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The Journey from Tragedy to Hope: The Experience of Christian Undergraduates

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THE JOURNEY FROM TRAGEDY TO HOPE:
THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN UNDERGRADUATES

by

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and the School of Education, George Fox University
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“THE JOURNEY FROM TRAGEDY TO HOPE: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN UNDERGRADUATES,” a Doctoral research project prepared by DAVID M. JOHNSTONE in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational Foundations and Leadership Department.

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ABSTRACT

Using the case study approach, I interviewed seven student leaders at an evangelical university in the Pacific Northwest. Their common feature, other than attending the same institution, was that they had all experienced tragic or traumatic situations at some point in their lives. In spite of this experience, they were able to display a hopeful outlook on life. The purpose of this study was to discern elements or themes that were common to their stories. I was particularly looking for themes that might explain what helped them move on from their traumatic experiences into a perspective of hope.

I anticipated the importance of relationships and community for them. The interviews also confirmed the importance of a personal faith. Not anticipated was the significance of having someone prompting and assisting them to draw meaning from their experience, or to discern some purpose in their experience. These data and observations can inform how educators design communities that will help students who have experienced and are processing traumatic experiences.

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None of the work I create is mine. It is all the product of others investing in me. I am indebted to men and women who lived thousands of years ago, and children recently born. My indebtedness is not a burden; it is the privilege of being a part of so many communities.

In the process of this research, I am particularly aware of the intentional and unintentional investment that others have made.

I am particular aware of how my students have shaped my understanding of both themselves and my own faith. They have given me insight into grace, hope, and joy. Though the age gap is often vast, what they teach me is equally vast.

My family and friends close and far have been tenacious and patient listening to my ideas until they made sense in both my own and in their minds.

My sons, Samuel and Caleb, have “kept it real,” encouraging me through their actions and observations that I need to continue connect my academic life with the lives around me.

My wife, Heather, above any individual, has encouraged me when I despaired, and has been an anchor when I have lost my mooring.

DEDICATION

Each generation desperately needs the good news that Jesus provides. What is good news is often different for each new generation. My prayer is that my students and their peers come to see and embrace the goodness that Jesus offers. My goal is that this collection of papers assists in that hope. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The gospel of Jesus Christ is wrapped up in the idea of God's "will be[ing] done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, NIV). The "good" in the good news (or gospel) looks a little different for every age, culture, and context. Unlike the Eastern notion of karma, or *what goes around comes around*, the Christian gospel centers on God's grace being offered to those who accept Jesus's kindness and authority. God extends grace so that men and women do not receive what they deserve; therefore, what goes around does not come around. Many find this to be good news, particularly when they realize that they are not as kind, merciful, and conscientious as they might wish.

The good news is unique for every generation because every generation struggles with life in different ways. In Christian theology, followers of Jesus understand the idea of good news as grace. Writers discuss this good news along with faith, love, and hope, as outlined in I Corinthians 13:13. My sense is that ideas of love found in popular music, film, and other media saturate the current generation of college students. Because of this, the idea of love has lost some of its power. Many are also not sure what *faith* describes or implies. College students are at the developmental stage where they are beginning to understand the impact and scope of their character and actions. My observation is that many college students are unsettled with their moral character. When they are told, "God loves you just the way you are," it sounds like a cliché and seems trite to them. Many are not happy with who they are becoming or have become. The hope that there is the possibility of change is a means of grace for this current generation of college students.

My contention is that this generation links the good news of the gospel with hope. While

love is still rich with meaning, hope is more immediately pertinent because it seems to be less common for many (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Smith et al., 2011). Hope may be the central message of Jesus's good news for today's college students: hope that they are acceptable the way they are and hope that the Holy Spirit will enable them to change. They hope that the Holy Spirit can transform the tragedy and circumstances of their lives and that their current context is not as good as life gets. Hope pulls them from despair and gives them a vision for the future.

Hope has many variants and nuances, but it is much more than dreaming, having a wish, or being wistful. In the English language, writers use hope as a verb in the sense of anticipating something's fulfillment ("Hope, v.," 2012). Others also use it as a noun, indicating a longing or aspiration with an element of expectation ("Hope, n.," 2012). Hope contains the possibility that circumstances do not have to remain the same. Further, it provides the means and the final vision of what could be. This is particularly reassuring and comforting for students who have dreams and longings far beyond their current circumstances.

