ABSTRACT

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS CALLING: THE ROLE OF DREAMS

by Jeffrey Russell Schweitzer

James Hillman (1996) resurrected a Platonic notion, the daimon or soul-companion, towards a mythic, archetypal understanding of calling. According to Hillman, contemporary paradigms privilege the influence of genetics and societal factors and have all but erased the image of a soul’s calling. However, the arena of religious vocation is one in which the notion of calling retains significance. Using a narrative and performative writing methodology, I examined religious calling and dreams in the lives of three female ministers. Three major themes—“calling as a life-long process,” “the multiplicity of callings,” and “the irrationality of calling”—recurred throughout the ministers’ narratives. Particularly in relation to the third theme, the ministers reported that their dreams provided instruction, support, and a unique, embodied access to a divine other. Moreover, the ministers experienced their calling as a relationship with a divine other augmented by the autonomous and presentational qualities featured in their significant dreams.
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS CALLING:
THE ROLE OF DREAMS

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
Department of Psychology
by
Jeffrey Russell Schweitzer
Miami University
Oxford, OH
2010

Advisor: _____________________________
Roger M. Knudson, Ph.D.

Reader: ______________________________
Larry M. Leitner, Ph.D.

Reader: ______________________________
Kathryn B. McGrew, Ph.D.
Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
The Soul’s Code .................................................................................................................. 2
Christian Calling and Vocation through an Historical Glass ........................................... 4
   The Early Church ........................................................................................................... 4
   The Middle Ages .......................................................................................................... 6
   After the Reformation ............................................................................................... 7
   The Post-Christian World ........................................................................................... 9
Dreaming the “Big Dream” in Contemporary Psychological Research ........................ 10
   Impactful Dreams ....................................................................................................... 11
   Archetypal-Titanic Dreams and Presentational Symbolism ...................................... 13
   Significant Dreams ..................................................................................................... 14
   Root Metaphor Dreams and Religious Meaning ....................................................... 15
   Neither Things nor Thoughts: A Foray into the Intermediate Imaginal .................. 18
The Present Study ............................................................................................................ 19
Researcher’s Positioning in the Present Study ............................................................... 21
Method ............................................................................................................................... 23
   Interview and Recruitment Procedure ....................................................................... 23
   Interview Process ........................................................................................................ 25
   An Imagistic Approach to Narrative Inquiry ............................................................... 26
   Performative Writing ................................................................................................. 27
Results: Calling in Three Parts ....................................................................................... 31
   I. Esther ....................................................................................................................... 31
   II. Ruth ......................................................................................................................... 46
   III. Gertrude ................................................................................................................. 59
Discussion ........................................................................................................................ 80
   Under-the-Ground: Revisiting the Heart’s Calling and Dreams ................................. 80
   Above-the-Ground: Extraordinary Stories and Performative Writing .................... 86
   Beyond-the-Horizon: Postmodernism, the Sacred, and Soul ...................................... 90
References ......................................................................................................................... 94
Appendix A ......................................................................................................................... 99
Appendix B ......................................................................................................................... 100
Appendix C ......................................................................................................................... 102
Appendix D ......................................................................................................................... 103
Acknowledgements

First, I want to thank Esther, Ruth, and Gertrude, who gave of themselves graciously and with an affirming spirit of openness. I feel grateful, honored, and extremely privileged that they entrusted me with these extraordinary life stories. In particular, I want to give special thanks to Esther for recommending the other ministers and helping to bring their stories to light; none of this would have been possible without her. I would also like to acknowledge my mentor and thesis advisor, Roger Knudson, who originally breathed life into the study and refused to let it die. I am indebted to Roger for his steadfast support, enthusiasm, and faith in imagination. Most importantly, I am profoundly grateful for his mentorship, through which I have discovered new horizons of imaginative possibility for myself as a researcher and a person. Additionally, I want to thank the members of my thesis committee, Larry Leitner and Kathy McGrew, for their continued support and constructive feedback. The study and I have benefited greatly from their voices. I would like to acknowledge the members of the Miami University Qualitative Research Group as well as Kelly Bulkeley and Patricia Davis for their encouragement and guidance. Finally, I want to thank my partner, Michelle Hudson, for her love, support, and thoughtful attunement to the study and its ongoing significance for us in our own life callings.
A Narrative Approach to Religious Calling: The Role of Dreams

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that passed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolsca[p. (Nabokov, 1951, p. 25)

Starting with the Enlightenment project, a scientific consciousness has increasingly pervaded Western culture and discarded metaphysical models that privilege the soul as indispensable to our knowing and being in the world. The stuff of the imaginal, speech of the soul and “thought of the heart” (Hillman, 1992, p. 3), have seeped deep underground, and we are worse for its absence. Hillman (1996) echoes Nabokov’s reflection by arguing against the adequacy of our contemporary approaches to understanding the unique callings that impel us in life: “…the interplay of genetics and environment, omits something essential—the particularity you feel to be you. By accepting the idea that I am the effect of a subtle buffeting between heredity and societal forces, I reduce myself to a result” (p. 6).

Our current paradigms of inquiry, rationalism and empiricism, do not logically support dimensions of the unseen and the intangible that are part and parcel of imaginal ways of knowing and Hillman’s notion of a soul’s calling (Packer, 1985). Accordingly, the politics of reasonable and visible evidence largely govern the breadth of legitimate subject matter in psychological research. Because the dimensions of soul and fate are neither reasonable nor evidential in nature, mainstream psychological research delegitimizes any serious inquiry into their relation to lived experience. At best, our paradigmatic psychology dismisses the intricacies of soul and fate as a matter of religious concern, and at worst, pejoratively relegates them to the domain of superstition.

Although the nature of psychological theory has become increasingly literal, mostly forgotten is what psychology literally means—the study of soul (Leahey, 1991). Hillman (1996) has called for a re-visioning of psychology from the eye of the soul: “Of all of psychology’s sins, the most mortal is its neglect of beauty” (p.35). According to Hillman (1975), psychology, in its modern form, is inadequately suited for an aesthetics of experience: “Because the soul cannot be understood through psychology alone, our vision even leaves the field of psychology as it is usually thought of, and moves widely
through history, philosophy, and religion” (p. xv). Consequently, I composed my inquiry through an amalgam of historical, philosophical, and religious perspectives.

I set out to understand the role of dreams in religious calling by examining the life narratives of three women called to Christian ministry. I adopted a narrative and performative writing approach (Chase, 2005; Pelias, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2006) to the life stories and dreams of three female Christian ministers to cultivate a layered understanding of (1) the experiences of hearing and answering a call to religious service; (2) the ongoing role of significant dreams in hearing and answering the call to religious service; (3) the phenomenology of significant dreams that influence the call to service; (4) and finally, the extent to which significant religious dreams facilitate a participatory and receptive engagement with the divine in everyday lived experience.

In the following sections, I expand on Hillman’s notion of a soul’s calling and offer an important distinction that ultimately guided my focus and methodology. Next, I review different perspectives on calling from four distinct periods over two millennia of Christian history. Third, I provide an overview of the literature following from Jung’s theoretical conception of the “big” dream. Last, I return to Hillman’s notion of soul and Corbin’s notion of the imaginary or mundus imaginalis towards a theoretical elaboration of religious calling and dream as image.

The Soul’s Code

Hillman (1996) defined calling as, “an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events [that] struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I’ve got to have. This is who I am” (p. 3). He made the claim that we do not choose our callings; rather our callings choose us. According to his acorn theory, we each have unique callings, individualized patterns of destiny that unfold according to an innate image: the acorn of the soul. To be clear, Hillman demarcated his acorn theory according to the mythic, not the scientific. More specifically, a recognition of the acorn or image of the soul’s calling is necessarily an intuitive recognition guided by what Hillman called a “mythic sensibility, for when a myth strikes us, it seems true and gives sudden insight” (p. 97).
Hillman applied his acorn theory to the exceptional biographies of eminent historical figures, whose extraordinary accomplishments strikingly illustrate what we have presently come to regard as genius. One critical assumption inherent to this approach is that the extraordinary is a manifestation of the ordinary, albeit in “enlarged and intensified image” (Hillman, 1996, p. 31). Hillman explained that the anecdotal feats of exemplars have long functioned to edify, inspire, and reveal character. Narratives of exceptional human lives illuminate potentialities previously thought impossible. Like the tales of Greek mythology, the grandeur of the calling narrative captivates the imagination: “A single anecdote lights up the whole field of vision” (Hillman, 1996, p. 33) and in this light, we are compelled to wonder again what we may become. To be sure, Hillman does not conflate the extraordinary with the moral. Because the daimon is loyal first to the calling of the person and not to the person called, the daimon acts in obstinate fidelity to the image; the daimon “resists compromising reasonableness and often forces deviance and oddity upon its keeper, especially when it is neglected or opposed” (Hillman, 1996, p. 39). Therefore, the extraordinary force of a calling may or may not preclude extraordinary moral character.

What sense of calling does Hillman (1996) recover from the biographies of “Nobel laureates and statesman…pop stars, murderers, and talk show hosts” (p. 32)? In the interest of brevity, I will only summarize one major insight here. Nonetheless, this particular insight is of tremendous importance because it fundamentally informed my methodology and the level of understanding to which I aspired. With respect to the acorn and its determinacy of fate, Hillman draws an important distinction between telos and teleology. The latter is a philosophical approach that seeks to understand a phenomenon by figuring its ultimate purpose or final intelligibility. That is to say, the effect of a phenomenon explains its cause. For instance, in the field of psychology, motivational theories are teleological explanations of behavior. By contrast, telos provides a “limited, specific reason for the sake of which I perform the action” (Hillman, 1996, p. 197). One important implication of this distinction is the ensuing shift in focus: whereas teleology circumscribes phenomena in terms of outcome and concerns itself with the questions of why or what for (e.g., the satisfaction of a want or a need), telos examines phenomena in terms of process and concerns itself with the particularities of its becoming.
According to Hillman (1996), the concept of telos holds that we can still discern value or significance absent an explicit purpose: “Purpose does not usually appear as a clearly framed goal, but more likely as a troubling, unclear urge coupled with a sense of indubitable importance” (p. 197). In other words, the telos of religious calling does not entail a focus on clearly framed goals or grand purposes, such as ordination or world peace. Instead, a telos of religious calling focuses on those myriad, subtle experiences that resonate with a felt sense of significance, despite the absence of an overarching purpose. As Levoy observed (1997), “Our lives are measured in coffee spoons, wrote T.S. Eliot; they are not measured in the grand sweeps, but the small gestures” (p. 5). Therefore, a telos of religious calling specifically concerns itself with the significance that inheres in the particulars of experience.

*Christian Calling and Vocation through an Historical Glass*

In the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), calling is defined as, “9A: The summons, invitation, or impulse of God . . . The inward conviction of a divine call; the strong impulse to any course of action as the right thing to do” (p. 634). Towards a more elaborate survey of religious calling, I now turn to Placher (2005), who has arranged a comprehensive array of historical texts that explore the multiple perspectives on calling and vocation that have waxed and waned in significance over two millennia of the Christian theological tradition. To demonstrate the relationship between changing historical contexts and the different meanings of calling and vocation, Placher divided Christian history into four distinctive periods: (1) The Early Church (100-500); (2) The Middle Ages (500-1500); After the Reformation (1500-1800); and (4) The Post-Christian World (1800-Present). For each period, I summarize Placher’s arguments concerning the contemporaneous perspectives on calling and vocation, and intersperse illustrative writings of eminent Christian thinkers. An exhaustive historical analysis is beyond the scope of this review. Instead, I aim to provide a concise historical grounding to understand better the substratum of calling in relation to its current usage in Christian theology.

*The Early Church*

The early church of Christianity first existed as an inchoate and isolated system of belief in the margins of the Roman Empire. Outrageous stories of sanguinary,
cannibalistic, and orgiastic rites circulated throughout Roman culture and fueled persecutory and violent attitudes towards Christians. Consequently, an adherence to the Christian faith entailed enormous sacrifice that ranged from family estrangement to torture and death. Acts of martyrdom, in which adherents endured untold suffering, paradoxically enhanced the fecundity of the Christian faith as it spread beyond its humble margins, and pervaded the heart of the Roman Empire by the end of the fifth century. Thus, in the early church the general notion of call (klesis in Greek) signified the impetus to become a Christian: a membership to a burgeoning collective of “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet, 2:11). Three patterns of klesis, martyrdom, conversion, and, later, monasticism (which burgeoned in significance late in the period), are recurrent themes in the extraordinary calling narratives of this period and reflect the radical ascendancy of Christianity and its eventual status as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

*The Martyrdom of Perpetua* (203) reflects the marginal status of the early church and the corresponding potential for brutality to Christians in Roman culture. The Romans imprison, torture, and sentence Perpetua to death because of her status as a “catechumen” or new convert to Christianity. The story begins with her arrest and concludes moments before her death at the hands of a Roman gladiator. Despite her unjust persecution and imminent death, Perpetua maintains a profound blend of repose and ferocity. Most significantly, Perpetua’s visions of the divine are the wellspring for her indomitability. At one point, Perpetua’s captors force her to enter into a ring with wild animals. Before fighting the animals, she receives the following vision:

> We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air, and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together, linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other, and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head. (p. 43)

Perpetua describes herself waking upon the conclusion of the vision, which suggests that it came to her in a dream. Again, one’s calling to the early church could prove highly dangerous, and sometimes fatal; therefore, the martyr narratives of this age, as shown through the story of Perpetua, reflect the grandeur of vision commensurate to the suffering endured.
Two hundred years later, Augustine would write *Confessions*, in which he takes an inward look to explore the emotional dimensions of personal sin and faith. In excruciating fashion, Augustine confesses his abject desire and intent to redeem himself through the grace of God: “I shall still confess to you the story of my shame, since it is to your glory. Allow me this, I beg, and grant me the power to survey in my memory now all those wanderings of my error in the past and to offer unto You the sacrifice of rejoicing” (Placher, 2005, p. 84). Unlike the story of Perpetua, Augustine does not face the danger of death in the arena of Roman culture; instead, the locus of Augustine’s struggle is his heart, where God’s wisdom and the folly of desire clash in contemplative emotionality.

*The Middle Ages*

The early Middle Ages (500-1000) were most importantly marked by the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, the practice of trade, commerce, and craft specialization dwindled. Conventional medieval social structure consisted of three stations: “…those who pray (priests, nuns, and monks), those who fight (the nobles), and those who work (mostly peasants in the fields)” (Placher, 2005, p. 107). The medieval notion of vocation only referred to the former station: a self-chosen election of monastic life. In contrast to the extremes of self-denial that were central to the eastern monasticism of Egypt, the monasticism of western Europe possessed relative “moderation and common sense” (Placher, 2005, p. 108) in terms of the demands made of one’s calling. As Placher explained (2005), Benedict of Nursia established the rules of conduct for monastic life in Western Europe and one’s vocation consisted of prayer, work, humility, and obedience: “These disciples must obediently step lively to the commanding voice—giving up their possessions and their own will, and even leaving their chores unfinished” (p. 129). In addition to Benedict, Augustine continued to exert enormous influence on monastic life in Western Europe. According to Placher (2005), Augustine made a distinction between the “city of man” (p. 108) and the “city of God” (p.108). Individuals called to monasteries and convents inhabited the city of God and thereby possessed vocation. Augustine equated monasteries and convents with earthly locales of the heavenly paradise. By contrast, laypersons that inhabited the
“city of man” did not possess vocation because they ostensibly cultivated the love of self and worldly glory, instead of the love of God and heavenly glory.

By the late Middle Ages (1000-1500), a discrepancy between the reality of Christian life and ideals of monastic life spurred calls for reform and the emergence of religious orders that broke from Benedictine rule, namely, the Dominican and the Franciscan orders. The parents of Thomas Aquinas pledged him to a Benedictine monastery like so many other children his age. Instead, Aquinas fled his home to pursue a different calling with the Dominican order. He would go on to become the most prominent theologian of this epoch. Aquinas juxtaposed Aristotelian philosophy with biblical revelation and, in addition to the virtues of poverty, obedience, and chastity, placed charity at the heart of Christian life. Significantly, the interpretations of Aquinas and the larger Franciscan and Dominican orders started to blur the once sharp distinction between ordinary and religious life epitomized by the stringency of Benedictine rule and Augustine’s demarcation of the city of God and city of man. The foregoing movement gained momentum at the end of the Middle Ages and portended secularized vocation. To be sure, a Christian vocation in medieval times meant self-election to “…becoming a monk, nun, friar, or priest” (Placher, 2005, p. 112) and necessitated total devotion to the monastic life and its established rules.

After the Reformation

In the first decades of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther spearheaded the Protestant Reformation due to the inadequacy of monastic rule. Specifically, Luther opposed the indeterminable guidelines of monasticism and the preclusion of ordinary Christians due to its hierarchical structure. Moreover, Luther vigorously criticized the monastic notion of self-election arguing that it was antithetical to the meaning of vocation in the true sense—summoned by God and not self—and tended towards elitism and the adulteration of Christian ideals:

Monastic vows rest on the false assumption that there is a special calling, a vocation, to which superior Christians are invited to observe the counsels of perfection while ordinary Christians fulfil [síč] only the commands; but there simply is no special religious vocation since the call of God comes to each at the common task. (Stevens, 2000, p. 75)
Monastic vocation of the Middle Ages waxed authoritarian in its concentrated structure and claims to salvation, whereas Luther’s reformation advanced a more democratic vision for Christian life characterized by the principle of equitableness. Effectively, even the ordinary Christian had a rightful claim to vocation; Protestantism was towards a salvation for all, not a select few. Luther de-emphasized the parochial relation of vocation and salvation espousing that all stations are worthy as long as they are dutifully served in faith to God. Luther’s movement towards worldly vocation spread rapidly throughout Europe and significantly gutted the hegemony of monastic life as evidenced by the near total dissolution of monasteries and convents by the middle of the sixteenth century (Placher, 2005, p. 206). According to Placher (2005), Luther ascribed a dual meaning to vocation (and restored to it a sense of calling, as in a summons by God) that reflected the addition of his incipiently secularized conception. A “spiritual calling” (p. 206) referred to the call to become one of God’s people and thus echoed the sense of klesis that prevailed in the Early Church. In contrast, an “external calling” (Placher, 2005, p. 206) referred to a call to a specific position or station in society (e.g., a shoemaker, baker, shepherd, or homemaker). According to Placher (2005), while Luther’s revision of vocation engendered equality in the context of a “spiritual calling” (p. 206) his notion of an “external calling” (p. 206) had the paradoxical effect of stymieing social mobility. According to this view, the various stations among Christians—shoemaker, baker, shepherd, homemaker—were regarded as idiosyncratic callings assigned by God. To pursue a calling different from one’s station would be tantamount to transgressing God’s sovereignty.

John Calvin, founder of the Reformed Tradition of the Protestants, recognized the limitations endemic to this perspective. Thus, he reconfigured the notion of calling in a way that created space for increased social mobility: “For he [the Lord] knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once” (Placher, 2005, p. 236). Although Calvin sympathized with Luther’s position against monastic superiority and exclusivity, he did not think about calling in terms of faith brought forth by one’s work or station. Instead, Calvin conceptualized calling in terms of salvation and ministry. While he did associate calling with a particular line of work, Calvin did not espouse an
embodiment of faith specific to one mode of work or station, which allowed for more flexibility in the pursuit of calling. Placher (2005) explained that Calvin distinguished between a “general calling” (p. 232) and a “special calling” (p. 232), whereas Luther distinguished between a “spiritual calling” and an “external calling.” Calvin defined the former type of call as a general invitation (equally extendable to all) to faith transmitted by the preached word of God. For one to simply hear and respond to God’s general call did not secure salvation. According to Placher (2005), this was indicated by a “special call” (predetermined by God and extended to the elect) that effected a revelation of the preached word in the “hearts of the elect” (p. 232). Christians who heard and responded to the special call effectively confirmed a path predestined by God.

