptance. I was a tremendously social child, although I lived in relative seclusion two miles out of town. Throughout elementary school I jumped at any chance to hang out with my peers. When my brother, Derry, and I were invited to go to the AWANA group (the local children’s Bible study group) that met on Wednesdays at the little church that stood in the middle of the main street, we were elated.

The AWANA group on that Wednesday night was luring in the masses of little children, probably fifteen of them, by serving up banana splits along with Jesus. They intended to convert little born-agains through thirty feet of ice cream, syrup, bananas, and whipped cream, all stuffed into a new brown plastic rain gutter (the gutter would no doubt be nailed to the eaves of the church for repairs after our feast). After the tedium of answering questions about morality, we all lined up for the sacrament of ice cream and whipped sugar, eager to begin the spiritual journey that lay amongst the puffs of whipped cream and bruised bananas.

While I dug into the ice cream with the passionate fervor that people must look for in a young Christian, Derry was, unbeknownst to me, led into a small room in the church where the local pastor and his cronies interrogated him about finding Jesus. Years later, I heard about how Derry sat in the room, his typical trusting enthusiasm turning into discomfort as the pastor explained the fire and brimstone “truth” about life, or rather
after-life. This news was alarming enough in itself, but (apparently in response to
Derry’s crying) they decided to mention that he could do nothing to save his family from
eternal damnation. He could still, however, be saved himself if he joined the church.
Meanwhile, floating on my own cloud in that junk-food heaven, I didn't notice any
difference in Derry's demeanor when he showed up at the banana split trough. Like
Derry, I also had unconditional trust in adults.

When my friend Courtney, in the library at school the next day, told me that she
wasn't supposed to share her markers with me, I made no connection with the little
church. I asked Courtney why. She informed me that her parents didn’t want her to play
with someone who did not believe the way she did. Courtney walked away from the little
brown table and I stared at the bookshelves, wondering how any book--even one as
serious as the Bible--could make someone so unfriendly. Reaching for a copy of my
favorite Box Car Children’s book I curled up with it, and felt sorry for myself. When
school ended that day, I was relieved to return to the safety and seclusion of my house.

Over the soothing aroma of sautéing garlic, my mom asked about my day at
school. After explaining my confusion about my friend's actions, I drifted off to play
some frisbee with my brother. Perhaps after we kids had ventured out into the back yard,
my parents discussed this problem or perhaps neither of them realized what strange
socialization was taking place in our little school. The injustice of Courtney’s rejection
was lost on my undeveloped, concrete mind, but it made me sad. Yearning for my peer
group to embrace me, I appeased them by appearing to agree with their strange and
restrictive ideas.
Through classical conditioning I learned, just like Pavlov’s drooling dogs, not to speak about my liberal lifestyle. For example, I learned that when I referred to sleeping naked or eating certain health foods, my revelations were met with disapproval. Sometimes I would pretend to accept Jesus into my heart, or took gifts of Bibles so that I could hang out with my peers. In the end, I got along relatively well with my “friends” at school, with the exception of certain kids who could never find it in their little Christian hearts to accept me.

I was close to the eighth grade when my mom finally told me the story about what had transpired at the church with Derry. He was my favorite person in the world and picturing the fear he must have felt in that strange little church in that strange little room with those strange little-minded people was too much. A light bulb of fury turned on in my mind as I finally recognized the religious persecution Derry and I had experienced for years. After years of censoring my own identity, my recognition of their ignorance and injustice permanently alienated me from religion and my so-called community of Avon. I began to relinquish my pursuit of acceptance. The battle was not worthy of a fight.