The theological definition of hope identifies hope as a virtue – something of high value and integrity. A modern perspective is that hope is “the virtue that orients us to fulfillment, the virtue by which we consistently seek, despite hardships and discouragement, our most magnanimous possibilities in life” (Wadell & Davis, 2007, p. 146). In his theological discussions about hope, Thomas Aquinas notes that he considers hope a virtue because it provides the possibility for attaining difficult things: “difficult but possible to attain” (Aquinas, 1981, p. 1237). We hope along with others and hope better within a community. As humans, we are prone to discouragement and liable to abandon our quest unless there are others who support us and “remind us of the value of our quest” (Wadell & Davis, 2007, p. 147). The community's role in hope is important.

Some years ago, at the beginning of the academic year, a mother called me because she was concerned for her freshman daughter. When I went to check on the student, I found the 17-year-old in her room, curled up in a corner sobbing. After asking her female resident assistant (RA) to join me, we sat beside the student until she was composed enough to speak. She felt completely alone and, after being at the university for 24 hours, desperately wanted to go home. Home was in another state and therefore going home presented some challenges. I asked if she might consider the following plan: because a refund of her tuition and housing costs was still possible for another week, we had a window of opportunity. We discussed how her RA and others would accompany her to dinner. In the morning, she could go to church and lunch with her floormates. At the freshman banquet the following evening, they could sit together. After the banquet, I would contact her and help assess the need to make plans for going home. She agreed, and we proceeded with that strategy.

The next night, she acknowledged that even though it was a good day, she was still unsettled about staying. I encouraged her to go through one day of classes and then we would reevaluate the situation. This strategy continued to the end of the week, at which point she decided to stay. Her classes and experiences were significant, but the start of new relationships was what kept her at school. Knowing that she could leave at any time allowed her to invest in developing relationships. She was hopeful that there was a strategy for responding to her loneliness and isolation. In the following chapter, I will note the importance of relationships and community for this generation (Parks, 2000; Sittser, 1996; Smith et al., 2011).

In my sixteen years as an educator, I have observed many students who have faced tragedy and trauma directly or indirectly. These experiences have ranged from personal terminal illness to incidents of disaster and abuse. The depth of these experiences and responses varies

according to individual and situation. Sometimes the responses are very private; sometimes they are very public. After the incident or experience, some students move on to healthy and functional lives; unfortunately, others do not. My conjecture is that hope is a significant ingredient in the journey from trauma to a full experience of life. Conversely, when individuals do not attain hope, they may stay in their experiences of trauma and tragedy.

Beyond homesickness, I have observed an increased sense of isolation due to the trauma and tragedy that many college students experience. It does not matter whether the isolation is self-imposed or created by others, the results of isolation are damaging. As I will note in the next chapter, those within the emerging adult culture are experiencing more and more isolation from one another (Smith et al, 2011; Turkle, 2011). Many end up alone in every sense of the word: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When isolation and loneliness mix with the experience of trauma, hopelessness is often not far behind.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this research was to examine how this generation's evangelical college students understand community and hope in the aftermath of tragedy and trauma. I used individual interviews within a phenomenological framework to explore the nature of personal life tragedies among students, the process of transformation from despair to hope, and the forms of hope in the experiences of a small sample of college students. Specifically, the findings of this research yielded an expanded understanding of the response to trauma among young adults. More broadly, the research informs how college and university leaders can create a culture of hope in their student population.

Research Questions

This research was exploratory in nature; therefore, the research questions were general. In light of the problem statement, I sought to explore and answer the following questions, based on personal perceptions of the interviewees:

1. *Research Question #1:* What helped college students who go through tragedy move through despair to hope?
2. *Research Question #2:* What other factors played a role in individual college students' experiences that are transformed from tragedy to hope?
3. *Research Question #3:* In what ways did spirituality play a role in transforming college students' experiences of tragedy into hope?
4. *Research Question #4:* How did each participant define hope?

These questions were the central focus of this research.

Key Terms

Alienation – I define this term as social or relational marginalization or isolation of a man or woman.

College students – I focused on the traditional-aged undergraduate. This term usually encompasses men and women who pursue undergraduate studies between the ages of 18 to 23 years. With reference to national norms, I acknowledge that the average age of college students is changing, but in this study, the phrase *college student* refers to the ages listed above.

Community – I defined this term as a body of people who live in the same geographical location and share a common sociological culture.

Defining moment – Also known as a decisive or critical moment, a defining moment can be a

crossroads experience that often determines events that follow.