According to Stevens (2000), William Perkins, one of the key Puritan theologians, articulated another dualistic conception of call, in which he distinguished between a “general call” (p. 77), by which one becomes Christian, and a “particular call” (p. 77), by which one executes a particular vocation in accordance to the summons of God. According to Stevens (2000), Perkins’ perspective advanced the secularization of calling:

…Perkins emphasized calling as the particular duties which God requires of us in our estates—a state of life or lifestyle, though Perkins himself often spoke of callings as if they were simply occupations, some of which were not lawful callings. It seems Perkins fused the two ideas of duties and occupations. (p. 79)

Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Puritan movement employed and systematically refined the distinction of call proffered by Perkins.

The Post-Christian World

In The Post-Christian World (1800-Present), the primacy of secular culture, one dominated by manifold social, political, and economic issues, has confounded the meaning of religious calling. James Y. Holloway (1972), an American Baptist, questions the capacity of calling to subsume meaningfully the technical and vocational roles endemic to modernity:

Physician, lawyer, minister, teacher, priest, scientist, politician, administrator, and the divisions and subdivisions thereof—each seems trapped by what institutions and professions have been turned into by technique. Concern for one’s fellow man through profession or institution
is transformed into the dehumanizing goal of contemporary technology: efficiency. (p. 3)

In his seminal book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1905/2003) examined the relationship between religious belief and economics. He traced the roots of capitalism to the Protestant (or more precisely, Puritan) ethic of asceticism that vehemently decried the waste of idleness and worldly diversions. The value of efficiency as a Puritan ideal gave rise to the Industrial Revolution, a movement that would paradoxically lead to unprecedented economic growth, and, according to Weber, “…the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness” (p. 176).

With the propulsive expansion, differentiation, and stratification of occupational roles in an industrialized western culture, the primacy of economic activity drastically reconfigured the meaning of Christian calling in equating vocation with work. Secularized notions of calling markedly strayed from the original meaning, which held that life has some greater purpose or meaning for each of us, yet beyond each of us. Calling in the secularized sense has situated persons in a barren individualism that is governed by personal choice and antithetical to conditions that inhered in the original sense—abiding the will of God towards a purpose that surpasses the self.

Having completed a historical review of calling and vocation in the Christian tradition, I now turn to a body of theoretical and empirical research that has followed from Jung’s concept of the “big” dream. Specifically, psychological researchers have examined what they variously refer to as “impactful,” “archetypal-titanic,” “significant,” and “root-metaphor” dreams. I will provide an overview of each and underscore the conceptual and methodological features that inform and justify the current study.

*Dreaming the “Big Dream” in Contemporary Psychological Research*

How might we begin to characterize the psychological dimensions of extraordinary dreams? Do we place the extraordinary dream somewhere in the outer region of dreams and call it a creative, delirious, even bizarre amalgamation of day residue? In other words, do we regard extraordinary dreams as an aberration of normative dreaming? Jung did not think so. Instead, he made a distinction between “little” dreams
and “big” dreams along the dimension of significance in the nature and function of the
dream (Jung, 1990, p. 386). According to Jung, the “little” dream is largely forgettable as it consists of nocturnal sparks of fantasy emanating from the dreamer’s subjective realm that limit meaning to everyday, mundane affairs. By contrast, the “big” dream is eminently memorable as it consists of archetypal images that can feel exceedingly significant to the dreamer and seem *more* real than “reality” in the ordinary sense. This numinous quality can engender felt meaning that outstrips the dreamer’s subjective realm of experience and carry deeply spiritual implications. Because “big” dreams are remembered for a lifetime and often have demonstrably transformative ramifications for the dreamer, Jung (1990) fittingly referred to them as the “the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience” (p. 386).

**Impactful Dreams**

In a series of studies, Kuiken and colleagues developed a classificatory system that differentiated between mundane and impactful dreams as well as subtypes within the latter (Busink & Kuiken, 1996; Kuiken & Sikora, 1993; Kuiken & Smith, 1991). Here, the crux of the impactful dream is its continued influence on thoughts and feelings after awakening. By a method of cluster analysis, Kuiken and Sikora (1993) analyzed the content of a body of dreams self-reported by participants as influential and sorted them into three polythetic classes distinguished by quality of affect, motives, sensory properties, patterns of movement, and dream endings: (1) *nightmares*, which are marked by “intense fear, harm avoidance, vivid olfactory and auditory phenomena, and physical metamorphoses” (Kuiken et al., 2006, p. 260); (2) *existential dreams*, which involve “intense sadness, separation and loss, the emergence of strong and clear bodily feelings, and spontaneous feeling change” (p. 260); (3) *transcendent dreams*, which feature “feelings of awe, magical accomplishment, extraordinary sources of light, and shifts in visual-spatial orientation” (p. 260). Notwithstanding these differences, Kuiken and colleagues asserted that impactful dreams across classes engender intense affect and the sense of seeming real upon awakening. In sum, the overarching purpose of the aforementioned dream studies was to develop a taxonomical scheme for impactful dreams predicated on content features.
Previously, Knudson & Minier (1999) reviewed the early studies of Kuiken and colleagues and argued that their designs gave inadequate attention to “on-going, often changing or expanding, dream significance” (p. 236). Specifically, Knudson & Minier pointed to a lack of focus on the life context of the dreamer at the time of the impactful dream as well as the ways in which the impact of the dream endured and perhaps changed for the dreamer over time. To some extent, Kuiken, Lee, Eng, and Singh (2006) answered this critique as they examined the influence of impactful dreams on spiritual transformation and self-perceptual depth in a two-part study. In contrast to Kuiken’s previous research, that classified impactful dreams according to content, he and colleagues set out to contrast the effects of nightmares, existential dreams, and transcendent dreams on the dreamer, in terms of self-perceptual depth and spiritual transformation.

Although Kuiken and colleagues administered a comprehensive, 54-item measure (Impactful Dream Questionnaire or IDQ) to evaluate the narrative and emotional content of the impactful dream, the researchers used a mere five items to assess perceptual depth and spiritual transformation. Researchers measured perceptual depth by the following two questions: (1) “After my dream, I felt sensitive to aspects of my life that I typically ignore”; and (2) “After my dream, I felt like changing the way I live” (Kuiken, Carey, & Nielsen, 1987). The researchers developed a five-item measure of spiritual transformation from Batson and Schoenrade’s (1991a, 1991b) instrument: (1) “After my dream, I began to rethink my existential convictions”; (2) “After my dream, doubt became an important part of what it means to be honest about my existential concerns”; (3) “My dream experience led me to question my existential convictions”; (4) “After my dream, I began to value my existential doubts and uncertainties”; and (5) “Because of my dream, my views on many existential issues were changed.”

Arguably, an adequate exploration of perceptual depth and spiritual transformation would warrant either additional questions or an alternative methodology commensurate to the complexity of the subject matter. Moreover, the temporal scope of these questions was limited to immediate, short-term effects of the dream. Consequently, the methodology does not fully address Knudson & Minier’s (1999) findings that
significant dreams may have enduring and polyvalent significance for the dreamer decades later.

Archetypal-titanic Dreams and Presentational Symbolism

Harry Hunt’s *The Multiplicity of Dreams* (1989) approaches the subject from a cognitive psychological perspective and brings to bear Jung’s classic distinction towards a differentiation of dream typologies. Through a body of dreams variously culled from anthropological, clinical, and sleep laboratory studies, Hunt developed a classification model comprised of six dream typologies: (1) **personal-mnemic**, or normative dreams, feature common, realistic content predicated on day residue and/or personal memory and are thought to be controlled by linguistic structures; (2) **medical-somatic** dreams present medical and somatic conditions and are said to be visual metaphors of tactile-kinesthetic patterns; (3) **prophetic** dreams feature portents of future events and are best described as intuitive; (4) **archetypal-titanic** dreams are characterized by an ineffable sense of significance beyond the bounds of subjectivity and are thought to arise from the synesthetic patterns of verbal, visual, and tactile-kinesthetic modalities; (5) **nightmares** are dreams marked by terrifying imagery and intense affect; (6) **lucid** dreams are characterized by an awareness that one is dreaming and, like nightmares, tend to occur at the threshold that separates waking and dreaming consciousness (Bulkeley, 1994; Hunt, 1989).

Of the archetypal-titanic variety, Hunt pointed to the dreams detailed in Jung’s autobiography *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (1961) as quintessential examples; however, he also asserted that archetypal dreams, while rare in the scope of a lifetime, are memorable fixtures in the dream lives of many people. When he asked participants for their most fantastic dream, Hunt found that most reported dreams similar to those recalled by Jung (Hunt, 1989). Hunt described the distinctive imagistic and embodied features of the archetypal dream: “Subjects tend to have a characteristic style of dream bizarreness, most subjects on occasion experience dreams full of uncanny numinous emotion, geometric and mandala-like patterns, flying, mythological /metaphysical thinking, encounters with mythological beings, monsters, or strange animals, and those transformations of character…found to be characteristic of classical mythologies” (p. 128). In contrast to personal-mnemic dreams, whose content is largely representative of
reality and therefore conducive to free association, archetypal dreams present meaning absent an ostensible linkage to day residue or personal memories and therefore *defy* free association. According to Hunt, archetypal dreams impart a sense of “felt meaning” (p. 129): a profoundly powerful, embodied state that resists full or complete verbal description.

Hunt’s work has also focused on differential cognitive processes that may elucidate remarkably disparate classes of dream content (e.g. personal mnemonic and archetypal-titanic types). Working from an established empirical relationship between creativity and “bizarre dreaming” (Belicki, 1987; Brink, 1979; Hartmann, 1984; Sylvia, Clark, and Monroe, 1978), Hunt applied Susanne Langer’s (1942) theoretical distinction between representational symbolism, as manifested in formal language and mathematics, and presentational symbolism, as manifested in the expressive arts. Hunt (1989) claimed that in representational processes, a “connection between symbolic vehicle (word, sign) and its referent is relatively fixed, arbitrary, and largely automatized” (p. 13). However, “felt qualities and rhythm of the expressive medium” (Hunt, 1989, p. 13) characterize presentational processes. While representational processes serve important semantic and communicative functions, presentational processes largely evade narrative formulation. In other words, presentational processes yield non-verbal, multiply significant meanings.

*Significant Dreams*

By way of a narrative methodology, Knudson and Minier (1999) explored the ways in which significant dreams continually act as an influential presence in the life of the dreamer and detailed an illustrative case of the phenomenon. First, the researchers asked participants to provide a written text of their most significant dream experience. Additionally, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews to have participants expound on their dream, the immediate experience of waking from the dream, and the concurrent and subsequent life events to which it memorably conferred significance. On methodology, the researchers argued for a qualitative approach to inquiry appropriate to understanding enduring dream significance and epiphanal experiences that constellate the exceptional case (Denzin, 1997; Hillman, 1983; Hillman, 1986).

Of the 42 participants, Knudson and Minier (1999) selected a single exceptional case and found that the meaning of the participant’s significant dream defied verbal
articulation. Instead, the participant reported that the dream’s significance sporadically manifested as a spontaneous felt experience over the course of twenty years. Inasmuch as these phenomenological qualities bear similarity to the qualities of felt meaning and presentational processes advanced by Hunt (1989), Knudson and Minier concluded that these processes support a unique form of dreaming (e.g., significant; archetypal-titanic). Specifically, Knudson and Minier (1999) asserted that “linguistic concept and image are co-emergent and co-dependent frames of mind” (p. 243), yet the latter more fully accounts for the finding that archetypal or significant dreaming eludes narrative formulation. Thus, archetypal and significant dreams point to an imagistic mode of consciousness aligned with Hillman’s (1977) understanding of the dream as image as opposed to text. The researchers situated the significant dream in a primarily imagistic mode of consciousness and, by way of example, related its images to the aesthetics of a painting that not only beckons the eye of the beholder, but presents to the beholder new ways of seeing. In sum, Kundson and Minier concluded that images of the significant dream have a presentational quality that resonates for the dreamer through a felt sense of significance with implications for mutable, polysemous meaning.

**Root Metaphors Dreams and Religious Meaning**

Bulkeley (1994) critically examined the religious meaning of dreams in modern western culture by way of root metaphors. Towards this end, he has offered the following thesis:

Dreams do have a dimension of religious meaning; this dimension emerges out of the root metaphors in dreams. To understand fully the root metaphors of dreams requires an interdisciplinary integration of the different fields of study with a theory of interpretation and a theory of religious metaphor. (Bulkeley, 1994, p. 20)

Bulkeley asserts that the potential for religious meaning is generally inherent to dreams; however, he does not suggest that we always actualize religious meaning from dreams. The root metaphor concept assumes that we experience, perceive, and understand the world through metaphors. Simply put, the metaphorical mode of thinking entails relating one experience in terms of another. For example, the notion of “Mother Earth” is a root metaphor by which one may understand his or her relationship with the
natural world in terms of one’s relationship with his or her mother (Bulkeley, 1994). More specifically, Bulkeley discussed root metaphors as images or symbols by which we understand the ultimate concerns of human existence. In particular, he claims that root metaphors address profound mysteries concerning the nature of our origins, purposes, sufferings, and death, “images and symbols that shape our perceptions, inspire our ideals, and motivate our behavior” (Bulkeley, 1994, p. 21). Root metaphors derive from an array of sources: our bodily, individual, and collective experiences, religion and culture, nature, and, importantly, dreams. The emergence of root metaphors in dreams has historically imparted insight with respect to existential concerns; therefore, root metaphors undergird the features of dreams that potentially present religious meaning.

With the assumption that dreams are a rich source of root metaphors, Bulkeley wondered how they emerge and formulated criteria by which one can identify root metaphor dreams. First, one must discern the extent to which the dream involved metaphorical expression to facilitate an understanding of impalpable, ambiguous meanings from concrete images (e.g., an understanding of spiritual change through choosing between two pieces of fruit). Second, one must identify whether or not the dream addressed a fundamental question of human existence (e.g., one’s place in the cosmos or “scheme of things”). Third, one must specify the extent to which the dream proved markedly provocative, powerful, and forceful to the dreamer (e.g., an unmistakably confrontational dream). Fourth, and corollary to the third criterion, one must discern the extent to which the dream revealed possibilities for transformative change in the life of the dreamer (e.g. one is resolved to change vocations). To assess these criteria, Bulkeley employed a scope of inquiry similar to Knudson & Minier (1999), in which he considered the life context of the dreamer at the time of the root metaphor dream as well as how the dream significance interpenetrated his or her ensuing life experiences.

For illustrative purposes, and because of its specific relevance to dreams of the divine and calling, I include one dream in its entirety and then provide a summary application of Bulkeley’s root metaphor criteria. As cited by Bulkeley (1994), Mrs. M., a female Presbyterian minister, reported the following religious dream that occurred near the end of her seminary training:
I was going to one meeting after another in the mother house at Domenican College [a nearby Catholic convent]. We are working on the homeless problem. I was tired of the endless talk and doing. Someone said to me that if I really wanted to be near God and know God that there was a place deep within the heart of the convent where I could do that. I went off in search of this holy place—and found it. It was a dark cave or grotto made of wet drippy rocks. There was a stream coming into the cave that made a small gurgling fountain of water. It was quiet except for the sound of the moving water. It was quite dark. A short nun dressed all in black was quietly shuffling around taking care of the grotto. She told me that if I sat down on the red bench and waited quietly that maybe I would experience God. The red seat was covered with cheap, worn vinyl and there was a tear in the seat that had been repaired with tan tape. I thought it probably wouldn’t happen to me but I’d sit quietly and see what would happen.

It was dark and quiet and I began listening to the sound of the little fountain of water. Before long I became aware that the water was rushing faster and then I found myself becoming one with the water and being thrust into space. My being became at one with the stars and the suns. I experienced complete peace, complete understanding of how everything in the universe fit into an integrated whole and a total unity with God—not becoming God, but the indescribable feeling of being that I was totally with God. This feeling continued for some time and then I simply found myself back on the red bench. The little nun continued her work but I knew that she knew that I had met God in that cave. (pp. 157-8)

With respect to the first and second criteria, the image of home (e.g., mother’s home and God’s cave) doubly appears in concrete form and metaphorically expresses what the dreamer identified as two salient existential issues: an ongoing, conflictual relationship with her family that had left her feeling displaced in the world and a longing for intimate communion with the divine. According to Mrs. M., she apprehended the dream as a real experience that, in its immediate and remote aftermath, positioned itself as a powerful and enduring presence in her life. In addition, the dream provided assurance of Mrs. M’s decision to become a minister, while deepening her relationship to God. Finally, the dream challenged Mrs. M. to reflect on her past and explore the sense of alienation that stemmed from her long-abandoned family and home. According to Bulkeley (1994), Mrs. M.’s illustrative case points to two major themes that seem to constellate around root metaphor dreams: (1) they are often experienced in times of crisis, wherein the dreamer encounters a “profound threat to his or her ordinary,
accustomed life or worldview” (p. 165); and (2) they catalyze transformative changes towards a moral response.

Neither Things nor Thoughts: A Foray into the Intermediate Imaginal

In one of his seminal works, Henry Corbin (1972) invoked the words *mundus imaginalis* to name a separate order of reality experienced through a mode of perception variously called imaginative consciousness and cognitive imagination. Corbin emphatically distinguished the *mundus imaginalis* from the imaginary and its definitional trappings. In its conventional usage, imaginary denotes an absence of factual reality. When used in conjunction with an object, the adjective ontologically negates the object (e.g., the imaginary friends of childhood do not exist independently of a child’s thoughts). Conventionally, we regard an imaginary object as fanciful, fantastic, chimerical, or quixotic; but fundamentally, we apprehend the object as unreal. The deeply entrenched Cartesian philosophy of western culture has erected a barrier between the inner operations of mind and the outer tangibles of reality (Hillman, 1975). This philosophical move cleaves thinking and being by assuming they comprise ontologically separate categories. Mind is not reducible to matter, and conversely, matter it not reducible to mind. Mind and the realm of abstract intelligence (alternatively, spirit) are perceived by the intellect, whereas matter and the realm of physical material (alternatively, body) are perceived by the senses.

Corbin and Hillman both recognize a third order of reality—*mundus imaginalis* or the place of soul. According to Corbin, *mundus imaginalis* is an ontologically real place that is intermediate and intermediary to the sensible realm of matter and the intellective realm of mind. It is through a mode of imaginative consciousness that we are able to perceive the *mundus imaginalis*: “a faculty with a cognitive function, a noetic value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition” (Corbin, 1972, p. 7). Similarly Hillman (1975) assumes the place of soul is ontologically real: “a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection, that is neither physical and material on the one hand, nor spiritual and abstract on the other, yet bound to them both” (p. 68). Hillman understands soul and the imaginal synonymously, a primordial reality constituted by image.
Hillman (1977) makes a sharp distinction between symbol and image as he considers image prior to the world of symbols: “Consequently, two ways now open up. We can approach images via symbols or symbols via images. If we focus on the whenever and wherever of an image, its generality and conventionality, we are looking at it symbolically. If, on the other hand, we examine the how of a symbol, its particularity and peculiarieness, then we are looking at it imagistically” (p. 64). In short, Hillman’s distinction points back to the differential operations of linguistic (e.g., dream as symbolic text) and imagistic frames of consciousness (e.g., dream as image). The power of an image derives from its characteristic idiosyncrasies and capacity for polysemy. To affix symbolisms with fixed referents to images is to deplete images of their power and depth. In contrast to a conceptual approach that seeks to know the dream through interpretation, an imagistic approach to the dream is receptive to the particularities of its phenomenal appearance, in which polysemous significance inheres:

Dream as image brings us back to the unknown. We stick to it in the image. There is nowhere else to go. Only it can tell us about itself. So we set aside our collective unconscious that knows where dreams are, what dreams do, what they mean. The practice with dreams as images suspends our theory which relies on a symbolic approach. We do not want to prejudice the phenomenal experience of their unknowingness and our unconsciousness by knowing in advance that they are messages, dramas, compensations, prospective indications, transcendent functions. We want to go at the image without the defense of symbols. (Hillman, 1977, p. 68)

In this way, the image and the unknown are rife with possibility. To deepen into the idiosyncrasies and particularities of image absent interpretation approaches beauty, death, and the divine in an act of soul-making. Hillman refers to dream as image because of its particular context, scene, and mood—the peculiar, equivocal, polysemous nature of the dream can engender a sense of embodied significance commensurable with the general phenomenology and numinous quality of religious experience.