It has taken me the duration of high school and most of college to fully release myself from the bonds of my peer group’s intolerance, and to live for myself. I have also finally discovered that spirituality and religion are not synonymous. There is still no religious dogma that I have found comfortable enough to accept. My spiritual needs are fulfilled in many ways now, but I am still reluctant to participate in group spirituality. I also realize that losing trust can be a very good process for maturation; I am probably better for this experience because I was forced to consider what my own spiritual beliefs are, just as I was forced to confront and reject the “pretend” identity that I assumed in
order to be accepted. After all this, the story ends on a happy note: as my dad always says, “my karma ran over my dogma.”
Basketball

The tension-filled locker room stunk with the fear of failure. Pessimism had become a way of life for the six seniors who had stuck with the basketball program for all four years. The Lady Wardens varsity squad won a total of two games in the two seasons preceding my first varsity experience. Our teachers and peers seemed to think that we were going to end up playing as poorly as the previous varsity teams. The problem was the change over of three varsity coaches in three years. For three years there had been no established continuity, no basketball program. During our first season as varsity, we lost the first twelve games and things weren’t looking good. Basketball was a job. Still, the job earned us popularity and that was a hard privilege to relinquish.

Basketball had started out with the pleasure of playing for the sheer fun of it. Competing in this sport changed my perception of Avon when I finally joined the co-ed team as a fourth grader. Our volunteer coach, Joe Bignell, inspired males and females equally. Playing for Joe dispelled any quality of self-doubt. Avon social interaction revolved around sports and the parents in Avon were just happy that their children were able to participate in sports. The old courts that we played on dated back sixty or so years, and had not had one penny put into them since. The heaters that hung from the ceiling usually produced only a small layer of condensation on the un-insulated hardwood floor, but we played our hearts out there--win, lose or draw. In fact, during my eighth grade season, we lost every game, but I had the most confidence-boosting season of my basketball career.

Now playing for Powell County High School, losing every game my junior year did not produce the same enthusiasm. I transitioned from being internally motivated to
play to finding myself playing only for fear of losing my identity of an “athlete”--which offered the one certain way to secure popularity and survive the cruelty of high school. I hated playing and so did my teammates, if they were honest with themselves. I was fortunate in many ways. For starters, my parents went to every game, not to live vicariously through me, but to support something that they thought I loved. Many of my teammates experienced harsh criticism at home for the basketball “problem.” The pressure from faculty was also strong. Some teachers told us that if we did not improve, funding would be cut for girls basketball. With the exception of the play-by-play commentator for the local radio station, no one seemed to have anything good to say about the team.

When I consider how much negativity I suffered through to do something that required so much work, I wonder why I was so reluctant to quit. The brain is a fascinating mechanism. Emotional pain and physical pain are said to trigger the same centers in the brain, but unlike pulling away from a hot stove, I did not pull away from the humiliation of playing basketball. Between humiliation, exhaustion, and pressure to perform, basketball became an emotional time bomb.

The bomb was detonated at the end of an away game our senior year, in the pungent boys locker room in Darby after another sound loss. The team erupted into a huge fight, which echoed throughout the emptying gym. Only a few punches landed on their targets, but the words that were spoken could not be easily withdrawn. I don’t know why anyone was shocked. After the anger died down, I finally started to see that basketball was not worth the emotional strain it caused.
I did not, however, quit the team. I was fortunate enough to find another activity that got my adrenaline going before a game. I started singing the national anthem before games. At my senior-parent night game, my dad and I sang the anthem into a duct-taped microphone for my last game ever. A black-and-white picture of that night was the only piece of memorabilia that I kept of my team t-shirts, sweat shirts, letters, and awards. Changing my athlete identity was a difficult thing to do. My early withdrawal through singing made the transition more relieving than nostalgic. I learned to never again sacrifice my identity for my happiness.
Socio-emotional Processes

Socio-emotional processes are the third part of the Bio-psycho-social model. Socio-emotional processes are defined as changes in an individual’s relationships with other people, changes in emotions, and changes in personality. Making socio-emotional changes has been my ultimate goal in writing this thesis. To give a clear understanding how socio-emotional processes affect behavior I provide the following list of examples that demonstrate such affects.