The Present Study

I embarked on this study to gain a deeper understanding of religious calling and the role of dreams. Hillman (1996) has generally defined calling as, “an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events [that] struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I’ve got to have. This is who I am” (p. 3). Towards a
definition of religious calling, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) has referred to calling as, “9A: The summons, invitation, or impulse of God . . . . The inward conviction of a divine call; the strong impulse to any course of action as the right thing to do” (1989, p. 634). Over the span of two thousand years, alongside major historical and cultural developments, the notion of calling has undergone several critical changes that undergird the relatively narrow parameters of its contemporary usage in Western culture. What originated as a perilous call to faith among aliens and exiles on the margins of the Roman Empire has considerably diminished in scope and significance. The equivalence of calling and work or occupation reflects the trivialization of the notion in secularized Western culture. The inordinate degree of surrender and self-sacrifice demanded by calling has largely become a vestige of the past. However, the notion of calling continues to abide and retain significance for persons called to the ministry. For this study, I focused exclusively on the dreams and lived experiences of these persons.

Jung’s assertion that dreams may be “the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience” (Jung, 1990, p. 386) brings to bear their immense value and specifically points to what he called the “big” dream. Jung stated these dreams—by virtue of sheer force and beauty—reveal their significance in ways that suggest that meaning is intrinsic to the dream. A rich lineage of researchers have supported and elaborated the powerful influence of the “big” dream on the life of the dreamer (Bulkeley, 1994; Hunt, 1989; Knudson & Minier, 1999; Kuiken et al., 2006). Hunt’s (1989) classification of archetypal-titanic dreams and theoretical propositions regarding presentational symbolism and felt meaning cohere with Knudson and Minier’s (1999) qualitative findings that situate significant dreams in a primarily imagistic mode of consciousness. Insofar as archetypal-titanic and significant dreams have ongoing transformative effects and manifest existential antinomies, these types of dreams closely relate to the root metaphor dreams espoused by Bulkeley (1994) in his study of dreams and religious meaning. Together these three lines of dream inquiry support the proposition that extraordinary dreams bearing numinous, presentational, and existential qualities have the potential to constitute a religious experience as powerful as divine calling.
In his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902/1994) circumscribed religious experience as the “feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine” (p. 36). With the addition of dreams, I employed James’ definition of religious experience in my study of religious calling. In his lecture on the reality of the unseen, James’ stated broadly that the religious attitude of the soul is comprised of a belief in and adjustment to an invisible order (James, 1902/1994). Notwithstanding his reference to soul, James proceeds to espouse a dualistic consciousness in relation to religious matters: “All of our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the “objects” of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with our-selves. Such objects may be present to our senses, or they may be present only to our thought” (p. 61). On this point, I diverged from James and elected instead to adopt the tripartite model proffered by Corbin and Hillman that encompasses mind/spirit, matter/body, and imagination/soul. Particularly, I aligned my approach to dreams and religious calling with Hillman’s notion of dream as image.

I set out to understand the role of dreams in religious calling by examining the life narratives of three women called to Christian ministry. I adopted a narrative and performative writing approach (Chase, 2005; Pelias, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2006) to the calling stories and dreams of three middle-aged, female Christian ministers to cultivate a layered understanding of (1) the experiences of hearing and answering a call to religious service; (2) the ongoing role of significant dreams in hearing and answering the call to religious service; (3) the phenomenology of significant dreams that influence the call to service; (4) and finally, the extent to which significant religious dreams facilitate a participatory and receptive engagement with the divine in everyday lived experience.

**Researcher’s Positioning in the Present Study**

Once upon an otherwise ordinary night, something rather extraordinary happened. Out of the icy, dark nothingness of sleep emerged a minute zone of infinite density, a glowing singularity that at once exploded into an expanding cosmos of kaleidoscopic image. In rhythmic pulsation, the images swirled, multiplied, and danced among each other as if animated by
the beating of some celestial Heart. Breathlessly, I awakened from this
dream with the oddest, truest admixture of ineffable wonder and indelible
purpose, and the conviction that where I had been was other than just a
dream and none other than the horizon of my own destiny.

The preceding passage is a poetic imagining largely inspired by my unexpected
and burgeoning fascination with archetypal dreams over the past year. As I revisit the
imagining and the exuberant reverie it articulates, I take pause to consider the mutuality
of the research process and the extent to which it has shaped and reshaped my own
beliefs and assumptions regarding religion, spirituality, or the divine.

Ultimately, research with soul in mind concerns itself with the paradox of
revelation and concealment that characterizes a hermeneutical approach to psychology.
The concealed perspectives are what Romanyshyn (2007) calls unfinished business
because no one perspective may ever envelop the totality of soul; therefore, an imaginal
approach to research requires the researcher to release his or her claim upon the work. In
this way, a sense of mourning arises in the shift from an ego perspective to a soul
perspective: “An imaginal approach to research is a poetics of the research process in
which the researcher has to ‘die’ to the work so that the unfinished business in the soul of
the work can speak” (p. 82). To “die” to the work, the researcher must actively elucidate
his or her ego perspective and understand the ways in which it seeks to subordinate the
area of inquiry.

For as long as I can remember, my parents placed church, God, and the teachings
of Jesus Christ at the foundation of our family life and values. On a weekly basis, we
attended a congregational church, where I received my baptism as an infant and my
communion as a preadolescent. Despite the faithful commitment of my parents to
religious life, I never fully subscribed to the existence of God or the notion of
institutional worship. I can vividly recall as a boy running amok in the backyard of my
childhood home, while yelling at the gathering storm clouds, daring God to throw some
lightening my way. During the Sunday sermon, disinterested and listless, I would
sometimes stare intensely at the holy objects arranged in the sanctuary in a concentrated
effort to move them with my mind. More commonly, I would turn to the window and
watch for animals, wind, or light in the trees that constellated in the churchyard.
Throughout my adolescence, I attended church more sporadically; and once I reached
college-age, I stopped attending altogether except for major holidays. Meanwhile, my early apprehensions regarding the existence of God had coalesced into an unrefined system of belief comprised of atheism, existential humanism, and Buddhism.

Prior to beginning graduate school two years ago, I had long since abandoned the practice of meditation, once routine in my early twenties, and rarely reflected critically on my religious and spiritual beliefs. It was not until my thesis advisor had proposed the present study and introduced me to James Hillman’s archetypal psychology that I began to wrestle with my assumptions regarding the nature of the cosmos and consciousness. I cannot overstate the sense of vitality and purpose that imagination has afforded me throughout my life. Surely, imagination is the closest thing to religion that I had ever experienced. Due to this bias, I naturally gravitated towards Corbin and Hillman, and wholeheartedly affirmed their writings on the intermediate imaginal and soul. Nonetheless, I had never seriously considered Corbin’s (1972) notion of *mundus imaginalis*—imagination having valid ontological status—much less Hillman’s (1992) notion of *anima mundi* (Hillman, 1992) or a world animated, ensouled.

As I read these texts for an archetypal psychology course and my literature review, I began to engage my dream life and poetic process on a routine basis over the duration of the study. Simultaneously, I suspended my tendency to take personal ownership and an interpretive stance towards “my” poetic imaginings and increasingly rich dream life. What emerged from this stance were a series of experiences that proved painful, or healing, or both, but always significant with respect to how I engaged others, the world, and myself. In short, I cultivated a faith in imagination that exceeded personal dimensions of meaning. In addition, throughout the interview and writing process, I found myself aligned with the participants’ clear and active commitment to social justice in ways that dispelled some of my prejudiced generalities regarding the agenda of the institutional church. Most surprisingly, I became increasingly aware of the absence of community in my own life and a longing to share in the enlarged sense of home intimated by each of the ministers.

**Method**

*Interview and Recruitment Procedure*
My faculty research advisor and I conducted unstructured telephone interviews with three women who identified as ordained ministers of the United Church of Christ. The prerequisites for participation were two-fold: (1) participants had to have completed or be working towards ordination; and (2) participants had to endorse that dreams, to some degree, figured into their calling to service. I recruited the participants through a snowballing technique. One minister, a family acquaintance, agreed to participate and then recommended two of her colleagues, who also consented to participate after reading the recruitment script (see Appendix A). All three of the participants resided in New England and were ordained female ministers in active service. Additionally, all three of the participants were in their mid-50’s, Caucasian, and college-educated. Each reported at least one significant dream that she experienced as relevant to her calling. All of the dreams reports except for one were included in the results section. I elected not to include the aforementioned dream because (a) the minister did not refer to it as a significant dream and (b) she intimated the dream to support the theme of synchronicity rather than her calling. Prior to the interviews, I provided each participant with a consent form for participation (see Appendix B) and a consent form for recording and quoting from dreams (see Appendix C) to read and sign. Due to the geographical distance between the participants and this researcher, I could not feasibly carry out face-to-face interviews; therefore, all interviews were conducted by telephone and audio-recorded.

In accordance with the unstructured format, we initiated each interview by asking simply, “We would like to begin by hearing the story of how you came to a life of religious service.” We had prepared a set of open-ended questions (see Appendix D) to frame the interview as needed; however, the brief prompt invariably elicited from the ministers long, detailed life narratives concerning their calling to service and relevant dreams. The faculty research advisor and I conducted follow-up interviews with two of the three participants. Due to time constraints, the third participant could not participate in a follow-up interview. Each initial interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and each follow-up interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes.

Once we completed the interviews, I transcribed, iteratively read, and re-presented the calling narratives around my sense of the salient images. I sent each participant a
written copy of her narrative to elicit feedback. Each participant fully endorsed my re-
presentation of her calling narrative.

*Interview Process*

We predicated our approach to the interview process on a postmodern perspective
that emphasizes the researcher’s human role (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Accordingly, we
conducted the interviews according to the following guidelines: (1) we provided an initial
description of narrative inquiry as well as the purpose of our study and elaborated on
these descriptions insofar as the participants had additional questions; (2) at the outset,
we did not ask our research questions; instead, we asked the participant to tell her story;
(3) we were careful not to interrupt the participant’s narrative; additionally, we actively
encouraged the participant to voice her personal opinions regarding the research topic;
(4) we aimed to cultivate an empathic, collaborative, and co-creative stance in relation to
the participant; in doing so, we occasionally validated the participant’s views and
constructively submitted our own perspectives; (5) points of confusion were regarded as
inevitable and welcome elements in the interview process; such junctures were used as
valuable opportunities to excavate deeper layers of meaning; (6) in general, we were
fully amenable to any and all dialogical improvisation over the course of the interview.

For the initial series of interviews, my thesis advisor acted as the lead interviewer
and asked participants follow-up questions for the purpose of clarification or elaboration.
Nonetheless, I too participated actively in the first set of interviews and posed questions
that perhaps my thesis advisor did not think to ask. The conjoint interview process
alleviated the pressure of having to “get it all” and thus allowed us to listen more freely
to the participant’s narrative. In addition, the conjoint interview structure enriched the
process because it involved a multiplicity of perspectives. Following the initial set of
interviews, my thesis advisor and I listened to and discussed the audio-recorded
interviews, while formulating follow-up questions for the participants. In the second
series of interviews, I assumed the role of lead interviewer with respect to our follow-up
questions, while my thesis advisor periodically posed questions for clarification or
elaboration. We conducted all of the interviews with the assumption of a co-constructive
process. Nonetheless, the majority of the interview process consisted of the participants
describing in detail their calling and dreams in the frame of a life narrative. Most of the questions that my thesis advisor and I posed were for reflection or clarification.

An Imagistic Approach to Narrative

Towards a broad definition, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) characterized qualitative research as a field of inquiry that interpenetrates multiple fields, disciplines, and matters of human phenomena. By interpretive, naturalistic, and pluralistic modes of inquiry, qualitative research seeks to understand lived experience, while interrogating the assumptive structures inherent to the methods, approaches, and epistemological claims propagated by positivist, foundational, and post-positivist paradigms. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) have argued that the future of qualitative research will entail “a concern with moral discourse” and the “development of sacred textualities” (p. 3). Ultimately then, the social sciences and humanities will become “sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender…community” (p. 3) and significantly, religion and spirituality.

As a specific domain in qualitative research, the discipline of narrative inquiry makes as its focus the succession of biographical experiences as narrated by the person who has lived them (Chase, 2005). Crucially, the narrative researcher assumes that the ways in which the narrator privileges particular lived experiences over others and (in) coherently assigns structure to these experiences can provide valuable in-sight into the narrator’s retrospective process of meaning-making as well as how they view their life as a meaningful whole (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1995). In this way, the possibilities for narrative exceed the simplistic notion that they merely represent a chronological enumeration of facts or events. Inasmuch as I assumed that the significance of religious calling and dreams extended through multiple life contexts, I chose a narrative methodology because it is eminently conducive to a breadth and depth-based inquiry.

Narrative inquiry makes understanding rather than truth seeking its perpetual goal because the methodology fully acknowledges the dynamic, emergent complexity of human beings. Elsewhere, Miller (1992) has observed, “An individual’s existence is meaning, and so truth is being. Because truth is not a characteristic only of propositions but of reality, it inheres in action and moral judgments as well. The truth finds people as they muddle through the practical dilemmas of surviving” (p. 23). We at once find ourselves embedded in multiple life contexts (e.g., home, community, and culture) across
multiple points in time (e.g., past, present, and future). Consequently, a narrative approach to understanding necessarily contextualizes lived experience in the historical, cultural, social, and political systems out of which they emerge. With all the manifold and shifting perspectives in space and time, even the most rigorous narrative research will yield understandings that are mutable, partial, and incomplete because of the inextricable linkage between the revelation and the concealment of meaning. According to Romanyshyn (2007), an imaginal approach to psychological research attunes itself to this very paradox—significance revealed always entails significance concealed.

Hillman’s (1977) distinction between image and symbol, and prescriptive corollary—“stick to the image” (p. 68)—crucially informed my imaginal approach to narrative inquiry. In short, the symbolic approach to image is towards generality by way of interpretive meaning. In contrast, an imagistic approach to image is towards the polysemous significance inherent to its phenomenal particularity. Hillman (1980) also distinguished between the meaning of an image and the significance of an image: “the first is what we give to it; the second, what it gives to us” (p. 37). Although Hillman originally intended this distinction for the dream image, I wondered how I might apply it to a narrative inquiry, proceeding, as I did, from the theoretical assumption that the religious calling manifests as image (Hillman, 1996). To this end, I employed the method of performative writing due to its imagistic approach to text and value of presentation over representation.

**Performative Writing**

Performative writing is a method of inquiry concerned with evocation rather than representation. In short, the performative researcher is one who shows rather than tells. Pollock (1998) characterizes performative writing as polyphonic, reflexive, and evocative, and defines it generally as “an inquiry into the limits and possibilities of the intersections between speech and writing” (p. 75). For Denzin (2001), the cutting edge of performative writing animates and radicalizes textuality by way of narrative collage—a method in which conventional temporality is dismantled in the service of enlarged possibilities with respect to textual image and voice. In other words, the boundaries that separate past, present, and future are purposely collapsed to make way for Joycean textualities that instantiate the non-linear manifestations of consciousness. With this
transgressive move, it is then possible that “more than one voice can speak at once, in
more than one tense. The text can be a collage, a montage, with photographs, blank
spaces, poems, monologues, dialogues, voice-overs, and interior streams of
consciousness” (p. 29). Together these various incantations of textual collage point to a
method of inquiry that is characteristically poetic and dramatic in its attention to an
aesthetic multivocality, and potentially consequential in its capacity to forge an
emotional connection and incite action in the reader.

Pelias (2005) presents a compelling three-part argument in support of
performative writing as legitimate and valuable scholarly praxis. Pelias first offers a
poem, which concludes with the following stanza:

for identification: real lives that shake the imagination
connecting us to subjects that truly matter,
connecting us to each other
shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw data of life in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in
performative writing. (p. 416)

Pelias’ reference to identification speaks to the visceral, empathic responses that
performative writers aspire to evoke in their readers. These works aim to shake the
imagination because we envision horizons of possibility by way of it. Specifically,
evocative and empathically resonant writings allow us to dwell within lived experiences
other than our own.

First, Pelias wonders about the epistemic criteria for scholarly knowledge and
interrogates the claim that performative writing does not count as a legitimate form of
scholarship (Gingrich-Philbrook, 1998). For academic opponents of performative
writing, the supreme fear is a burgeoning relativism that assumes all claims to truth are
utterly arbitrary. To be sure, the legitimacy of objectivism is being increasingly
interrogated through the recognition that values are unavoidably inherent to the academic
enterprise; however, Pelias argues that performative writing as praxis is merely a small
fissure in the academic foundation. Rather than topple the monolithic structure of logical
positivism, he understands the action of performative writing as innovative in scope: an
attention to aesthetics augments and enlarges our notions of human experiences. In short, performative inquiry aspires to cultivate an understanding of embodied meaning and allows us to “see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by simple linear or causal logic” (Goodall, 1991, p. 125).

Second, performative writing weaves together a pastiche of arresting, epiphanic moments in a way that honors the complexity and flesh and blood of human life. Conceptual dichotomies and categorizations (e.g., cognitive or emotive; objective or subjective) are regarded as reductive, abstractive, and anathema to the particularities and poignancies that punctuate captivating and instructive narratives. In addition, performative writing does not merely aim to reproduce experience; instead, performative writing seeks to create experience. Rather than inventory experiential actualities, the overarching purpose is to furnish artfully experiential potentialities by way of evocation. Performative writing offers “enabling fictions” and opens “doors to a place where the raw and genuine find their articulation through form, through poetic expression, through art” (Pelias, 2005, p. 418).

Third, performative inquiry does not assume that truths of the world inhere in a singular reality; rather it assumes that multiple realities comprise the world. Consistent with philosophical hermeneutics, a performative inquiry approaches lived experience as partial and contingent upon layers of dynamic contextual factors; therefore, the epistemological aim is not explanatory knowledge, in which the danger of colonization inheres, but a plurality of knowing, in which emergent differences of perspective are fostered and explored though the textual interplay of multiple voices and images.

Fourth, through the evocation of empathic responses, performative writing cultivates a space that others can inhabit and begin to see themselves differently. Identification and empathy are invitational in this context and beckon the reader to enter concrete manifestations of human experience. Performative writing vivisects the meaning-making processes by which the reader and the world mutually define each other. Importantly, a performative inquiry does not apprehend these processes as intellection abstractions but embodied forms of meaning, where “tensions are felt and
uncovered,” (Pelias, 2005, p. 419) and matters of significance are recognized through what the body feels as it makes reciprocal contact with the world.

Whereas Pelias has provided several valuable insights towards the definition and justification of performative writing, Goodall (2008) has offered useful guidelines with respect to the execution of what he refers to as evocative storytelling. According to Goodall, the key to evocative storytelling consists in four basic criteria: conflict, connection, continuing curiosity, and climactic satisfaction. The first criterion, conflict, refers to a mystery, problem, or dilemma that is central to the story. The second criterion, connection, involves the ways that the writer forges reader identification with the characters that populate the story. The writer fosters continuing curiosity by engaging the reader through the depiction of novelty or uniqueness with respect to the events, characters, or form of the story. By this criterion, the writer sustains the readers’ interest and concern towards the conclusion of the story. Finally, the writer accomplishes climactic satisfaction when the ending effectively fulfills the possibilities suggested by the initial conflict, mystery, or dilemma. Conflict, connection, continuing curiosity, and climactic satisfaction are indispensible to evocation and, by extension, effective performative writing.

In the time between the first and second interview, and the interview and writing process, I iteratively listened to and read each calling narrative with specific attention to these criteria as the fore structure. With the exception of the final criterion, climactic satisfaction (see my methodological focus on telos), one of my goals was to have the participants elaborate on elements of the narrative that substantively informed the main conflict and most richly supported connection and the continuing curiosity of the reader.
Results: Calling in Three Parts

I. “Before the message there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn, before the prose the poem” (Wilder, 1972, p. 1).

Steel butterflies. That is what we are. Diaphanous, sheer, and brightly winged imagoes tumbling lithely in elliptical flight. We arrest the eye and recede into the world that meets its dilated gaze. Yet some would have us sealed in a jar, or fix us with a silver pin on paper and cork. Steel butterflies. That is what we must be. Steel so that others cannot steal us. Steel so that others cannot pierce us. Not all but a touch of steel, for we must not be shot through with steeliness lest our sheerness begin to rust and brightness dim.

Esther had recently attended a clergy gathering, where a colleague shared with her a particularly challenging predicament she faced within her congregation. About the paradoxes that confront clergy, Esther’s colleague developed the following insight: “It’s almost like we have to be steel butterflies.” The metaphor resonated with Esther as she herself often grappled with the unwieldy balance of other-sensitivity and self-preservation in her own ministry. Esther emphasized the primacy of sensitive attunement to persons of her congregation. At the same time, Esther explained, the minister must have the awareness and fortitude to recognize and preempt the antagonistic forces, however rare, that inevitably emerge. The aptness of the metaphor so struck Esther that she shared it with one of her deacons. The deacon, an artist, gave to Esther a painting of butterflies. Esther hung the painting in her office because the image served as a constant reminder of the metaphor and provided her a means of support during particularly arduous times.

In the year prior to receiving the gift from her deacon, Esther was embroiled in an ongoing conflict with two members of her congregation, a married couple, whose antagonism toward Esther became so insufferable that it disrupted her sleep. To make matters worse, the woman worked closely with Esther as her administrative assistant. Despite Esther’s repeated efforts to initiate dialogue, the couple remained intent on undermining her at every opportunity. Never had Esther imagined a ministry such as this one. Although the woman finally resigned and the couple had left the church, the anguish of the experience still weighed heavily in Esther’s telling of the story. One of the most
tumultuous trials of her life, Esther struggled mightily to sleep nights and lost the facility
to dream. In particular, Esther lamented the loss of dreaming because throughout her
lifetime, it has provided her a unique means of support and guidance, much like the
butterfly painting that hangs in her office. Esther regained a semblance of peace after the
woman’s resignation and with it sleep and the restoration of dreams. One in particular,
the Steel Butterfly Dream, held enormous significance for Esther:

I dreamt I went into my office and my steel butterfly painting had been
stolen. I went into the administrative assistant’s office to look for it—the
one that is giving me so much difficulty—and she was holding it. And she
had stolen it. I saw that she had it and I said to her, “I would like for you
to give me back my painting.” And she said, “I’m not giving it back.” Then
in the dream, something happened that, even though it’s a dream, I’m still
embarrassed to tell you, but I will tell you about it. It is something that I’ve
never done. In the dream, I looked at her and I completely lost my temper.

All the rage,
all the anger
that I felt toward
this woman,
who has abused my trust,
violated my kindness,
given me a hard time,
just had been
a nightmare,

All that anger
came out
and pardon my language,
but this is what I said
in the dream.
I said to her,
“Fuck you,
you bitch.
Give me back
my painting.”

And she just looked at me
and smiled
a very mean like I-got-you smile,
like an I-made-you-lose-it and
now-you’re-really-in-trouble kind of smile.
In the dream, I instantly felt overwhelmed by the implications of what it meant that I had lost my temper and sworn at her. So I said to her, “I regret that I just lost my temper, but I would really like you to give back my painting,” and she said, “I’m not giving it to you.”

And then I woke up.

Esther’s painting, a materialization of the resonant metaphor, was dear to her, particularly at a time in which she needed every ounce of steel to stay afloat. Nonetheless, the unbridled ferocity and steeliness of the dream figure, alien to her own temperament, left Esther bemused and appalled. At first glance, the intensity of anger demonstrated by the dream figure had puzzled Esther because she had never allowed herself to submit to provocation. Instead, Esther had prided herself on her patience and integrity in the face of a formidable and malignant opposition. The rage expressed by the dream figure horrified Esther because it was antithetical to her gracious nature as a person and minister. For two years, Esther responded to the conflict with a spirit of care, concern, and loving-kindness; therefore, the aggressive entitlement of the dream figure frightened her. Nevertheless, Esther heeded the feelings of the dream figure as true, perhaps truer than her own in some ways, and recognized the deeper repercussions this trial had taken on her inner life. As Esther put it, she did not so much elect to see significance in the dream as the dream presented significance she could not see. Aside from the manifest content, the vivid quality of the dream supported its significance. In particular, Esther recalled that the dream possessed augmented visual properties in terms of color, intensity, specificity, and verisimilitude. The dream could really happen and in a sense really did happen to Esther. It served an instructive, cautionary, and portentous function for Esther in showing her the steeliness of which she was capable should she rely solely on her butterfly nature.

Esther’s global sense of calling and reverence for dreams manifested early in her childhood. Esther warmly recalled her first sensory and intellectual memory as one of feeling watched over, cared for, and loved. Her parents situated church and religious faith at the very center of their family life. From her first remembrance, Esther’s childhood experiences involved themes of God, higher purpose, and mystical presence. As the oldest of five children in a Roman Catholic household, her parents instilled in Esther from a very young age the value of piety and responsibility. Esther also attended
parochial school for six years prior to public school and became adept at thinking in theological categories. Esther manifested her ardent sense of global calling through play. She imagined herself as a priest and enlisted her siblings to participate in a variety of religious ceremonies. Periodically, Esther had her mother fashion a vestment out of white diaper cloth and pin it to Esther’s lapel with large diaper pins. With her siblings lined up in front of the fireplace, Esther would serve them communion with candied mints from a glass dish used as a chalice. In and through Esther’s imaginal play, she felt constantly cared for and accompanied by God or some mystical Presence. Esther’s attunement to this sense of accompaniment approached its pinnacle when she reached the threshold of sleep and stepped through it into dreams:

I would often awaken
into hearing a calm
and steady breathing,
very peaceful,
that was not my own.

It perhaps started
because I shared a bedroom
with a sibling
until I was about 7,
but once I had my own room,
I would often awaken
into an awareness
of another entity
just breathing
very comfortably and peacefully

and I would be sort of
half-asleep, half-awake
and sometimes would awaken lightly
and check for it
and hear it
and be comforted
and go back to sleep.

I would often come
into hearing this
as I awoke
and when I fully woke
it would not...
I would be aware that
it wasn’t something
I could hear any longer.

I would often have this dream
and to me it felt like
a Guardian Angel,
or something.

In hypnagogia, the liminal consciousness between wakefulness and sleep, Esther had sensuously encountered an invisible entity, a companionate Presence, a Guardian Angel manifesting itself through the cycle and sound of rhythmic breathing. Esther denied that the Presence ever alarmed or frightened her as if some unwelcome, malevolent haunt. Instead, its benevolence comforted her, a Guardian Angel that enveloped Esther and engendered an unbounded intimacy and peace. In addition, her Guardian Angel heralded Esther’s passage through the veil of hypnagogia into the non-physical, heavenly realm of dreams, where anything was possible:

That was very much
a part of my experience
in my sleeping life
was the opportunity
to go into that non-physical world

That was equally real
and that I was being
taught about during
the day in school;

About heaven
and what it was like
and how wonderful it was
and how joyful it was

And then I could go
home
and go to sleep
and kind of go there.

Esther traversed into the non-physical world with anticipatory relish and joy; she simply loved to sleep: with sleep came dreams and with dreams came the promise of high adventure and play. In a world ungoverned by physical law, Esther was lifted up and supported by a groundless ground, an implacable conviction, not just of safety, but of
another world equally real, and in some ways more real than the physical world opposite the veil. Esther’s adventures provided a radical assurance of a more-than-meets-the-eye. One particular dream, recurrent in her childhood, manifests Esther’s joy for that non-physical, heavenly realm:

I also would dream very often that my siblings and I were flying around the house together and I would be leading the flight team and we would have capes on and we would be flying and it was incredibly fun and it felt like crossing into a different world. It’s kind of that we were able to swoop and soar and go fast or slow. And interestingly, one of my brothers had those dreams as well, which has made us have some hilarious laughter as we thought that maybe we were really doing it! I would dream about flying around with them, inside the house like a group of geese. I would be in the front leading the flight and they were all behind me and I felt kind of protective of them. And we just had a great old time. And I remember when I would go to sleep I would hope I would dream that because it was so much fun.

For five years, Esther and her siblings lived as winged dream animals, a skein of geese freely swooping, soaring, and circling high above the floor of their childhood home. With laughter and hilarity, the children would take great joy in reliving through story Esther’s nighttime adventures. Significantly, Esther made a distinction between the notion of flying and the experience of flying. The former flies in the face of physical laws and surely carried with it some emancipating significance, yet a conceptual awareness still grounds this notion of flying or more specifically, a knowing that in flying the physical world and its limitations are absent. In contrast, the experience of flying for Esther manifested through a felt bodily awareness, soaring and swooping through the air, a being in flight exclusive of conceptual dichotomy (e.g., physical/not physical).

Sorrow too weaved through Esther’s childhood as she demonstrated a precocious and passionate attunement to the seasons of life and death. Lent and Easter annually occasioned a profound sadness in Esther as she reflected on the inordinate pain suffered by Christ in his final days. Esther’s sensitivity to suffering and death, together with her faith and joy in the groundless ground of the angelic realm, served to cultivate an incipient tolerance and respect for perhaps the most onerous of our existential dilemmas. Much later in life, Esther’s call issued from the transitional space between life and death,
where she accompanied the dying and grief-stricken. Through her hospice social work, Esther again approached the veil and resumed contact with the non-physical world of her youth. She deepened into her calling with reverence and a renewed conviction of the groundless ground:

I’m always privileged
to hear stories of people
who experience that other realm,
either as they get closer to dying
or grieving people

Who experience the presence
of their departed loved ones,
in many different ways
and sometimes for years
from the time of the loss.

One is privileged
to hear these things
that people will
often scarcely dare to tell anyone
else for fear they will be
thought of as mentally unstable.

But I always know
when one of
these stories is coming
because people will say,
“You’re going to think I’m crazy, but…”
And then, they’ll say,
“I swear I heard my husband’s voice”
or “I’m pretty sure I saw my brother.”

These and other remarkable stories illustrated for Esther how contact with the non-physical world is a potentially transformative touchstone of the grieving process. In waking life and dreams, the dead manifested vividly and engaged loved ones, by word or by image, in some form of direct communication. For one grieving widow, a simple dream image provided a dual reassurance:

I remember one woman
telling me she would have a dream
of standing and
an elevator door would open
Esther’s gift for accompanying the dying and bereaved was in large part due to her faithful engagement with the angelic realm, where the dead live on hauntingly or lovingly, or both, in the dreams of the living. Instead of taking their encounters of the dead as abstractions of the mind, Esther treated them as real. She found that her ontological faith in the non-physical realm addressed a hunger in the bereaved to seek substantive reconnection with the dead.

Esther attended seminary for a 10-year period that bridged two decades, over which time her brother James contracted HIV and died after eight long years of steady decline. As Esther’s next oldest sibling, she and James were very close. Six years into his illness, James’ condition worsened significantly and he moved in with Esther’s parents, who cared for him in the final two years of his life. Esther’s previous experiences as a hospice social worker provided an invaluable source of understanding and support; however, no measure of experience in her role could have prepared Esther for the anguish of losing a brother so insufferably. In the final years of James’ decline, Esther received a series of significant dreams that consoled her during the most tumultuous of times; dreams that influenced Esther’s sense of calling; dreams Esther says she will never forget. When James’ condition had taken a turn for the worst, he moved back home and Esther had the following dream:

I had a dream that he [James] and I were walking on a sidewalk. The dream is crystal clear. You know, those important dreams have even a different visual. They’re clear; they’re colorful; they have a vibrating resonance around them. It’s sort of like, “This is an important dream. Pay attention!”

He and I were walking along the sidewalk in the city together. He said to me, “I have to cross the street now.” And I started to cross with him and
he stopped me and he said, “You can’t come with me.” I felt very, very sad, but he spoke with a very authoritative compassion and I understood that I could not go with him. And he crossed the street and he went onto the sidewalk on the other side of the street with a lot of other people. I understood that I could not go to that place, where he was going.

Esther awoke from the dream racked with terrible sadness. The image of James crossing the street without Esther depicted vividly the inevitability of death. The dream confronted Esther with a simple yet agonizing truth, the stark terms of which had otherwise eluded her. The dream, in part, answered the mournful question of James’ fate when Esther watched him safely cross the street. Once he reached the other side, other people met and stood alongside James, and he stared back at Esther with an expression of repose. James’ peace in accompaniment reassured Esther immensely.

James’ disease continued to progress under the care of his parents in what Esther described as a nightmarish set of circumstances. This was before the introduction of antiretroviral therapies; therefore, no viable treatments were available to him. Worried for her parents, emotionally exhausted, and at the height of her distress, Esther had another dream:

```
I had a dream
and it was just
an image.

There were no words.
There were no voices
in this dream.

Sometimes,
in later dreams,
there were voices.

But in this one...
it was a dream of
an enormous Hand.

A huge Hand
and lying curled up,
naked in the center
of the palm

And in a fetal position
```
was me.
And the Hand was
just holding me.

Although Esther’s first dream conferred some semblance of peace regarding James’ ultimate transition, the prolonged pain he suffered eventually sapped Esther of her strength. With her family in crisis and similarly bereft, Esther felt a sense of desolation in her despair. The second dream engendered the feeling that a divine presence cared for, held, and supported Esther at a time when she most needed it.

In the final days preceding her brother’s death, Esther’s family had all gathered at her parent’s home, while James lay in a hospital bed some 70 miles away. Esther and her family members were taking turns going to the hospital and when it became clear that James had very little time left, they tried to bring him home, but circumstances did not allow it. James finally passed away in the hospital bed and three nights later Esther had the following dream:

I dreamt I was looking out my parent’s back window, sliding glass door. They live in a really pretty place with lots of woods in the back yard and a little hill rises up out of their yard. It’s all woods. And I’m looking out the window and I looked at the hill in their backyard and

it was all arid and dry
and all the plants had died
and it was like a desert
and it was hot
and scorching
and bereft of life.

And I was very, very sad. And then I heard a voice in the dream. It happened to be a male voice. Though I do think of this voice as a divine voice, I don’t necessarily think of God as a man.

A very rich, deep, beautiful male voice said, “Do not be sad. Your brother is ok and let me show you where he is.”

As the voice said those words, the hills began to turn. Almost like a stage at a theater, where the whole stage turns. By degrees,

it became verdant
and lush and green
and every color of flower
and fruit blossomed
and it was fragrant.
There were drops
of water on the leaf.

_It was just the most gorgeous, beautiful garden I had ever seen. With the appearance of this garden, the feeling transformed into one of complete joy and peace beyond my ability to describe in words. It was an incredibly powerful moment of shining peace and joy. And then the voice said,_

“This is where he is.”

Esther awoke filled with ineffable peace and gratitude for having received the gift of such profound reassurance: a desert of sorrow transformed into a garden of peace. As she shared the image with her family, Esther’s son John intimated that he too had dreamed of James. He had seen his uncle standing atop the stairway of his grandparent’s home. Gone were the Kaposi sarcoma lesions that covered his emaciated, prostrate body. In John’s brief dream, James had appeared healthy and happy. He had ascended intact. More than ten years later, Esther had her fourth and final dream of the series. The dream was brief, to be sure, yet the image touched Esther indelibly:

_It was just his face smiling and just appearing in my dream and remaining there for what seemed like a minute or so, but who knows._

This series of four significant dreams occurred over a 15-year period and coincided with the whole of seminary and the greater part of service for Esther; at the time of her fourth dream, she had been ordained and in service for eight years. These dreams at once provided comfort and reassurance during a protracted time of acute distress and served to deepen Esther’s sense of calling. The first three dreams potently underscored for Esther her ability to commune with persons touched by death or dying. Over and over, Esther’s dreams emerged out of the depths of her own sorrow and imbued her with a restored conviction of peaceable deliverance: for us all, in this dark, perilous
night of the soul, a redemptive beauty inheres, for we are granted safe passage by virtue of accompaniment.

Esther repeatedly emphasized how this series of dreams as well as the breathing and flying dreams of her childhood possessed a distinctive experiential quality. The feelings engendered by Esther’s dreams ranged from limitless joy to terrible sadness; however, all were intensely embodied experiences that signaled significance and remained embodied upon awakening and, in some cases, many years later. Esther’s dreams also possessed in common a unique visual quality that conveyed that these were indeed a different kind of dream. More specifically, Esther described each of these dreams as exceptionally clear, colorful, and *vivified*. That is to say, the dreams were shot through with a real sense of animated presence: the blanket rising and falling in breath, flying through the air like geese, walking with James, lying in the enormous Hand, the blooming garden. Insofar as her dreams possessed an animated, lifelike quality, they served to support Esther by way of accompaniment and lift her up through beauty.

The embodied nature of Esther’s dreams—*being* accompanied, *being* lifted up, *being* cradled, *being* transformed—gave way to a different mode of knowing, at once a letting-go of self and submission to a divine presence or realm. A precise formulation eluded Esther; however, she compared this type of consciousness to the contemplative prayer described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of 14th century Christian mysticism: “And so with great longing for him enter into this cloud. Or rather, I should say, let God awaken your longing and let him draw you to himself in this cloud while you strive with the help of his grace to forget everything else” (Johnston, 1973, p. 52). Paradoxically, Esther expressed how the forgetting of conceptualization imparted a curious knowing: “For me, it’s this funny cloud of knowing; this conviction of accompaniment and peace. It’s a funny kind of knowledge that’s beyond words; that feels very true.” In short, the cloud of unknowing for Esther was knowing God through an embodied sense of accompaniment and love.

Esther also mused on the experiential dimensions of responding to her call. She described it as an ever present felt sense of being stretched, challenged, and made to yearn for the fulfillment of a ministerial role. Significantly, though, Esther’s ordination, while a milestone in her calling, did not bring with it the sense of culmination of
completion. Esther confessed there have been times in which she wished the ceaseless yearning would go away because of the inordinate demands it has made of her. At the same time, Esther talked about feeling necessarily and irrevocably bound to her calling in a way that has always precluded refusal:

And an ongoing sense
that despite logic
or the reasons why
it was too expensive
or too difficult
or too demanding
for my family,
a sense that
I had to do this.

And it’s like a hunger,
a yearning,
a pulling
that you can’t
walk away from
and feel like
a whole person.
And it is that irrational.

Esther’s calling, however, did not manifest itself wholly as a brute necessity. She has also loved how her calling has given her life a higher purpose and shaped it so compellingly. In celebratory terms, Esther extolled the attendant rapture of God’s love, and with it, the radical assurance of God’s passionate desire to stand among us in justice and peace. To this end, Esther summarized her calling as the ineffable feeling of divine love married with the implacable conviction that the enactment of this love by persons so called can bring about substantive change in the world.

Esther experienced a strong sense of global calling as a child. In her adulthood, however, the male exclusivity of priesthood, and the alternative, celibate religious sisterhood, to which she did not aspire, stymied Esther’s pursuit of a particular calling. This barrier to religious vocation pointed to Esther’s larger discontent with the authoritative polity structure of the Roman Catholic tradition. After exploring several different churches, Esther and her husband found a home with the United Church of Christ and attended a small congregational church in New England. The pastor, Arnold
Kenseth, was a poet who had known Robert Frost and once had been the curator of the poetry room at Harvard University. Kenseth often espoused the kinship of poetic and religious experience. In particular, a major hallmark of his work was the immanence of the divine in the natural world:

Yea Lord, we give thee thanks
For this day and all our yesterdays:
For good days and bad days,
For days of hope and days of despair,
For days of losing and days of finding.

And we praise thee especially
For the lofty open pause of summer:
A pasture running to a hill,
A pool and a deer.
Many birds in the mornings
And their soft talk in the evenings,
And sleep drifting in
After the games and the run and the people.