The most extreme example of socio-emotional processes are the changes that arise from traumatic experiences such as rape. Victims of rape typically respond in one of two emotional styles to the assault. An “expressive style” includes showing fear, anger, anxiety, crying, sobbing, and tenseness. A “controlled style” includes showing a calm exterior (Seligman, M.E., Rosenhan, D.L., 1998). Emotional responses in the context of classical conditioning can result in the victims hating all men for example, rather than the man responsible for the violation (Cory, 2001). Both of these emotional styles reflect “locus of control,” which is the way a person references his or her role in the world, internally and externally (2001). In the case of rape, a person could change from an internal to an external locus of control, and this could affect the way a person would react towards all men, namely, as a potential victim.

Another example of socio-emotional processes happens when a persons is trying to secure a particular job. Outside influences could affect the person’s ability to achieve his or her goal. Repeated “failure” could result in a change in his or her personality from optimistic to pessimistic viewpoints.
Socio-emotional processes like the previous two examples are affected by multiple factors. Socio-emotional processes are the internal mechanisms that a person uses to interpret incoming information from the environment, but unlike cognitive processes, are emotionally based rather than linguistically based. The vignettes *Accusations*, *Revelations*, and *Amarillo* are associated with this subsection focus on my emotional experiences with people, which affected my personality at that time and thus influenced the way I interacted socially.
Accusations

The landscape was bland with melted snow revealing the previous falls decaying plant life. My mom drove me back from a weekend in Deer Lodge. I blathered on about Andy Stobie, the boy that I liked. My mom shifted in her seat as the conversation changed. She reached over and turned on the heat. I don't know what we were talking about or how the topic was broached. I don't know if she had misgivings about it. Maybe her speech was rehearsed; whatever the rehearsal, I'm sure it did not go as planned.

All of a sudden she blurted out, “Ian is not your boyfriend, Flannery, so tonight, I don't think that it is appropriate to sit on his lap, OK?” My face flushed as anger raced through my body. Ian was a rare topic of conversation these days, even though he was by far my favorite uncle of all time. Looking back, my fragile self-image and my need for others' approval were being countered by my uncle's constant attention. I never had to do anything to please him, not like everyone else.

I didn't think that there was anything wrong with sitting on Ian's lap; I had been doing it since I met him. He welcomed it. I pointed this out to my mother, the anger clear in my voice. “What in the hell does it matter?” I demanded, defiance being second nature to me in high school.

“Well,” my mom replied, "Marta really isn’t comfortable with it."

"If Marta doesn't appreciate it, why the hell doesn't she tell me then?” I shot back, with tears rushing to my eyes. "I mean Ian is her goddamn husband. Shouldn't she be talking to him? I mean, for fuck sake, he's forty and I'm sixteen. Why don't you talk to the adult here?"
In most disagreements I did not lose my composure, or rely on swearing to make a point, but this time I felt particularly out of control.

Mostly, I pondered whether there was validity to my mom’s statement. Until that moment I had never questioned whether my relationship with Ian was anything other than a healthy one. I returned to the house a mess of tears and disappeared into my bedroom for several hours, too humiliated to face my family. I could hear Ian's laugh ringing throughout the house as he scored huge points on the scrabble game. I felt no anger towards him yet. He felt like my only ally in the family. My mom’s apparent “divide-and-conquer” strategy had not worked. Instead my stubborn defensiveness drew me closer to him.

Several weeks after the incident, my aunt left me a card and a gift in my room, a peace offering. I was a little confused, but relieved that I did not have to feel the tension between us any more. Later I found out that Marta, who did not have children, had asked my mom whether it was normal for me, at sixteen, to sit on my uncle’s lap.

My mom, fearing for my safety, did not know how to handle the situation. I do not feel hurt by her actions. This was just one more example of Ian’s ability to create unnecessarily uncomfortable situations that the rest of his ex-family has had to deal with.
Revelations

The roadside blended into a monochromatic blur of fall browns, decayed remnants from its recent festival of colors, as the intensity of my aunt's conversation grew. My aunt and I were taking our annual trip to Missoula to buy a few school clothes. We had been doing it for the six years that Marta had lived in Montana. Marta was my first relative of eleven aunts and uncles to live close to my family. I loved it.