Under it all, over it all, most gracious Lord,
We hear and touch thyself.
Amen. (Kenseth, 1969, p. x)

Esther marveled at the way Kenseth could deftly articulate words like a painter would images. To be sure, he spoke of the divine through images and listening to him speak was for Esther akin to seeing an incredible painting and grasping meaning beyond what appeared on the canvas. The genesis of Esther’s particular calling manifested during one of Kenseth’s sermons, when in hearing his words, Esther envisioned for herself an infinitesimal possibility as she beheld an impossible beauty:

He could just
look out the window
and you would
suddenly see divinity.

And I remember
sitting there thinking,
“I could never do that.”

That was my first conscious thought
of what I would I call
a growing sense of call
to ministry in this denomination.
My first thought being:
I couldn’t do it.
II. “A SCREAMING COMES ACROSS THE SKY. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (Pynchon, 1973, p. 3).

In a report issued to the United States Congress on March 4, 1985, President Ronald Regan made the following prefatory statement in support of the acquisition and deployment of MX missiles:

The attached report on the Peacekeeper missile contains my assessment of the requirement for Peacekeeper and my anticipated impact of the continued procurement of Peacekeeper missiles, pursuant to the provisions of Public Law 98 - 525, Section 110 of October 19, 1984.

My report concludes that the continued procurement and deployment of the Peacekeeper are essential to national security. The recommendations of the Scowcroft Commission are still valid. One hundred Peacekeeper missiles should be deployed in existing Minuteman silos as soon as possible.

My report also concludes that Peacekeeper is an essential element of our arms control strategy. Without the Peacekeeper our chances of reaching an equitable agreement with the Soviet Union to reduce significantly the size of our nuclear arsenals are substantially lowered. Indeed, should Congress delay or eliminate the Peacekeeper program, it would send an unmistakable signal to the Soviet Union that we do not possess the resolve required, nor the continuity of purpose, to maintain a viable strategic triad and the policy of deterrence the triad represents.

The time has come to place this issue behind us. While we have debated the merits of the Peacekeeper program, the Soviets have deployed over 600 Peacekeeper type missiles. If we are to move towards an equitable treaty in Geneva, procurement of 100 Peacekeeper missiles must continue.

I urge each member of Congress to approve the Peacekeeper and join me in a bipartisan and united effort in Geneva. With your support, and the support of the American people, our efforts at the negotiation table could lead to the more stable world we all seek, and lead to that day when mankind is free of the terrible threat of nuclear weapons. (United States & Regan, 1985)

Originally conceived in 1972, the United States classified the LGM-118A MX (Missile-eXperimental) or Peacekeeper as a land-based, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). A multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV), the missile contained a collection of nuclear weapons conducive to multiple-strike capability. Specifically, the Peacekeeper could hold up to 10 reentry vehicles (RV), each equipped with a 300-kiloton, W87 warhead/MK-21 RV (Croddy & Wirtz, 2005). By comparison,
the nuclear explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were estimated to yield 15 kilotons and 21 kilotons of force, respectively (Malik, 1985). Its design and development came out of an arms race with the Soviet Union, who, at the time, started to field increasingly sophisticated warheads capable of effectively neutralizing counterforce or second-strike nuclear weaponry, such as the Minuteman III missiles. Engineers designed the Peacekeeper to surpass the Minuteman III in accuracy, survivability, range, and flexibility. While its engineers primarily intended the Peacekeeper as a counterforce weapon, they also equipped the missile with first-strike capabilities. Initially fielded in 1983, the weapon underwent 50 flight tests prior to its manufacture in 1984. In July of 1985, approximately five months after President Regan declared his support for the program, Congress approved the limited deployment of 50 Peacekeeper missiles.

That same July in 1985, Ruth, then six months pregnant with her first child, stood before a group of Air Force generals and gave a talk on the missile guidance system she and her fellow engineers had developed in conjunction with the MX program. The night before the presentation, Ruth and her husband had watched on television a film called Testament (1983). The story depicts the occurrence and aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe from the perspective of a stay-at-home mother. The story follows her efforts to care for her three young children as a looming field of nuclear radiation envelopes the home and ultimately contaminates the family. As the crisis ensues, the elderly, the infirmed, and the youngest children of the community first succumb to radiation sickness. The tone of the film becomes increasingly hopeless and reaches its climax when the mother and her surviving children sit in the family station wagon as it idles in an enclosed garage, though in the end, the mother cannot bear to carry out what would be a tragic group suicide. In the final scene, the surviving family members solemnly circle around a birthday cake with lighted candles. When her son asks what he should she wish for, the mother replies, “that we remember it all…the good and the awful” (Littman, 1983). As she summed up the story, Ruth expressed darkly how she had identified with the mother character and juxtaposed the horrific images of the film with what she had already known about the toxic radiation effects:

\[\text{Basically, everyone is dying. What I knew,}\]
given my background
in nuclear analysis,
I knew
of the side effects
of how people die.

So, I was seeing it
right before my eyes,
only this time
it was children
and here I had a fetus,
a growing infant
inside of me.
I didn’t sleep well that night.

July of 1985. Ruth recalled that the next day, the day of the presentation, she wore something black. Standing in a large auditorium, feeling and looking very much pregnant, Ruth explained to a collective of Air Force generals how the technology of her firm could augment nuclear weaponry. Meanwhile, Ruth had seemingly stepped outside herself and looked on as this pregnant woman in black, Ruth-on-the-stage, moved her mouth and gestured dramatically to an audience of uniformed men sitting in rapt attention. Staring intently at Ruth-on-the-stage, it had occurred to Ruth how terribly wrong this all was and she then wondered incredulously, “What is she doing?” Yet, Ruth surmised what the audience must have thought of Ruth-on-the-stage: that she was conscientious, upstanding, and praiseworthy in her patriotism. She imagined the audience considering Ruth-on-the-stage admiringly, “Look at her. Isn’t she a good citizen? She’s looking out for the welfare of our nation. She’s a good Christian woman defending our nation.” However, Ruth came to know herself differently through this powerful, epiphanic experience, which iteratively spawned the same question, always with compelling force: What are you doing?

Ruth’s question to herself signaled an incipient end to her life as a software engineer. Ruth realized in horror how for years she had dealt in death unawares; and several months later, after the birth of her first child, the destructive implications of her work presented themselves in a gruesomely personalized dream:

I was the mother in that movie and in one very poignant part her son...I do know it was when our first born son was already born. He was an infant. But in this very poignant and despairing part of the movie where the
woman’s youngest son was just a little boy and he’s having these symptoms of nuclear illness, where you actually start bleeding internally. She manages to find some fresh water and she heats it up and puts it in the sink and she lowers him in the sink. By this time, even his bowels are bleeding. And I remember in this dream

I’m trying to get
my infant clean,
but he is
only bleeding.

And I remember I
was just frantic.
I’m trying to stop the
baby from bleeding.

Ruth recounted having awakened feeling frightened and deeply shaken by these graphic images and the lingering desperation of a mother vigorously, but futilely, cleaning her dying baby. Through the dream experience, it had dawned on Ruth that she belonged to what she called a cult of death. The kill ratios she calculated were not numerical figures, but real, flesh and blood people.

Born seriously ill, Ruth was not supposed to live. When she was old enough, Ruth’s mother and father would tell her the story with great tenderness: how the doctors said that Ruth was gravely sick; how her parents, already grief-stricken, then arranged for a priest to baptize Ruth in the hospital; how, several hours after the baptism, she started to rally; and how, against all odds, Ruth lived. More than 30 years later, Ruth’s remembrance of this story provided her with enormous reassurance. A time of marked internal and spiritual struggle, Ruth reflected questioningly on the meaning of her life, which had changed drastically since that fateful day in the auditorium. Ruth had just given birth to her third child and two years earlier, she and her husband had moved from California to New England. When Ruth discovered that a few of her neighbors were affiliated with a local Church of Christ, she arranged to participate in their weekly Bible study group. Ruth eventually realized that the church members expected a strict code of obedience to their dogmatic beliefs and practices. In particular, Ruth’s exegetical approach to scripture and Episcopal baptism were de-legitimized, yet Ruth did not
capitulate to these dogmatisms. Instead, she elected to challenge them and in doing so unearthed a hunger to connect more deeply with scripture and her renewed faith:

But what I discovered is that there was also a dimension of me that began to take hold, where I began to question their methods, and after so-called Bible study I would go back and study the scripture further and come back the next meeting to challenge them.

As she moved away from the parochial views espoused by this local Church of Christ, Ruth returned to the baptismal narrative of her infancy. She revived through its remembrance an assurance of God’s grace deferred years before by successive experiences of division and loss, in church and family, through her adolescence and adulthood:

So, I think it was that sense of recalling that grace-filled time of being an infant and having two terrified parents—and also I was the third child and I had just given birth to my third child—and just recalling with such tenderness of God reaching into these fractured and vulnerable lives and offering God’s grace.

I began to have and experience
an awareness of a sense
of the recalling
of that God
hearkening back to
living into the vows
that my parents took
at that point of time
in my baptism
and acknowledging with gratitude
the grace and
the gift of life
that God had given to me.

Ruth’s earliest memories were of kneeling at a pew beside her mother and siblings, while looking up in wonderment at the Christmas wreaths that festooned the Episcopal sanctuary. Ruth also fondly remembered running freely with the other children in the churchyard. A small and diffident child, to be sure, the church of her childhood afforded Ruth a safe and secure arena to play, to sing, to grow into, as she said, the child God intended her to be:

I was free to explore.
At an early age,
I liked speaking before the church.
I liked experimenting.
I liked singing.
I liked going on youth groups.
I liked getting out of my...

I was a rather quiet,
small child and
this was a safe place
to grow and
it was okay
to try these things out.

When Ruth’s father, a hospital administrator, had wanted to worship as a family, they joined a Presbyterian Church. Here too, Ruth felt that same sense of wonder and freedom she experienced in the small sanctuary and grassy yard of the Episcopal Church. A large sanctuary replaced the small sanctuary, a courtyard the churchyard, and yet Ruth continued to freely seek and play under the auspices of this faith community, where she always felt welcome:

You’re surrounded by
the walls of the institution,
but there’s space inside
to play.
There’s space inside
to communicate.
There’s space inside
to seek
and question
and experiment.

During her childhood and early adolescence, Ruth’s family and church life were inextricably linked. Her father had served as a deacon, a prominent elder, and a leader within the community, while Ruth’s mother facilitated a women’s bible study class for a number of years. A pious and dedicated woman, Ruth’s mother read the Bible extensively and loved to teach the scriptures. Ruth’s older siblings found support and guidance in their wayward teenage years. From worship to mission trips to Bible study, much of Ruth’s family life took place in the church community.
However, when Ruth had finally reached her own teenage years, the church began to splinter over a politically volatile issue. Factions debated whether to allocate funds toward the legal defense of Angela Davis, whom police had charged as an accomplice to conspiracy, kidnapping, and homicide in the abduction and murder of Superior Court Judge Harold Haley. During the trial of San Quentin inmate, James McClain, a group of men, two of whom were fellow inmates and key witnesses, had abducted Haley from the courtroom by gunpoint and killed him as they exchanged gunfire with the police. Davis was neither one of the captors nor present at the scene of the crime; however, the assailants had allegedly purchased the guns in her name.

Ruth recalled that the issue had irremediably polarized the church and spurred a painful division, whereby a number of people, including Ruth’s family, defected with the pastor and formed a separate Covenant Church. Ruth sorely lamented what was for her a profound loss of community during a critical period of her adolescence. Her family’s defection effectively foreclosed the safe arena of Ruth’s childhood. Outside its walls, she struggled to form an identity and network of relationships absent a community whose loss she still mourned. In truth, Ruth never quite recovered from the loss. In recalling the experience, she emphatically reproved the misguided nature of these all too common ideological schisms that can tear asunder church communities and engender alienation, mistrust, and marginalization:

"Unfortunately, I think people and parents need to realize that the issues they think are so important and so critical can also alienate their children from the faith. What happened was that friends I had been previously so close to...what happens in this kind of thing is there can be no middle ground. You’re either for us or against us. Oftentimes, people, supposedly out of religious conviction, will take one side or the other, but they don’t realize that they’ve abandoned a higher principle and that is in terms of learning there will also be differences of opinion and trying to hammer that out. I think it would have been much more helpful for me and my other youth friends for our parents to find a way to hammer out their differences and be reconciled.

In the end, Ruth belonged neither to the Presbyterian Church nor to the newly formed Covenant Church. Instead, she had simply fallen out. Ruth could not go back to her former community, where many of her friends attended, because wounds from the fracture were still fresh. Alternatively, the Covenant Church to which her parents
belonged was too conservative. Consequently, Ruth felt like she belonged to neither body, inhering between, in the margins of the two faith communities, without full participation in either. Ruth eventually joined a church whose immense size allowed her to remain anonymous and invisible, just another face in a sea of faces. At the same time, the safety of this anonymity precluded the recovery of that freedom Ruth had once cherished.

Almost three years after the schism, Ruth’s father died of gastrointestinal cancer in a few short months after receiving his diagnosis. Ever the bedrock of the family, his sudden and unexpected death left everyone devastated. Family ties started to unravel with the loss, and Ruth increasingly adopted the role of peacekeeper and caretaker in an effort to hold everything together. Her mother, in particular, suffered the loss tremendously and expected Ruth to care for her; however, Ruth foundered in the role and became embittered by it despite her best efforts and intentions. The ties that had bound and anchored Ruth’s sense of cohesion, family to faith community and father to family, seemed irreparably broken and resulted in a painful rupture she struggled to mend. While Ruth had subsequently managed to gain some semblance of purpose and control, it would come at the expense of inuring herself to the loss of freedom occasioned by the dissolution of home and community:

"Eventually, I went to junior college and went on to university. I was living by myself. I was working full-time. I guess, sadly, I didn’t know it then, I know it now looking back is I thought I had a foundation but I really was without an anchor. I was looking for the perfect love or something to bail me out. At the same time, if you were to see me and meet me, it seemed like I had all my ducks in a row. I was working. I was going to school. I had my own apartment. I was very responsible. I think I had in some respects emotionally a lot on my plate, but I didn’t have anywhere to fall back on in terms of having that formative and secure anchor and secure foundation that the church could have provided me.

When Ruth could not reclaim a foundation in her home, community, and faith, she set out to achieve material and professional success. As an employee of an aerospace firm, Ruth chose to immerse herself fully in her work and, in the process, turned into what she called a cynical, corporate woman largely cut off from the world. In the years preceding the missile presentation, Ruth described her psychological state as a silo-
mentality, a lack of interconnection demarcated by guardedness and sustained through relative anonymity:

There’s job.
there’s personal life.
there’s church.
independent silos
with no connection.
that’s where I was at.

If you were to look at me,
you would say I was responsible.
I was married.
I had a good job.
I was doing all the right things.

On the one hand, Ruth had regarded her life as successful. Both Ruth and her husband were employed and making generous incomes. In a mere several years, she climbed to the upper echelons of the aerospace firm. By all accounts, Ruth had optimally fulfilled the image she set out to achieve: the successful corporate woman; the model citizen; the good Christian. On the other hand, Ruth’s image had also cast a shadow figured by dispassionate equations of nuclear attack:

It made perfect sense.
I still have the chart
there in front of me
of how many people
would be killed
if the nuclear cloud
passed over them and
there was no remorse,
nothing in my mind.

I thought, what was I doing?! What was I doing? I was so lost, gentlemen. It just blows me away. I was so lost. Gosh!

I was that lost sheep. So, what happened... I strongly believe there is no such thing
as one conversion,
but sometimes your life
can be a series of conversions
as you are changed and

God is calling you more and
more into the lightness of
what you were originally intended,
to be the child
God had created me to be.
It’s almost like God was
calling me back home,
back to God’s intended creation.

With the birth of Ruth’s first child and her unsettling dream of the irradiated baby, she attended with increasing regularity the small Presbyterian Church where Ruth and her husband were married. Here, Ruth cultivated a close relationship with the minister as well as a few older women who belonged to Ruth’s fellowship group. Looking back, Ruth recognized how the male minister and older female group members served as surrogate parental figures, and, through these relationships, Ruth again glimpsed the possibility of freedom in a faith community:

_In many respects, they were the mothers that my mother ceased to be for me and could no longer be after my father’s death. The pastor in many respects was that paternal image, that wise paternal counseling image that I needed with the loss of my father._

The nurturance, care, and maturity exuded by Ruth’s minister and her elders helped Ruth to recover slowly the feeling of safety that had once freed her to play, to sing, and to grow. The Presbyterian Church also had a large courtyard, where Ruth’s two young children would run around happily as she watched. Regretfully, this relationship too had come to a premature end when Ruth and her husband moved to New England, but even as the separation pained Ruth and bore resemblance to losses of the past, she carried with her the renewed possibility of freedom.

Even as her search for internal and spiritual wholeness pulled Ruth from her silos, she had not yet found a cohesive sense of purpose for her life, which was in great upheaval. Ruth’s transition to an alien place only compounded her spiritual and existential questions. While her neighbors and the local Church of Christ provided Ruth
with an arena to bring her questions, the peremptory nature of their theological standpoint eventually manifested and induced vehement opposition in Ruth. The intensity with which Ruth challenged their theological views brought into relief a growing sense of intentionality. At the same time, Ruth acquainted herself with a group of young mothers who belonged to a small congregational church situated in her hometown. Ruth and the female pastor, both of whom had three children, had become close friends as the pastor counseled Ruth to leave the local Church of Christ. Through the support of this pastor and the church community, Ruth separated herself from the local Church of Christ and joined the congregation. Ruth and her family were welcomed wholeheartedly and flourished in the faith community. Meanwhile, the passionate intentionality with which Ruth pursued her faith had become increasingly apparent to the extent that the pastor and members of the congregation suggested she consider ministry. Through the trust and support of this faith community, Ruth more fully recovered the freedom and cohesion deferred by past losses in church and family, and out of her reclamation emerged an intentionality that culminated in Ruth’s decision to enter seminary just one year after joining the congregation:

We knew everyone
and whereas we didn’t have
a courtyard in this church,
we did have a lawn to the side
and there was a weekly mother’s group
that met in the basement
and like the freedom
I had experienced as a young child,
my children there discovered
that sense of freedom
of just running around.

I think that’s where I felt comfortable,
whether it be in worship
or even when I was nursing
my youngest child
it was fully okay for me to be nursing
in the rear of the church.
There was that sense of acceptance

And also gradually reclaiming the fact
that I was able to talk about
with this pastor
my own sense of internal search
and wanting to deepen my prayer life,
wanting to take more seriously reading scripture,
and all the while hearing her affirmation
that I may want to think about
going into ministry,
just given how intentionally
I was taking it.

With sadness, Ruth conveyed how this faith community also fractured and split due to a divisive issue. The female pastor had firmly believed that the congregation ought to adopt an open and affirming stance toward gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. While Ruth sympathized with her pastor’s ideological position, she wholly disagreed with what seemed like an impetuous and obstinate approach to the negotiation process. The pastor had left the congregation due to the schism and gone to another church, where she struggled for a long while. For Ruth, the experience felt like yet another reenactment of her adolescent years—the dissolution of community in the face of seemingly irreconcilable differences—only this time, the locus of difference also resided between Ruth and her pastor. Although Ruth’s position on the issue was not without its merits, her own obstinacy partially contributed to the dissolution of what had grown into a deeply intimate and formative relationship. While active in seminary and embroiled in this relational conflict, Ruth had dreamed of the Holy Other:

I had a dream where I was in our home that we had purchased in Winchester. I had woken up in the night and I had gone downstairs to our kitchen and Jesus was standing in the kitchen. He was looking very approachable and I said, “Can I see who you really are?” And he said, “Are you sure?” And I said, “Yes. I want to see who you really are.” So then, my attention turned to the window above my sink. And just so you know, as a mother I spent a lot of time at that back window overlooking the kitchen sink because I would not only wash the children and bath the children in that sink, but I would watch them in the back yard. So, that was a place where I spent a lot of time. Well, this pastor who I knew was standing there. Jennifer was standing there and I went up to her, but suddenly

her face began to
be the face of many.
Like one woman,
one person after another.
It was like Jesus was saying,
This is who I am.
I am all these.

The eyes of this person
were looking right
through me
and I remember being terrified
because they saw right
through me.
Everything was exposed.

I thought that if this is God...
I became
like that little yelping animal
that wants to crawl underneath the bed.
I have never been
so scared in my life.
I was so scared.

And then I finally said,
“Enough! Enough!”
And then I turned
and Jesus was standing there
and he said, “I told you so.”

Once Ruth had finished telling the dream, she paused in silence. Even though 20 years had passed, the immense power of the dream remained. When Ruth finally spoke, she reflected pithily on the danger of judgment, the necessity of forgiveness, and the dream as a gift. That, through dreams, indeed, dreams that turn us into tiny helpless creatures, we may submit to humility and receive grace.
III. “The poem supreme, addressed to emptiness—this is the courage necessary. This is something quite different” (Creeley, 1962, p. 29).

The biblical story of Saint Paul climaxes with his back to the earth and face to the sky, arms and fingers splayed out and up toward it, his short fall a lesson in gravity. The story begins only moments earlier with a man named Saul, essentially Paul before the fall, but unlike Paul, Saul was not a Christian. In fact, Saul appraised this “Jesus Cult” with an aggressively righteous eye. With murder on his lips, Saul rode on horseback to Damascus to rid its synagogues of the Christian menace. Suddenly, a burst of light shone forth from the heavens and flashed around Saul, who fell to the earth and heard the voice of God. God called Saul, a blind, a speechless, and a prostrate Saul, to go forth to Damascus and so Saul went. Saul blindly wandered Damascus for three days without food or water, until Ananias, a servant of God, touched him and restored Saul’s vision. That very day, Ananias baptized Saul, whose name God changed to Paul. For the rest of his days, Saint Paul spread God’s word to all who would listen. To be sure, the story of Saint Paul’s call is short and occasioned by a single, dramatic fall.

Gertrude’s story, however, is much different:

*It’s a long story...*

*It’s not as simple*  
*as Paul [or Saul]*  
*getting knocked off his horse*

*And having this immediate*  
*epiphany*  
*and knowing that*  
*he was called.*

Nor were the roots of her story in an arid desert bereft of life. On the contrary, Gertrude’s first encounter with the numinous occurred in the verdant heart of New England. The woods that abutted her home presented Gertrude with a haven from the loneliness she often felt as a child. She would seek refuge in a grassy knoll; an apple orchard; a river, and the thick of a pine tree. Of the last, Gertrude spoke with unmistakable reverie. She reminisced about the pine tree and how she would stand on one particular branch and sway with it as it swayed with the wind. The tenor of
Gertrude’s original call did not issue as thunderous command, but sensuous consanguinity. The natural landscape imbued her with a sense of companionate Presence, and feelings of connectedness, wonder, and love. Gertrude embodied the meaning of her original call, its significance interpenetrating with the animate landscape of those hidden woods behind her childhood home:

One particular time
during the day,
the sun would shine
on this spot and

I would just lay there
and again I would feel
this incredible sense
of Presence and love.

And so really
that’s the origin
of my calling,
believe it

Or not,
it’s a grassy knoll
and a branch
of a pine tree.

While Gertrude forged a unique and indelible relationship with a Presence, she would quest arduously to piece together the truth of its Being. Ananias’ touch restored Saul’s sight after a mere three days; however, it took Gertrude a much longer time to regain her vision. In the four ensuing decades, Gertrude struggled to articulate, by image and by word, the ineffable sense of significance she felt over those several years and figure the Presence integral to it. As fate would have it, Gertrude’s Presence had many faces.

Gertrude’s grassy knoll, river, and pine tree were situated in Norwood, a small town 23 miles due southwest of Boston, Massachusetts. Two roadways, Neponset Ave and Chickatawbut St, run orthogonally to one another and intersect at the town’s center. Named after a Native American tribe and one of its prominent chieftains, respectively, these streets are crude remnants of an altogether vanquished people (Cogley, 1999). More than 250 years before its official settlement, members of the Neponset tribe roamed
this land and used it as their hunting grounds. Gertrude knows this. In the sixth grade, she unearthed from the ground one of their hunting implements, an arrowhead, while playing in the woods. This land and its rivers were sacred to the Neponset people. Gertrude knows this too. According to her research, the Neponset long ago used the site of Gertrude’s encounter as a ceremonial marriage plot. Gertrude embodied the tumbling speech of the river, the metronomic dance of the trees, and the cyclic breath of the wind as an ancestral connection, one that inevitably subsided with age:

**Chickatawbut:** Sit here, child, and palaver with me, for the end of our time draws near. Remember now, this place, the flesh of this place is your flesh, as surely as the sun is your sight and the wind your breath. Yet soon you will be scattered away from here like the seeds of a dandelion parachute. Under the eclipse of sun and moon, you will slowly re-collect yourself along a wending, shadowy path. The day will come when you remember this place in your flesh and weep with joy. But you will find the flesh of this place dismembered and weep too with sorrow.

**Gertrude:** I’ve had many, many dreams as an adult trying to make peace with the fact that those woods are now completely developed. I’ve had a lot of dreams. I went back a couple of times to try to find my tree. I couldn’t quite find it. I found a couple of pine trees, but it wasn’t Her. The river is still there. They couldn’t build on the river. But it’s highly polluted...it’s all desecrated.

In a natural sanctuary, Gertrude received her original sacrament in the name of the tree, the river, and the knoll, all sensuous and visible conveyances of an invisible order. Gertrude received her second sacrament in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, when baptized by immersion in the American Baptist Church of her childhood. Gertrude inherited the American Baptist faith from her mother, a devout but permissive woman known to smoke, drink, and dance from time to time. A Jewish man, Gertrude’s father served in the Second World War and played a role in liberating a concentration camp. On his return to the United States, Gertrude lamented, her father concealed his Jewish heritage and even went so far as to change his name. Gertrude’s recollections of her family of origin were few and spare in detail, yet shot through with a palpable longing for a place to call home. One image, displayed in Gertrude’s church, called out empathically to her:

*I was raised from day one*
in an American Baptist Church
and I remember walking
into the church
and just seeing
this incredible...

It’s a very common picture
of Jesus as the Good Shepherd
holding a little lost sheep
and I knew I was
that little lost sheep.

At the time of her youth, the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd captivated Gertrude as it spoke poignantly to the sense of loneliness that had interwoven her childhood and offered the reassurance of accompaniment and protection. Large and small in scale, the image appeared both as a fixture in the church and a miniature picture given to her one morning in Sunday school. Gertrude would later understand the Jesus figure as a human embodiment of the Presence she encountered in the woods. Gertrude explained that the evocation of original Presence engendered by this image was integral to her becoming Christian:

I had this
very personal,
very personal
connection to Jesus.

What I did as a child
was that Presence,
that I felt
down in the woods

That I felt in the tree
that I felt by the river
that I felt in that grassy knoll,

What I did was
I then sort of imprinted that
on that archetypal picture
of Jesus.

So for me,
the Presence
became Jesus.
During her childhood and adolescence, Gertrude held this image of Jesus very close to her. Gertrude found solace in dwelling within the image, a shepherd, a guardian, and sentinel at the boundaries of an invisible order. She even placed it under the mattress on which she slept and dreamed:

I just took  
the picture of Jesus  
and I put it  
under my mattress

And I left it there  
until college  
and just literally  
slept on it.

While Gertrude’s relationship with Jesus was originally borne out of an image, she first came to know God through the iteration of two words: I am. As a second grade student, Gertrude’s Sunday school teacher asked her to read the Bible, from Genesis to Revelations, and underline with a pencil the phrase I am each time it appeared. The exhaustive exercise both tantalized and frustrated Gertrude’s indefatigable curiosity about the world and cosmos:

Call: Who are you?


Call: You...are who you are?

Response: “And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious” (Exodus 22:27).

Call: You are a gracious God, to be sure; but who are you?

Response: I am He, “Who has performed and done it, Calling the generations from the beginning? ‘ I, the LORD, am the first; and with the last I am He’” (Isaiah 41:4, emphasis added).

Gertrude’s emphatically curious nature left her with an abundance of questions, yet a satisfactory answer to who God truly is always evaded Gertrude. I. Am. With multiple iterations, these two vexing words became for Gertrude a koan, an ambiguous
question not amenable to a rational answer. As time passed, the koan eventually served to quell Gertrude’s rationalistic striving to explain God’s presence in the world, and alternatively presented a way of being with God through intuition and a felt sense of immanence; however, she would not encounter this way of being until her college years.

To be sure, Gertrude’s desire to know God in the former sense was alive and well in her adolescence, a period marked by confusion and ambivalence in connection with her faith, identity, and newly discovered ancestry. Gertrude’s father quietly renounced his Jewish heritage before she was born and kept it a secret for more than ten years. Gertrude finally learned of her Jewish ancestry in junior high school and, instead of feeling angry and betrayed, Gertrude was proud, joyous, and ecstatic: “I shouted it from the tops of the roof. I thought it was awesome” (Gertrude). The revelation spurred a desire in Gertrude to fully explore and embrace her Jewish roots, yet her ancestral narrative clashed unavoidably with the Christian narrative on the significance of Jesus: “I wanted to know everything I could know about Judaism and sort of started researching that area. It didn’t ring deeply, deeply true with me because I had this very personal, very personal connection to Jesus” (Gertrude). Although a Jewish ancestry presented Gertrude with new possibilities for her identity and faith, the revelation of her heritage and subsequent exploration of it ultimately served to remind Gertrude of her home in Jesus:

All my colleagues,
all my fellow students,
and everyone I worked
with was Jewish
and I just delighted
in that.

I went out
and bought
a la heim sign,
but still,
still there was
something there.

It wasn’t like...
I was like,
you guys,
Jesus was Jewish,
he was a Rabbi,
In her adolescence, Gertrude also struggled to reconcile the will of God and evils of the world. This period of Gertrude’s life corresponded to major cultural upheaval and radical change in the form of political and social movements. John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were exemplars of a new ideal, iconic pioneers of the New Frontier in America (Maga, 1994), but their assassinations tragically underscored the violence that so often accompanies precipitous social and cultural change. Overarching these two significant losses was a restless and dysphoric cultural consciousness braced against invisible enemies—the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation; the Vietnam War and its horrific atrocities—and manifested by socio-cultural patterns of paranoia, outrage, and widespread indictments of meaning in the proliferation of countercultural movements.

In relationship to this period, Gertrude recalled a burgeoning sense of anger and disillusionment that called into question the broader meaning of her original encounter with the divine and threatened to corrode the very foundation of her faith:

*I became very, very angry at the injustice and went through a developmental stage in my faith where I felt certain that even though I had personally experienced this love and I had personally experienced this God, the rest of the world clearly hadn’t experienced it because none of this would be allowed by God.*

Simply put, Gertrude wondered how God could be good, when so much in the world was bad. One of the most formidable problems of the humanity, the existence, and warrant of evil obtains as a serious objection to the existence of God. From a biblical perspective, nowhere else is the problem of evil as thoroughly addressed as in the Book of Job.

A pious and prosperous man, Job had lived with his wife, seven sons, and three daughters in a very large house on a tract of land plentiful with livestock in a place called Uz. Everywhere, the people of the East regarded Job as a most esteemed and blessed man. One day Satan and the angels convene before God to discuss the men of earth. God asked Satan to consider his servant Job, an unimpeachable exemplar of piousness. Satan questions the integrity of Job’s blamelessness for he had lived a supremely blessed life,
untouched by adversity. In hearing the argument, God gives Satan divine governance over Job’s fate to put to true test his servant’s piousness and character.

So begin the trials of Job. The Sabeans and Chaldeans pillage most of Job’s livestock. God sets fire to the remaining cattle and reduces them to ash. As Job’s seven sons and three daughters eat and drink in the home of Job’s eldest son, the wind of God sweeps through and collapses its walls killing all of his children. In the face of all this, Job holds God blameless. Still assured of Job’s essential weakness, Satan riddles every inch of Job’s flesh with weeping boils. Job’s wife implores him to curse the name of God to alleviate his suffering, yet he will not accuse God of injustice.

Aware of the calamities that have beset Job, three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to offer consolation. They had sat in silence for seven days until Job speaks at last to curse the day of his birth:

“May the day perish on which
I was born,
And the night in which it was said,
‘A male is conceived.’
May that day be darkness;
May God above not seek it,
Nor the light shine upon it.” (Job 3:1-4)

When his friends finally retort, they argue that he must have sinned to incite God’s wrath and plead with Job to confess. They intractably assume that God rewards good and punishes evil, and then conclude that Job’s lot was an act of retribution from God. If Job wished to be free from his suffering, then he must repent. Job maintains his innocence and claims that his lot was unjustified for he was without sin. While he does not curse God for the infliction of his suffering, Job insists on an explanation of his transgressions.

And so I got angry at God and said, “Ok, I get that you love me, but what’s going on here in this world?” I just went into this four-year period of really questioning and really wrestling with God and most of my faith went deeply, deeply underground.

A fourth visitor, Elihu, acts as a mediator, though espouses a much different perspective than Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The latter three argue that Job must repent by renouncing his sin. In contrast, Elihu maintains that God is the ultimate moral authority; therefore, Job must repent by relinquishing his prideful
conviction of moral authority. Elihu’s defense of God is also in response to Job’s desire to debate his lot by arguing his blamelessness. God’s voice emanates out of a whirlwind to declare His omnipotence and caution against the folly of pride:

On earth there is nothing like him;
Which is made without fear.
He beholds every high thing;
He is king over all the children of pride.” (Job 41: 33-34)

Gertrude was intimately familiar with the merciful, loving God defended by Elihu in the company of Job and his friends. In fact, Gertrude’s original encounter in the woods served to hew her dilemma regarding the problem of evil. Her connection to numinous Presence filled her with feelings of connectedness, wonder, and love. Like the story of Job, Gertrude felt as if she received the recognition, love, and grace of some divine Presence; however, the sufferings that led Gertrude to question her faith were not personal trials and tribulations inasmuch as the social injustice and senseless violence she witnessed in the world. Even as Gertrude buried her faith deeply underground, she continued to debate the question of God’s place in the world by interviewing others regarding their own faith. In terms of the question and its presumed way of knowing God, Gertrude’s line of inquiry was in some ways a resumption of the I am question that emerged from her Sunday school exercise. For Gertrude, the scope of the question was universal (e.g., the overarching principles of faith) and its way of knowing explanatory (e.g., why or how faith ultimately endures in the face of human suffering). The force of Gertrude’s theological questioning originated in her embodiment of the numinous as a child. Ironically, Gertrude’s line of questioning proved fruitless because she used primarily discursive means to re-access the non-discursive meaning engendered by her childhood experiences. As Gertrude struggled to make sense of God in relation to the worldly strife of her adolescence, she buried the origin of her calling along with her faith.

Gertrude stridently continued to seek metaphysical truths in college through an interdisciplinary course of study consisting of philosophy, political science, and religion. Of all her questions, God and the problem of evil persisted as the most complex and troublesome:

I wrapped up every course I could possibly take on mostly philosophy, a lot of philosophy, and one of the courses was on the interfaith of religion and
politics, which I just loved because that’s where the big question was for me: why is there so much evil in the world; although I didn’t use the word evil? How could God allow? That was my question.

According to Gertrude, the answer to her big question was non-discursive and followed from neither a lecture nor philosophical or religious text. Instead, Gertrude came into being with God as she discovered meditation and recovered the embodied Presence of her childhood:

One of my philosophy teachers gathered a small group of us and introduced us to meditation and I took to it like a duck to water because all of sudden for the first time in 18 years I was able to articulate and give words to what is was I was feeling when I was 3, 4, 5, and 6 in those backwoods.

That feeling returned.
and I was astonished.
I was absolutely
astonished

Because I just thought
that was a bit of
a childhood phenomenon
and it came with innocence

And at 18,
I was no longer innocent
and I had that feeling again.

God was present.
God loved me.
God was very real
once again.

I remember one night
sitting in his living room
with the other students
and I just started crying
because I felt like
I came full circle.

I was being held
in the pine tree
once again
and God was real
Gertrude’s foray into meditation had unexpectedly invoked the dormant, numinous Presence of her childhood. This epiphanic experience radically reconfigured the *I am* question and the problem of evil by supplanting Gertrude’s previously disembodied conception of a transcendent God with the embodied experience of an immanent God:

> And then it dawned on me, in those years it dawned on me that God is very, very present and that the question in me...of how could, how could all of this evil exist was actually God’s question. And that’s when I connected to the I am. That went back to the third grade. And so I realized that God works in and through me was my first realization and then I realized that God works in and through everyone. And that’s where the archetype of the body of Christ made perfect sense for me and I knew no matter what, no matter how much I loved the Buddhist tradition, no matter how much I was drawn biologically to the Jewish tradition, I knew I followed Jesus. I wasn’t particularly thrilled with the institutional church, but I loved this guy called Jesus. Loved him! It’s great! He was my guru, he was my Rabbi. It integrated everything for me.

Just as the remembrance of her embodied experience served to reconfigure the existential, religious, and philosophical dilemmas of Gertrude’s adolescence, so too did the embodied significance merge the archetypal Christ with the historical Jesus.

After graduating from college, Gertrude started teaching and married her husband, an Italian-Catholic, who, like her father, renounced the faith of his family of origin. Gertrude intimated that during the first several years of their marriage, her husband committed a transgression by which she felt betrayed and deeply injured:

> As a young married couple, we had a crisis and...hmm. I felt very betrayed. I had this young baby and I had felt very, very betrayed and I was wondering...I was in deep, deep crisis and was wondering if I should stay in the marriage and went into this place of almost just not being able to speak; just deep, deep depression.

Until this time in her life, the discrepancy of Gertrude’s early experiences of numinous Presence and the profuse sufferings of the world had ruptured her faith. While Gertrude partially reconciled these two opposing standpoints, she now confronted a deeply personal form of suffering and despair. Hopeless and not knowing where to turn, a childhood talisman presented itself to Gertrude in a seemingly miraculous way:
I noticed out of
the corner of my eye
on one of our bookshelves
my childhood Bible.

I had not taken it out
since I absolutely had to,
which was in the 7th grade,
when I was baptized
by immersion
in the Baptist Church.

I took it out again
and the first thing I notice
is all these I ams underlined
and I remembered the exercise
and I thought,
“Oh yeah, yeah, yeah”.

And then I just started
crying
and closed the Bible
and I was
weeping, weeping.
And I just opened it up...

I opened it up
to a passage
in the New Testament
that said specifically,
“Ye who can cast the first stone,
go ahead for no one is without sin.”

A well-known lesson of the bible, the passage (John 8:7) describes a confrontation between Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes concerning the fate of a woman apprehended on charges of adultery. When captors of the accused would have her stoned to death for her transgression, Jesus narrowly averts the execution by asking the members of the mob to take honest stock of their own sins. For Gertrude, the passage illuminated how her righteous anger precluded forgiveness of her husband, whom she still very much loved. To be sure, the relevance of the biblical passage to Gertrude’s marital dilemma was strikingly synchronistic; however, what prevailed in the experience was the recurrent sense of Presence:
And I knew in that moment, again I felt that Presence wash over me, that inexplicable Presence. But now I had this experience of God talking directly to me. I was a little spooked by it. But how did that happen? How did this exact situation, this exact passage out of this enormous book that I touched in over a decade, how did this find me and speak so directly to my heart? I didn’t know the answer to that other than God loved me, God was present in my life, and God was saying this is not worth getting a divorce over. And none of us, none of us are perfect. We’ve all fallen short of the glory of God, including you, Gertrude!

This experience marked the beginning of reconciliation for Gertrude and her husband and, several years later, Gertrude set out to find a home for their growing family in the institutional church. The process was a long and wearisome one for Gertrude. She and her husband attended numerous services, but never found a church that felt quite like home. Gertrude would leave these services feeling forlorn, and sit and cry tears of disappointment. One day her husband’s uncle, a trusted and beloved member of the family, suggested they come to his church, a United Church of Christ, and meet a clergy couple, who were among the candidates for pastorship:

Then one day I decided to go this United Church that Bill’s uncle had suggested and there was this couple there and I saw a light around them, the woman in particular. I felt a Presence in their voice and then they started talking about their years of meditation in India and I knew I was home.