We flipped through the CD collection and laughed about the picture that we had taken in one of those funny little photo booths the previous year while shopping. So much had changed in that year. My heart felt an achy twinge remembering Josh, my boyfriend of the previous year, and how much I had loved him before he broke my heart. Josh had been the first person to take our relationship seriously, unlike others. Even a year later I still felt unsettled and my heartache lingered when certain memories arose.

My aunt's year had also been turbulent, full of accomplishments and problems. Her relationship with my uncle Ian had fallen on the rocks. He worked out of town all the time now, which, I soon found out, meant that he was working on another relationship --or perhaps several. I had begun to lose my interest in Ian's little games for attention. A few months before this drive, my cousin Lilly, who had been staying with us during the summer, had been at Marta and Ian's house with me. Ian had asked her in all of her thirteen-year-old beauty if he could take nude pictures of her. At that moment the mask over Ian's true personality was removed and I realized that I, at the age of sixteen, had reached an emotional maturity that Ian would never attain. We had nothing in common after that. The haze dissipated and I was finally able to join my family in their dislike of
Ian. No more would I resent not being able to see him by myself. I embraced my new dislike for him, and it pleased my dad immensely.

As we drove, my thoughts meandered to Josh. Breaking for a moment from my own little world, I glanced at my aunt whose face to my surprise reflected the heartache that I was feeling. She was suddenly overcome with tears. I had never seen Marta cry and I felt uncomfortable.

"I'm divorcing Ian, before he splits the country and I can't," she gushed, forming words around her heartache. "By now he has had so many affairs now that I can't keep track any more. We moved to Montana because he was sleeping with our friend's wife six months after we were married. It seemed like a good idea to move far away to Montana to save our marriage."

I was speechless, a problem I rarely suffered. I never know what to do when people cry. The events Marta narrated for me filled in the missing pieces that explained my uneasy feelings about Ian. I felt sick as the puzzle came together and I fully recognized for the first time his violations in our relationship. I didn't even hear part of Marta's account as my mind raced. And then she asked the question that I was starting to ask myself at that very moment.

"I was talking to Ian's mom. She mentioned Ian's sexual abuse as a young child." Her voice quivered with guilt. "Did Ian ever touch you, Flannery?" Her question solidified my realization that Ian was not the uncle of my dreams. Ian had indeed acted inappropriately with me and her question showed that she suspected that. I could hardly deal with the sudden awareness that all those uncomfortable situations were something that I had every right to be uncomfortable about.
I had only that instant to respond and I responded the only way that I could. I lied to her. I lied to her to lie to myself. I lied to Marta so that she would not wrestle with the guilt of bringing him into my life. I lied because I still wanted to protect Ian from the repercussions of his own sickness. I lied because I was only starting to hate Ian, and I did not want to watch the chaos that would consume all of our lives if I said yes. Mostly, I suppose, I was protecting myself. In my own heart I believed that if I did not speak it, then I could handle the information because it would remain mine. To release the demon would send it spinning out of my control, and I would never be able to tame the beast once it was set free. I sacrificed myself to protect myself, and the moment passed. It would not return until I engaged it again.

I said, “No.” Anxiety washed away from Marta's face. As soon as I said it, I knew it was the right response for the moment. But I did not know the significance that one-word utterance would have when I became a senior in college and the ice had yet to be broken. Marta did not need to feel any more guilt about Ian. She was already suffering enough. The pain of the word “yes” would have been too earth shattering. I was not brave enough to go down that road.