Once again, I went outside after the service and I wept, but these were tears of joy.

Then I went home and processed that and came back a month later and come to find out it was only their second time at the church. What had happened was the day I happened upon it was their candidating sermon. I didn’t know anything about that. In that month that I had left they had been hired and then they started the day that I came back. Their first time and their second time in the church was the same as my first and my second.

Much like her re-acquaintance with I am, the idiosyncratic experience of Presence and synchronicity interpenetrated Gertrude’s initial encounter with the clergy couple and
engendered the feeling of home for which she had so perseveringly searched. Much like her meditation experience, Gertrude recognized the Presence through non-discursive, sensorial engagement as reflected by the ineffable quality of light and sound, which figured so centrally in her description of the clergy couple. The uncanny light that illuminated the clergy couple also hearkened back to Gertrude’s childhood encounter of Presence in the woods:

One particular time
during the day,
the sun would shine
on this spot and

I would just lay there
and again I would feel
this incredible sense
of Presence and love.

Significantly, Gertrude identified this childhood experience as the origin of her general calling and her encounter with the clergy couple as the origin of her particular calling. For the longest time, Gertrude remained exiled from the institutional church, unable to find a place of worship hospitable to her unique brand of imaginal and critical theology. Everything changed when Gertrude joined the United Church of Christ and served as an active leader in the church community. Gertrude’s stewardship over the ensuing ten years amplified her calling and again facilitated, reinforced, and integrated all the disparate elements of her religious and spiritual identity—Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist—only this time, in the lifeblood of a creative religious community concerned with social justice and alternative ways of being with God:

My Jewish roots, my meditation, my love of Jesus all once again came together, not just in me now but in a community and in these two leaders. We spent the next ten years creating programs where we could create an environment where other people might be able to have some sort of...just create a safe enough environment where they could have some sort of encounter through meditation or through the scriptures or through one another where they could also know that God is very much with us. It was a wonderful ten years of creativity. What these two clever pastors did over time was give me more and more responsibility. And they called forth more and more and more of my gifts. And I also kept a dream journal and come to find out so did they! We just had so much in common it was ridiculous
and up until that point I felt a little bit like a stranger in a strange land and now I found my family.

The beginning of this 10-year period also marked Gertrude’s decision to pursue a graduate degree. Gertrude recalled it was through her initial experiences as a retreat leader that she decided to enter a masters program in pastoral counseling. Gertrude pointed out emphatically that it was her desire to pursue pastoral counseling and not ministry. Notwithstanding her growing leadership role in the church community, Gertrude did not once consider for herself the possibility of ministry. As Gertrude privately appraised one pastoral counseling program with increasing interest, she encountered another manifestation of synchronicity by way of a dream:

I was pondering this and one of the ministers phoned me one day and she said, “I had this”…and I was pondering by the way Eranos College specifically because they had a great program in pastoral counseling…and she called me one day and said, “I had this dream where I just saw you walking on this college campus and they had these beautiful Gothic...”. At that point, I just said, “Oh my God! What is going on here?” She just described perfectly the campus of Eranos College and she had never been there. I said, “Terry, I have been praying, thinking about, and almost have my application completed for Eranos College. I’m interested in studying pastoral counseling.” And she said, “Oh, wow.” Again, another connect. I went to EC and found quite a home there in their theology department, their philosophy department, and their counseling department. I loved that time.

For the next seven years, Gertrude immersed herself in her studies, while raising three children with her husband and continuing to lead church retreats. Gertrude feverishly studied scholarly works that echoed the religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences to which she was privy in the succession of synchronicities and encounters with the numinous throughout her life. For many years, Gertrude participated in a community of religious and philosophical academia, wherein others gave credence and voice to the unsayable and non-discursive qualities of her embodied experiences of Presence:

I had words.
I could articulate
all of these experiences
I’ve had all of my life
and suddenly this world
opened up to me,

Where there were others
who certainly
had these experiences
and not only had them
but gave word to them,
gave meaning to them,
put them into a context.

To be sure, Gertrude found at Eranos College another place of belonging as well as a network of meaning hospitable to her previous experiences; however, even as she obtained this much longed for identification with her church and academic program, Gertrude underwent a process of inner transformation that significantly influenced her calling and relationship with God. Two years after entering the masters program, Gertrude had a memorable dream as she was nine months pregnant with her third child. Gertrude discussed the dream with one of her instructors, a priest and Jungian analyst, and he suggested that she see a female colleague, an artist, and fellow Jungian analyst specializing in the relationship between art, archetypes, and dreams:

That was 25 years ago and she is a dear, dear friend of mine. She is my Spiritual Mother and probably one of three single most influential people in my life. I went and saw her when I was 9 months pregnant at age 29. I brought a dream to her and the rest is history.

What is so interesting is that on the surface of this dream, it is not overtly in any way religious.

i had a dream
that i was watching
the hand of
a very brilliant Artist.

i don’t know
whose hand this was
and i was just watching it.

It started out
on this large canvas
and It started out
in the lower left hand corner
drawing stick figures.
Then it moved.

The movement went
from the lower left hand corner
and covered the canvas
all the way
to the upper right hand corner.

In the upper right hand corner
was a very large full moon
and the Artist
drew the full moon first
to shed light on
what was going to become
the painting.

The painting,
the finished product of
the painting,
was just kind of
exceptional artwork.

The dreamer just loved
watching this creative process
and i was completely fascinated
by it

And felt like i was
in the heart
and head
and hand
of an Artist.

The full moon in this dream
shone over a shack,
an old,
decrepit,
ready-to-fall-in barn.

It had a field of grass
in front of it
and the grass
in front of the barn
reminded me very much
of the grassy knoll
of my childhood.
I loved the painting
and I just thought,
“That is really a beautiful dream.”

Interestingly, Gertrude said she forgot about the dream, until two days later, when a series of events culminated in yet another experience of extraordinary synchronicity. While Gertrude had forgotten the dream, the dream had not forgotten her. Gertrude paused several times and labored with her words before she told the story of what ensued. It was clear that even after 25 years, an awesome power inhered in the dream and her subsequent experience of it. Gertrude gathered herself and proceeded:

I’m driving through
the center of town
where that United Church is
where I attended

And out of the corner
of my eye
I caught
a shaft of light
and it was a brilliant light
but it wasn’t blinding
by any means.

I looked over,
fortunately there was
a traffic light,
and I looked over
and I’m just sitting there,

I look over
and it’s in the window,
this light is coming
from the window
of an art studio.

And there was a painting...
Oh God...
there was a painting
in the window
that was my painting.
Upon seeing the painting in the window, Gertrude remembered the image painted by the brilliant Artist two days earlier. What of the shaft of light caught the eye of Gertrude? Alternatively, what about Gertrude’s way of seeing caught the shaft of light and image therein? Did this dream insist that Gertrude remember? Was it only a matter of time before the dream re-presented itself to Gertrude? The ways in which these kinds of questions spawn more questions in dizzying recursion reflect Gertrude’s conundrum with the *I am* exercise and point to the intuitive dimensions of significance inherent in the dream and its iterative remembrance in the world. Again and again, Gertrude’s way of seeing light in the world is in itself a way of intuiting significance as in the illuminated Presence that shone on the grassy knoll or the clergy couple following morning service. Gertrude prefaced the story of the painting by bringing to bear its utter weirdness: “This is going to sound crazy and I don’t care…” Indeed, Gertrude told a story absent rationality, yet the very irrationality of her experience signaled the incipient death knell for her old ego structure and allowed Gertrude to deepen into, come apart, and reconstitute herself within the dream image:

*That full moon in the dream was shedding light on what I have come to understand as my old ego structure. My old ego structure was no longer really doing a great job of housing my soul and kind of had to fall apart and die so there would be a larger container for my soul.*

*And I connected very strongly to the image of the Crèche,*

*of Jesus being born in a barn,*

*at night, outside, in the cold.*

*And that image that I dreamt of and found the painting of for me is where my inner Jesus was born.*

At the very beginning of her story, Gertrude described her calling as unfolding through a life-long succession of experiences. She made a point to contrast the ongoing transformation of her call with the relatively instantaneous call and conversion of Saul. To be sure, Gertrude’s dream of the shack and synchronous discovery of its twin image were climactic in her story and foundational to her calling as she remembered them in hindsight. Nevertheless, I would give short shrift to Gertrude’s story and the life of the
dream by saying that these few experiences suddenly actualized Gertrude’s calling. Instead, the dream and the synchronous painting signaled for Gertrude a nascent change in her general life direction and served to potentiate her calling as it would unfold in the subsequent decade. In short, Gertrude’s calling consisted in finding a home for her soul. In a dilapidated shack illumined by the moon, Gertrude saw through the ego structure that strived in vain to house her soul. With the next ten years came an awareness of the inadequacy of this old home and a willingness to let it fall to the ground, piece by piece. As Gertrude gradually moved beyond this old ego structure, the force of her call pulled Gertrude into new directions that were at once frightening and exhilarating. According to Gertrude, the demands made by her calling often felt risky, yet emboldened her, oftentimes through dreaming:

Well, more so ten years after I had it and while I was really in formation. It really informed me to take risks and that’s what a person needs when... and we all have a call, but in order to listen to that crazy call that is usually counterintuitive and certainly often countercultural and very involved with risk, right down to money, lifestyle, family; and in order to listen to that call and really, really trust, I think a dream that carries so much energy and so much reality helps. It certainly helped me to have the courage to make some really crazy, crazy changes in my life and take some really huge risks.

I think that God

gives me the dreams

when I need them.

When I might be faltering
or when I might be heading
down the wrong path.
Or when I’m no longer
being incredibly intentional
or when there’s a new step
or a new risk to take.

I’ll get a dream
and I won’t understand
some of my dreams
for ten years.
Ten years.
It is the foundation,
it is definitely.

You’re really on to something
because it is the foundation
of my call and courage,
really courage.

When we face
whatever is inside
of ourselves
and wrestle with them
as Jacob wrestled
with the angel
and come away,
yes,
wounded and limping,

But we live
because there was
a Presence,
there was
grace,
there was
something bigger
than just
us...

That’s my story.
Discussion

In the following discussion, I first elaborate the three central themes of calling that interpenetrated the ministers’ narratives. Furthermore, I point to the unique contribution of dreams in the formation and maintenance of a religious calling. More specifically, I explore how calling as a relationship with the divine uniquely attunes to the autonomous and presentational qualities of significant dreams. Second, I make a methodological argument for the exceptional case, and recapitulate the value of performative writing toward a poetics of the research process and an embodied understanding of the other. Third, I enumerate several fundamental assumptions of postmodernism and discuss their implications for the sacred. Last, I suggest some potentially fruitful directions for future inquiries into calling.

Under-the-Ground: Revisiting the Heart’s Calling and Dreams

In the results section, I elected to present the calling narratives individually, in three parts, so to preserve the storied and imagistic particularities that uniquely marked the ministers’ respective experiences of calling and relevant dreams. However, here, I will supplement this mode of analysis with a summary of commonalities by way of three major themes that overarched the individual narratives—“calling as a life-long process,” “the multiplicity of callings,” and “the irrationality of calling”—and then proceed by pointing to the unique contribution of dreams to religious callings.

Previously, I underscored Hillman’s (1996) vital distinction between teleology and telos and its bearing on my methodology. To reiterate, the former circumscribes phenomena in terms of outcome and concerns itself with the questions of why or what for, whereas the latter, telos, examines phenomena in terms of process and concerns itself with the particularities of its becoming. The relevance of telos to the study exceeded my methodological application as it figured centrally in the ministers’ description of their callings as an ongoing, life-long process. Gertrude’s initial response to the prompt, “We would like to begin by hearing the story of how you came to a life of religious service,” succinctly illustrates this notion of calling. She expressed, “It’s a long story…it’s not as simple as Paul getting knocked off his horse and having this immediate epiphany and knowing that he was called.” Similarly, Esther explicitly discussed her calling as a
process to dispel the idea that she feels compelled towards some discernible culmination, such as ordination: “The call is a process, really. It has a process element to it, and I think it is wrong to think of it as something that just gets you into the ministry. It’s always there and it’s shaped and reshaped…” Moreover, Esther explicitly described her calling as a process that is ongoing and irrepressible:

> In my experience, it is a constant presence and there are times in fact when...I’ve been an ordained minister for 10 years now, and there have been times during these years, and of course leading up to them, when I wished it would go away.

Even Ruth, whose narrative consisted of a monumental epiphany and a radical vocational turn, articulated her ensuing call to ministry as a gradual process complicated by significant internal struggle and self-doubt.

The theme of calling as a life-long process also subsumed the ministers’ recurrent distinction between a global calling and a particular calling. Each minister expressed having a global sense of calling in her childhood that was marked by an intensely embodied experience of the divine—Esther and the accompaniment of her Guardian Angel; Ruth and the freedom of the churchyard (and, in hindsight, her improbable survival as a newborn); Gertrude and the Presence of the woodland landscape. Significantly, Esther and Gertrude both characterized their experience as mystical in nature. While Ruth’s description of the churchyard did not approach this level of mystical numinosity, her recollections of the churchyard and seemingly miraculous survival did reflect her intimate relationship with God and felt sense of “growing into the person God intended.” Notably, only Esther endorsed childhood dreams as integral to her sense of global calling and related participation in an angelic realm. Nonetheless, Gertrude’s descriptions of her mystical encounters in the woods were distinctly oneiric in quality.

A particular calling or the intention to act towards ordained ministry emerged for each minister approximately thirty years after her global calling and followed her graduation from college, marriage, the birth of at least one child, and her engagement in a secular vocation. Regarding the institutional denomination of her childhood—Roman Catholic for Esther, Episcopalian and Presbyterian for Ruth, and American Baptist for Gertrude—each minister reported the onset of a burgeoning criticism in adolescence and
eventual separation in young adulthood. In terms of salient influences, the ministers identified teachers, mentors, ministers, and whole communities as instrumental to the formation of their particular calling. Esther cited Arnold Kenseth as a singular exemplar, whereas Ruth and Gertrude listed myriad mentors, guides, and exemplars, such as male and female pastors, church elders, a church community, and a clergy couple, to name several.

The second recurrent theme, a multiplicity of callings, inhered in the notion of calling as a life-long process, not only in terms of the types of calling (e.g., global or general versus particular) that emerged, but also the additional roles or life callings that manifested in synchrony with the ministerial calling. Esther, in particular, emphasized the value of framing her calling in terms of a rich tapestry and went on to warn against the harmful consequences of a calling pursued singularly:

The other thing I feel very strongly about is that I don’t think anybody has just one call. I think we have multiple callings in life, otherwise I probably wouldn’t be a mother or a spouse. Calls, we haven’t talked about them, but they’re callings of equal weight and magnitude and they all deserve their due. So, we are all friends, family members, sons, daughters. Each role has an element of calling to it and needs to be carried with love and care. For me, it’s always seeing these different ribbons of calling intertwining. And is it working? Is the balance right?

You see so many people who break themselves. They break their health. They become overweight, unhealthy, they don’t exercise, they don’t rest, they don’t take time off, they don’t spend time with their families, and all in the name of their calling.

When discussing her preparatory responsibilities as a ministry retreat leader, Gertrude also explained how her calling consisted of several different roles that she had prioritized and must regularly negotiate:

In my mind, my call is sort of first and foremost my relationship with God and trying to keep that healthy. And my second call is my relationship with my family. And my third call is my relationship with the congregation and how I serve them. And then, I see the retreat ministry coming out of that. So, there is kind of a prioritizing, if you will.

Whereas Esther described her various roles and the callings associated with them as equal in importance, Gertrude arranged her multiple callings in order of importance and emphasized the primacy of her relationship with God. Notwithstanding this chief
difference, both women underscored the necessity of fostering and maintaining a keen awareness of how their various life callings interrelated and influenced one another.

The third and final theme pertained to the irrationality of calling. In one sense, the ministers defined irrationality in terms of the personal, social, and economic risks attendant to the calling. In general, they described the challenging and costly demands made by their call in terms of large expenditures of time and money as well as sacrifices in personal relationships. Once she enumerated several beloved aspects of her call, Esther also charted the more onerous dimensions:

Because of all that you get this refreshment from it that really nurtures and helps you bear the cost of the call, which are large: the time, the demands, the being on-call all the time, the relatively low pay for working a lot, and having to have some very highly developed skills and expensive training to do it.

But the experience of calling is almost irrational. It’s really tough on families. You have a perfectly good job and a perfectly good career and yet you have this thing inside of you that…to sort take on this difficult profession that makes very large demands on you…it’s, it’s, and you don’t…it’s just hard to explain. You feel like you must do it and not in some ego sense, but in this deeply inner sense—as sense of the unavoidability of it.

Gertrude affirmed Esther’s points regarding the practical and relational costs one can incur, while articulating the enormous risks associated with a call that is at once alien to personal and societal convention: “…and we all have a call…that crazy call that is usually counterintuitive and certainly often countercultural and very involved with risk, right down to money, lifestyle, family.” Due to the radical vocational turn—from a “cult of death” to a ministry of peace—Ruth’s calling narrative emerged as the most polarized and idiosyncratic of the three. Ruth’s narrative illustrated the countercultural aspects of calling cited by Gertrude and, more specifically, the disparity between our normative view of the good life—a life Ruth ostensibly achieved as an engineer—and the values endemic to a life of religious calling.

In a second sense, Esther and Gertrude, in particular, discussed calling as irrational in terms of its phenomenology and mode of expression. In other words, each minister described her call as an ongoing embodied, non-discursive experience.
According to Esther, the calling, in origin and purpose, transcended the personal and did not operate conceptually. Instead, she characterized it as a heart’s calling:

It’s not about you, personally;

it’s about some sort of experience
of God in a particular time and place.

It’s a feeling,

a very beyond words experience
of this divine love,

and a very strong conviction
about bringing that love into the world
in a changeable way.

That’s the purpose of your life.

Submitting yourself to that,

but not diminishing who you are.

I would say love, conviction;

they are experiences that I feel in my body.

There’s a real heart and gut to it.

Esther experienced her calling as an otherness animated by an ineffable feeling of divine love. The inner trajectory and foremost challenge of her calling involved separating her ego from this feeling of divine otherness, but doing so without losing herself entirely.

The image of Gertrude’s calling originally resided in the woodlands behind her childhood home. In sensuous and imaginal consanguinity with a grassy knoll, a pine tree, and a river, Gertrude attuned to the songs of an animated world in the form of a Presence and learned to sing the invisible life of the visible. What exactly does it mean to sing the invisible? Bachelard (1971) once explained, “Imagination is…the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality” (p. 15). I use the metaphor of song with an ear to its sonorous and lyrical dimensions. Singing the invisible necessarily entails a non-discursive lyricism, a resonant and affective rhapsody. Sonorous, lyrical, and rhapsodic songs issue from the deep of the body and call forth the deep of other bodies. None of this is to distinguish image from song because images too live in the body and body in images (Johnson, 2007). Instead, I mean to deliteralize what we usually apprehend as image—a picture we see with our eyes—and underscore its coextension of meaning vis-à-vis the body (Hillman, 1978). As Bachelard also explained, “Where the deep image rises, it endures. It rediscovers a profundity or intimates an elevation. It rises
or descends between sky and earth. It is polyphonic because it is polysemantic” (as cited in Kearney, 1991, p. 104). In other words, the embodied image is the multi-voiced image that sings enduringly.

We need look no further than Gertrude’s initial description of the numinous to appreciate how it called forth to her body: “I would just lay there and again I would feel this incredible sense of Presence and love” (Gertrude, emphasis added). By way of sensuous and imaginal participation with the natural landscape, Gertrude bridged the real and the imaginary, and figured as Presence the animte, lyrical invisibility of the grassy knoll, the pine tree, and the river.

For Esther and Gertrude, irrationality in the second sense did not signify the absence of reason, but the presence or the presentational manifestation of a consciousness different from conceptual reason. They, and Ruth in her insatiable hunger to connect with scripture and God, experienced this heart’s calling through felt significance and related to it as divine otherness. In one of its several meanings, the ministers viewed calling as an embodied receptivity to the divine borne out of and into love, grace, forgiveness, and humility. All of the ministers spoke of these four themes singly or in combination, yet Gertrude provided a compelling synthesis as it related to the goals of her ministry retreats:

...we try to create that arena, that space where there is a moment where the Spirit can speak to the individual and the community about love, really. Really, all it just comes down to is love...and forgiveness, a sense of grace, that there is something so much greater and larger than us and if we open up to this energy, to this grace, it will indeed work in our lives or it works in our lives even when we’re not open to it, I suppose.

According to Needleman (1982), this very paradox has marked religious experiences of saints and sages since time immemorial: “an extraordinary, passionate involvement in the whole of life of man together with a luminous detachment from it, a profound outward movement coexisting with an equally profound inward movement” (p. 5).

The irrational, presentational, embodied, and non-discursive features of the ministers’ religious callings were intimately attuned with the dreams that they cited as uniquely influential. Esther’s series of dreams, particularly of the arid desert transformed into the verdant garden, Ruth’s dreams of the irradiated baby and Holy Other, and
Gertrude’s dream of the decrepit shack illumined by moonlight were all remarkably vivid and arguably possessed an animated quality that engendered a sense of otherness or autonomous presence. In addition, the ministers’ reported that the dreams imbued them with an ineffable experience of felt-significance, an embodied awe (alternately beautiful and horrific) that provided a supportive (e.g., Esther in her sorrow and bereavement) and instructive function (e.g., Ruth in her readiness to place judgment; Esther and her dearth of steeliness). However, these interpretations of the dream were secondary to the sheer depth and power of its idiosyncratic, central images (e.g., the beauty of the lush, fragrant garden; the horror of the eyes staring through Ruth and an infinity of faces). Moreover, the ministers pointed to dreams as an expressive medium through which the themes of love, grace, forgiveness, humility, and courage came to bear. Of the last, Gertrude expressed the supreme importance of dreams in her calling:

…and in order to listen to that call and really, really trust, I think a dream that carries so much energy and so much reality helps. It certainly helped me to have the courage to make some really crazy, crazy changes in my life and take some really huge risks. And the dreams continue.

Instead of reality, I suggest that the power of the dream inheres in the depth of its central images and their potential to surpass the givens of reality towards world-making. This notion of world-making emerges from a poesis, whereby dream and reality enter into dialogical mutuality and each is made and re-made by the other towards shifting horizons of being. Kearney (1991) has discussed this reciprocal relationship in terms of Bachelard’s explication of imagination and reality: “In the discovery of this other world the self discovers its ‘other’ self. By generating this dialogue between my other-self and the other-world, the poetic imagination reveals new possibilities of being” (p. 102).

Above-the-Ground: Extraordinary Stories and Performative Writing

Each of the three narratives that composed my inquiry was extraordinary. While I consider myself extremely fortunate to have so readily discovered such stories, I purposely set out to understand religious calling and dreams by way of the exceptional case. To some extent, one could argue that all stories of religious calling bear out the extraordinary because they prevail in spite of a culture so emphatic in its rationality, individualism, and glorification of the self; hence, the extraordinary is in the deviation
from those values that undergird our ordinary way of valuing the good life. All instances of religious calling are then towards a purpose transcending the personal and therefore universally warrant the description of exceptional.

However, the de facto assumption that rationality, egotism, and literalisms are separable from religious calling is at once simplistic and misguided. As one minister cautioned, there are some for whom the calling is in service to the self and others for whom the calling is an orderly, intellectualized endeavor, unfettered by exceeding risk or ambiguity. To be sure, a major part of what made these three stories so compelling was the dynamic tension between the intentionality of the self and the intentionality of the calling as divine otherness. Yet, perhaps the most extraordinary facet was the extent to which the participants reported having communed with the divine presence, in dreams and in waking oneiric experience, as real, animated presence. Accordingly, I circumscribed the extraordinary by the latter phenomena; and it was to these encounters that I devoted most of my attention.

Why examine religious calling and dreams by way of the exceptional case as opposed to the commonplace? First, I quote, at length, Edgar Wind (1958), who, in support of the former method, cogently points out the relationship between the typical and the atypical in understanding a given subject:

A method which fits the small work but not the great, has obviously started at the wrong end. In geometry, if I may use a remote comparison, it is possible to arrive at Euclidean parallels by reducing the curvature of a non-Euclidean space to zero, but it is impossible to arrive at a non-Euclidean space by starting out with Euclidean parallels. In the same way, it seems to be a lesson of history that the commonplace may be understood as a reduction of the exceptional, but that the exceptional cannot be understood by amplifying the commonplace. Both logically and causally the exceptional is more crucial, because it introduces (however strange that may sound) the more comprehensive category. (p. 191)

Moreover, a method of the commonplace, with its reliance on statistical inference derived from probability, is poorly suited to an area of inquiry characterized by such improbability and seeming impossibility, inasmuch as religious calling requires enormous and untold sacrifice from the persons so called.

Assuming, as Hillman (1996) did, that the extraordinary reveals the ordinary on a larger scale, what value inheres in the depiction of an intensified image? Indeed, big
stories and big dreams are potentially transformative because they stir the imagination, and deform the given dimensions of the ordinary towards enlarged depth and possibility in regards to our lived experience (Bachelard, 1971). The liminal space between being and becoming reveals our dynamic interpenetration with each other and the world. Here, we are permitted to “see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by simple linear or causal logic” (Goodall, 1991, p. 125). In this way, the extraordinary is not exclusionary and transcendent, but participatory, descendent into, and inter-sectional with the localized and the particular. Writing and performing extraordinary stories is then in the service of charting the cartography of local horizons.

From the outset, I have asserted the primacy of image in understanding religious calling and significant dreams. More specifically, I have attempted to demonstrate a kinship between the two insofar as they intersect on the phenomenological dimension of numinosity or otherness and bear out non-discursive, embodied significance (e.g., calling as yearning; dream as context and mood). While one can experience numinosity as beautiful or terrifying, or both, the encounter, whether by dream or by waking oneiric experience, imbues one with humility and ontological wonderment. The supreme challenge then is to find the words to figure the non-discursive, ineffable, and invisible dimensions of dreams and religious calling:

A new angelology of words is needed so that we may once again have faith in them. Without the inherence of the angel in the word—and angel means “emissary”, “message-bearer”—how can we utter anything but personal opinions, things made up in our subjective minds? How can anything of worth and soul be conveyed from one psyche to another, as in a conversation, a letter, or a book, if archetypal significances are not carried in the depth of our words? (Hillman, 1975, p. 9)

While Hillman’s “angelology of words” mainly recapitulates the problem of representation, I have also heeded his pithy dictum—“stick to the image” (Hillman, 1977, p. 68)—as a way out of narrative as text and a way into narrative as image. In the following passages, I point to illustrations of my process and discuss how an imagistic approach to narrative dovetails with performative writing.
Performative writing is primarily in the service of evocation. While other scholars have located the method in an intersection of speech and writing (Pollack, 1998), I have approached it as a convergence of image and word, a process of image-making (Hillman, 1977). On the primacy of image in making sense, Lifton (1979) stated the following: “We live on images. As human beings we know our bodies and our minds through what we can imagine. To grasp our humanity we need to structure these images into metaphors and models” (p. 3). In each of the three narratives, several salient images—butterflies, missiles, and a pine tree, among others—resonated with broader significance in regards to the dreams and religious calling of the ministers. For instance, Gertude’s pine tree constituted the genesis of her calling and epitomized her relationship with the divine. Indeed, the pine tree and other images inhered in the narrative filigree and circumscribed other, less visible worlds through which the ministers’ made sense of their calling. In this way, image and significance are identical and locatable between the narrative lines. To return to image-making or world-making, it is not so much a process of making something out of nothing as it is drawing the invisible out of the visible. I have approached writing-as-drawing-out through the elaboration of context—biography of a nuclear weapon, for one—and by extension, the mood of the image—ominous, benumbed, shameful—as it permeates and shifts through the narrative. Performative writing and image-making evoke by bringing forth the manifold implications of image and weaving them into a fuller context: a more palpable world.

The final point of the preceding passage, a concern with the manifold implications of image, points to the next feature of performative writing, namely metonymy (Pollack, 1998). Metonymic writing actively seeks to transgress the notion of a fixed relationship between a word or sign and its referent so to obviate singleness of identity or meaning. Metonymy as a multi-vocality bears a bias toward multiplicity and difference. This feature of performative writing follows from the hermeneutic assumption that understanding is always partial—every disclosure of meaning at once entails a concealment of meaning. Accordingly, metonymy, as playful rather than didactic engagement with textuality, is particularly conducive to an imaginal approach to research.
Broadly, I set out to understand the intersection of dreams and religious calling by focusing on the particularities inherent to each of the three ministers’ narratives. Even as themes with archetypal significance reached across the three narratives, I proceeded with an eye to the peculiar images that constellated around them. For instance, I chose to preface Gertrude’s narrative with the conversion story of Saint Paul so to illuminate a difference, what her story was not—a precipitous and amazingly epiphanic calling to faith and service. Instead, I attempted to dramatize the non-linear, circular nature of her calling that spanned decades and circles still, and her big dream, initially forgotten, whose significance surfaced after ten years and surfaces still. In this way, the play of metonymic writing encapsulates the interplay of desire and imagination in the boundary space between being and becoming (Pollack, 1998).

Beyond-the-Horizon: Postmodernism, the Sacred, and Soul

To this point, I have discussed religious calling and significant dreams in terms of archetypal image and distinguished between discursive and non-discursive, visible and invisible, representational and presentational, and univocal and multi-vocal ways of knowing. Non-discursive, invisible, presentational, and multi-vocal ways of knowing all point to the unknowable, ineffable, and elusive dimensions of lived experience. Paradoxically, a sharp sense of cosmic significance seems to inhere in this way of knowing and experiencing. The numinous and ineffable challenge the two-headed notion of objectivism— independence of the world from the mind—and subjectivism— independence of the mind from the world—both of which take man as the measurer or “as the measure of all things” (Avens, 1984, p. 39) and obviate dialogic participation with the world.

I have concluded that non-discursive, invisible, presentational, and multi-vocal ways of knowing are synonymous with the soul perspective proffered by Hillman (1975):

By soul I mean, first of all, a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint towards things rather than a thing itself. This perspective is reflective; it mediates events and makes differences between ourselves and everything that happens. Between us and events, between the doer and the deed, there is a reflective moment—and soul-making means differentiating this middle ground. (p. xvi, emphasis added)
As I return to soul perspective and its relevance to understanding religious calling and dreams, I realize that I have come full circle. By way of introduction, I had differentiated the soul perspective and imaginal ways of knowing from the twin perspectives of rationalism and empiricism, with their respective emphases on logical and evidential ways of knowing. While these latter perspectives are certainly not without their value, they tend towards a singular worldview by which the local and particular are marginalized (Jencks, 1992). To be sure, I embarked on my study in the spirit of pluralism, with an eye to the local, particular, and invisible facets of experience in the remarkable and unique callings of three female ministers.

To some extent, Hillman’s appeal to differentiation dovetails with the agenda of postmodernism. The postmodern critique vehemently opposes the notion of an objective, independently knowable reality and contests the hegemonic progressivism to which it gives rise. According to Moules (2000), the fundamental tenet of postmodernism is “pluralism: a belief in multiverses and multiplicity, implying that there are as many ways to understand and experience the world as there are people who experience it” (pp. 229-230). Put simply, the major branches of postmodernism argue against the notion of a singular, static reality. Instead, postmodernist perspectives posit that either we construct reality or discursive practices and social relationships construct reality, as assumed by constructivism, poststructuralism, and social constructivism, respectively. Is it untenable to understand and honor spirituality through a postmodern lens, where ostensibly, only we, language, or other people determine the real?

Admittedly, several of the assumptions inherent to postmodernism suggest as much. First, the postmodern perspective values particularity over universality by assuming we can experience and understand the world in many different ways. When we too strongly herald plurality, it can give rise to a staunch individualism that ignores our patent commonalities and predilection for communal situation (Borgmann, 1992). Second, the notion that one construction is as good as another can ultimate in a moral and ethical ambiguity by which we abdicate ourselves from responsibility and accountability to the other (Borgmann, 1992). Relatedly, postmodernism, at its deconstructive extreme, seems to sponsor a centrifugal relativism that ignores the utility of entrenched “truths” or belief systems and simply replaces essentialism with nihilism.
(Amundson, 1996). By way of a summary critique, Moules (2000) observed, “Postmodernism, taken to an extreme, moves particularity into disengagement, self-referential construction, and cynical relativism and can become a context for a loss of meaning, community, connectedness, and a loss of a sense of embeddedness in…the rest of the natural world” (p. 233).

The extremities of postmodernism relegate meaning exclusively to humankind or the discursive culture of humankind and thus fall prey to the opposite pole of the Cartesian split—an intra/inter-subjectivism, whereby women and men are at the center of all things. On the trappings of deep subjectivity, Hillman has illuminated as its crux the absence of the imaginal or soul: “Here the depth dimension never transcends below the historical ego and its feelings. The appeal to a ‘totality of multiple perspectives’ remains an egocentric humanism, without the divine cosmoi that link the various perspectives through myths and that provide their root metaphors and their communities of meanings in which they are necessary” (Hillman, 1983, p. 137). Neither constructions nor thoughts nor things, images are the very stuff of soul that compose the divine cosmoi. Images constellate root metaphors and myths because the image is inherently polysemous. Moreover, image is numinous in its animate otherness and presentation of fecund significance (Hillman, 1980; Hillman, 1983). I have concluded that the numinous significance of both religious calling and dreams coextend through image: a grassy knoll and a ramshackle Crèche illumined by moonlight; a churchyard and an irradiated baby; a poet at the pulpit and a verdant, blooming garden. To be sure, each minister would sooner call her story a mystery than ‘my story’ because a de-centering of subjectivity or ego and submission or receptivity to a divine other constituted the very foundation of her calling and dreams.

As an inquiry into calling and dreams, this study has only begun to illuminate what is a potentially robust and multifaceted research area. In terms of religious calling, I chose to limit the focus to three ministers, all of whom were female, ordained at mid-life, and members of the same Christian denomination. By contrast, researchers might profitably explore the experiences of men, persons seeking ordination or a calling at various life stages, and indeed, persons who have different religious or spiritual affiliations, such as Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism, to name a few. More fundamentally,
Hillman (1996) did not situate calling in an exclusively religious context and neither should we. As I have already explained, the notion of calling can subsume a multiplicity of roles that variously manifest in the contexts of work, relationships, lifestyle, and service. To our knowledge, researchers have scarcely conducted systematic inquiries into other categories of life calling; therefore, calling as an area of inquiry is rife for expansion. Moreover, Leovy (1997) has described calling as a process of unfolding which requires “that we be in constant dialogue with whatever is calling us” (p. 2). Whether a dialogical process undergirds the multiplicity of callings requires us to invite more stories and to engage receptively the persons and images that compose them.
References


Appendix A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Jeffrey Schweitzer. I am a graduate student researcher in the psychology department at Miami University. I am conducting a study that explores the experiences of persons called to religious service. Attention will also be given to the significance of dreams in relation to the participant’s calling.

Currently, I am seeking community religious leaders who might be willing to participate in the study. All participants must be at least 18 years of age. I will invite participants to describe in detail the experiences of answering their call. Narratives will be collected in one or two interviews, which will take two to three hours in total per participant.

Participation is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty or loss of benefits of any kind associated with declining to participate. Participants will not be required to share any information they do not wish to share. Participants are free to withdraw consent and/or withdraw from the study at any time. I will ask your permission to audio record the conversations that take place during the interviews. The confidentiality of participants will be protected.

The Miami University Departmental Review Board has approved this research study.

*The prospective participant will be given an opportunity to ask questions about the study.*

*Commitment to participation will be ascertained.*
Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

STUDY TITLE: A Narrative Approach to Religious Calling: The Role of Dreams

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jeffrey R. Schweitzer, B.A.

FACULTY ADVISOR: Roger M. Knudson, Ph.D.

Thank you for your interest in this study! The purpose of this project is to learn about the experiences of individuals called towards religious service, with an emphasis on the role that dreams might have played in the process. While there has been renewed interest in the concept of a personal calling in life, it has rarely been the focus of psychological research. The project not only will contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept of calling in one’s life, but also to the profound connection between dreaming and religious experience.

Participants will be invited to describe in detail the experiences of answering their call. The study will employ a narrative methodology in obtaining these accounts. Narratives will be collected in one or two interviews, which will take two to three hours in aggregate duration per participant. Attention will also be given to the significance of dreams in relation to the participants’ calling.

The research process will ask you to tell the story of your entry into a life of religious service. Any potential discomfort would likely be minimal. In fact, for the most part, you may find that the self-reflective process during the research process will lead to personal insight. Benefits for participants’ might also include a deeper understanding of their personal concept in life and further understanding of the role dreams may play in shaping psychological experience.

Participation is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty or loss of benefits of any kind associated with declining to participate. Participants will not be required to share any information they do not wish to share. Participants are free to withdraw consent and/or withdraw from the study at any time. There are no foreseeable risks to participants. We do recognize that these interviews may evoke strong feelings from participants. The principal investigator is a psychologist licensed in Ohio. He can arrange an immediate
appointment for any participant in the Psychology Clinic at Miami University (phone: 513-529-2423) should involvement in the study cause significant distress or other reason for concern to the participant. There is no deception involved in this study.

The researcher will ask your permission to audio record the conversations that take place during the interviews. The confidentiality of the participants will be protected. Participants will be assigned identification numbers and these numbers will be used to identify all narratives collected. Only the researcher and his graduate research assistant will have access to the narrative materials. Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked file separate from the locked file in which the coded narrative materials will be stored.

If you have questions about the study at any time, you are invited to contact Jeffrey R. Schweitzer, B.A. by phone at 513-291-1644 or email at schweijr@muohio.edu. Alternatively, they may contact Roger Knudson, Ph.D. by phone at 513-529-2404 or by email at knudsorm@muohio.edu. If a participant has a question regarding the rights of research participants, he or she may contact the Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at 513-529-3600.

I have read the preceding statements and agree to participate in this study. I also acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

______________________    _________________________     _________
Participant Name                      Participant Signature                    Date

______________________    _________________________     _________
Researcher Name                     Researcher Signature                    Date
Appendix C

CONSENT FOR RECORDING DREAMS AND QUOTING FROM DREAMS

STUDY TITLE: A Narrative Approach to Religious Calling: The Role of Dreams

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jeffrey R. Schweitzer, B.A.

FACULTY ADVISOR: Roger M. Knudson, Ph.D.

I understand that the narrative account of my experiences and specifically, for purposes herein, dreams will be recorded on digital audio and that these audio recordings will be used through the duration of this research. I further give my permission for the researcher to quote from the dreams I contribute, verbatim, in part or in whole, in any reports of this research, including papers presented at professional conferences, articles in professional journals, or book chapters. I am free to withdraw this consent at any time for any particular dream, in part or whole, or for the entire set of dreams I have contributed. There is no penalty or loss of benefits associated with the decision to withdraw this consent.

I consent to the audio recording and quotation of my dreams as specified in the above description.

______________________    _______________________     _________
Participant Name                     Participant Signature                 Date

______________________    _______________________     _________
Researcher Name                    Researcher Signature                 Date
Appendix D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I would like to begin by hearing the story of how you came to a life of religious service.

The following are areas of further inquiry:

1. How do you understand the nature of your calling? Has your understanding of it changed over the course of your life? What critical events marked these changes?

2. What experiences were particularly facilitative of your calling? What experiences hindered it?

3. How did the pursuit of your calling affect your relationships? Family? Significant others Friends? Colleagues?

4. Did you explore alternative careers prior to your entry into religious service? Were these somehow unfulfilling? How?

5. Do you recall any dreams that seemed related to your calling?