For most of my relationship with my uncle, I believed that our interactions were fine, that he was not crossing boundaries. It was so hard to change my perspectives. I began to play back in my mind all the times that I had spent with Ian, each time integrating and connecting more and more until I thought I knew everything. At that moment I didn’t hate Ian for sexually abusing me, I hated him because he had ruined our trip to Missoula, and created my first uncomfortable situation with Marta. When I did
finally address the subject I almost dropped out of Carroll. It still amazes me to think how I used the word “no” to convince myself that nothing had happened. I am so glad that Marta and I will never have to deal with a situation like that again.
Amarillo

We had a six-hour drive through the dense smoke of the fires that were torching the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. The plume of smoke drifted almost all the way to Texas with us. Not only did the dark air create tension in the car, but my dad kept running into swallows that were blinded by the smoke. Swallows were my dad’s favorite birds, so I knew he was already highly annoyed when I decided that I just had to tell him about Andy and me.

Although my Dad says that he hasn’t won an argument with me since I was eight, there were some things that I never considered arguing with him about -- such as boyfriends. In fact, for most of my life, I enjoyed arguing, but not over matters of the heart. I left emotional arguments alone, aware of the shaky ground. I knew that my raging hormones were not enough to justify a logical argument. My parents’ policy with boyfriends was that it was my choice whom I dated, and their choice whom they liked. They never interfered with my dating life, at least not directly, but their disappointment was a clear deterrent. My mom, who was very accepting of people, usually was not the problem, but my Dad thought he knew Andy, and knew he wasn't good enough for his only daughter.

My Dad had not always disliked Andy. We had been dating on and off since our freshman year of high school. We met in our English and History classes at Powell County High School. Andy, a colorful and intelligent child, enjoyed the excitement of bending the rules. I lived thirty miles out of town, and found most of my excitement in sports. The bulk of our relationship we spent talking on the phone. We usually broke up at the beginning of every summer and started talking again around late August. Most of
the time that I dated Andy, I suspected it was a bad idea, but I kept on doing it. Neither of us made a firm commitment of our relationship, particularly Andy. Our friends placed bets, after our numerous break ups, on how long it would take us to "get back together," and although I wanted on several occasions to never talk to Andy again, we always ended up dating again.

The first bout of trouble that we experienced with my dad transpired after Andy and I got hauled off to jail one January night in my junior year. I sat in the lobby of the jail while Andy sat in a cell. Since he already had a few citations for possessions of alcohol, the police decided to give him two that night, and me none. However, they did call my Dad, and subsequently Andy was banned from our property, and I was grounded until track season started three months later. After that, when Andy and I did get together, I just didn't mention it to my Dad. Eventually, Andy ended up in jail for some "felony mischief by accountability," whatever that meant. I visited him on Sundays, but after a few months, my commitment dwindled. I didn't see Andy for eight months, and I thought we had finally drifted apart. I certainly never pictured myself as one of those people in an eight-year relationship with my "high school sweetheart." We didn't exactly fit the mold, because our relationship was not especially sweet.

Then, just before I started college at Carroll, Andy and I started talking again. Now I laugh at the games we played with each other's hearts, but at the time it was painful. Andy moved to Helena, a town he hated, and after a year, we broke up again, just before I became a Resident Assistant in the dorms. All in all, we had a run-of-the-mill, co-dependent relationship. I pretended not to be heartbroken to soothe my wounded ego, I convinced my parents yet again that Andy was a horrible person.
When Andy and I started talking again a year later, I had a huge hole to dig us both out of, if Andy were ever going to be welcomed in the presence of my family. I had come a long way in shifting my life. I had grown immensely from my experiences during the past school year as a Resident Assistant, but particularly as a member of a local Al-Anon chapter. The growth my Dad saw in me pleased him. I felt pleased by his pleasure. I assumed that he would be disappointed that I had chosen to get involved with Andy again. I moved home after the conclusion of the school year so that I could save money for an upcoming trip to Ireland. Andy and I had little time to develop a trusting and stable relationship before I went on my Galway adventure, so we worked hard to spend lots of time together. Andy was still not allowed on our property, but thanks to Dad’s frequent absences because of work travel, I was able to spend enough time with Andy in Avon that I grew much more confident in the possible success of our re-budding relationship. Although you can never truly "start all over again," and we both had misgivings, still I felt happy.

Andy took the first step in encouraging me to talk to my dad about Andy’s and my relationship before I left for Ireland. I didn't want to ruin my perfect image in my father’s eyes, especially if the relationship wasn't going to work out. I thought my father's disapproval was too much stress to deal with, but Andy did not share that feeling. He decided that he was tired of "sneaking around." Mostly, as he put it, he wanted me to stop giving in to the unseen reigns that held me tightly. I was willing to drop anything to do what I thought my parents would want or respect, particularly my Dad. My Mom was much more willing to give Andy a chance to come back in my life. She was definitely not
overly positive, but as she spent more time with us, she began to loosen her opinion. My brother gradually followed suit.

Finally the urgency of time, which has a funny way of changing a situation, became a serious factor. I was leaving for Ireland for five weeks on an exchange program and before that the whole family was taking a weeklong road trip to Texas for a Harpole wedding. My enemy, procrastination, led to bad timing for my confession to Dad. My last opportunity before I left was going to be in the car on this hot, long, cramped road trip to Texas. I was so reluctant to disappoint my dad at the outset of his sending me to Ireland, that I put off the conversation. He had spent so much money to get me there that, I felt like the unappreciative daughter dating someone he didn’t like. The increasing apprehension that I brought to the situation only worsened the issue until I was stressed out and angry.

With every swallow that hit our windshield, my imagination of how the conversation would go, darkened. I sat and rehearsed my arguments, based on all the things that I knew Dad would say. I shifted in my seat, nervously awaiting a "right moment" to speak. The phrase may have been suggested by the elaborately painted graffiti on the train that we were passing, but for some reason, "fuck this" seemed to sum up how I felt about the situation. I turned to my dad. Naturally, I said nothing I had planned to say. Actually, I have no idea of exactly what I said. I'm sure it was not eloquent, but it must have been clear. My Dad did seem angry, mostly because of the news of Andy, but partially because I had been hiding our rekindled relationship. The discussion was not pretty, and the graffiti phrase clearly reflected how we were both
feeling. The only thing that specifically sticks out was my Dad saying, "Well, there is no accounting for your taste in men."

Surprisingly, however, after I confessed, I felt much better than I expected to feel. I felt as though I had claimed my own life. I felt as though I was suddenly responsible and in control of my own happiness, a notion that my parents had often affirmed but one I had apparently not believed. I know I said that I was happy with Andy and that eventually, if things went well, he too would like Andy again. Dad replied that he would never let Andy break his heart again, which surprised me. It had never occurred to me that I had hurt anyone else during my dating fiascos. I knew that Dad’s negative attitude about Andy were my own doing, because of the stories I had told him about Andy. But I didn't let that sway my resolve. I remained calm. I did not let my dad’s emotional replies affect me. I felt, for the first time, an independence that would come in handy in Ireland and will no doubt serve me well for the rest of my life.

And so I began to wean myself from parents’ emotional support. My mom encouraged me to imagine what it would be like to spend time with my Dad and Andy together. I laughed at her suggestion. But two years later, in February, Dad met Andy and me at the Brew House for dinner. As we sat over beer and burgers, Dad congratulated me again on my accomplishments at Carroll. I thought he was finished, but after crediting me with success, he turned to Andy and, in front of our whole family, said, "Let's not forget, without Andy's support, it would have been a hell of a lot harder."
Conclusion

Just as Jamie Pennebaker discovered with his research subjects, I too have healed a great deal from organizing and writing my thoughts about emotional issues that have plagued me for years. The Bio-psycho-social model was highly effective in separating out issues so I could look at them in a critical light, rather than an emotionally charged light. I would recommend a project like this to anyone seeking self-awareness and healing, and particularly to students who are interested in pursuing a career in counseling. This project was singularly my most rewarding experience at Carroll College.

I am deeply thankful for my family’s ongoing support during the writing of this piece. I am sure that some of my revelations cause them some of their own personal grief. Selflessly they put those feelings aside and supported me throughout this process.
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