Despair – The opposite of hope or seeing the possibility of hope and being unable to take steps toward it.

Evangelical – The components of this term are complex and nuanced. For the purposes of this research, I defined evangelicalism as a stream of Christianity: (a) based on historical Christianity, (b) grounded in the Bible as the primary authority, and (c) focused on the saving work of Christ on the cross. Evangelicals view (d) Christ’s work as having implications made personal by conversion; (e) evangelicals believe that men and women collaborate with the Holy Spirit in the things he is trying to accomplish; and (f) evangelicals are willing to work across denominational streams in a trans-denominational manner.

Faith – Faith is belief or trust in somebody or something without the need for logical proof.

Hope – As conceptualized for this research, the term refers to belief in the potential or possibility of change with awareness of steps for how to achieve said change.

Spirituality – Spirituality is the sense of a reality existing beyond the material; it often involves a person’s seeking to discover the core of his/her being and significance beyond the perceptions of the material world.

Student leaders – While there are many forms of leadership on a college campus, in this case I am limiting the definition to formal positions in a college community. Many individuals have influence and voices on a campus without filling recognized, formal student leadership roles, but for the purposes of this study, I focused on those with formal leadership roles such as Resident Assistants, Peer Advisors, and members of student government.

Trauma – An experience of psychological or physical injury.

Tragedy – This term referred to a sorrowful or terrible event that causes emotional distress.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research is limited and delimited by the following factors, including a limit in the age of sample participants, drawing sample participants from one university, and limiting the size of the sample.

Limitations. I used a non-probability sample and it is therefore not a miniature representation of the campus where the participants are students. It would be inappropriate to apply the insights of this study as general observations of emerging adults beyond the participants.

A further limitation is due to this research being a phenomenological qualitative study of experiences of loose similarity. A phenomenological study does not try to engage with or develop new theory. The findings of this study will be of value in informing practice rather than to gain further theoretical understanding.

Delimitations. I delimited the sample to undergraduate students of 18-23 years of age. My student-development peers and I understand this as the traditional undergraduate age. I realize that the average age of undergraduates is changing at the national level, as students matriculate at earlier ages and others return to college in their later years. However, the traditional age of college students fascinates me because it is the age where many make decisions about identity, faith, relationships, and vocation, decisions that will shape their future experiences.

I drew the sample of students from an evangelical university in the Pacific Northwest. Proximity, accessibility, and budget became constraining factors in interviewing students and conducting this research. Limiting the interviews to students at a single university limited the breadth of any interpretation of the results.

I also delimited the interviews to seven individuals. Restricting the number of interviews in this way meant that I was able to complete this research in a timely manner. This small sample limits the generalizability of the research results; however, it does provide a catalyst for further research. The data provides a glimpse into the lives of a sample of this current generation of students. The study can become a primer for educators to begin to shape how they structure and form their campus communities.

I chose not to interview anyone under the age of eighteen. In my professional role as an officer of the institution, state law requires that I be a mandatory reporter if any current minor reveals to me incidents of abuse. I sought to identify participants who experienced their traumatic incident at least two years prior to my initial approach. My hope was that this gap of time provided them with some space in order to process their experiences.

For this study, I also chose to focus on self-identified evangelical believers in Jesus Christ. Many of these students had some theological notion of transformation and hope, as defined above. Further, I limited interviews to formal student leaders because much of the training for formal student leadership on the university campus promotes self-awareness and self-understanding. My hope was that those interviewed would have such a foundation.

Summary

In short, my goal was to discern how college students who have experienced trauma and tragedy move from that hard experience to a place of hope. The factors, which might be in this journey, intrigued me. My conjecture was that their community and faith were significant elements, my own hope was to assess whether this observation was true.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the research related to this study. I will begin by exploring how linguists, social scientists, educators, and theologians have understood hope. As well, I will look at how some have understood the opposite of hope. After this, I will review recent reflections on emerging adult and current traditional undergraduate student culture, with a particular emphasis on the challenging things of that age along with a general sense of how they approach relationships, community, and faith.

There are many ways men and women have understood hope. Leadership writers emphasize its role and importance in leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Pellerin, 2009). Social scientists have thought extensively about hope in terms of individual lives and broader society (Bressler, Bressler & Bressler, 2010; Smith & Denton, 2002). Biologists have even examined how hope affects the human body (Groopman, 2003). In this chapter, I will briefly examine these different voices. I will primarily be looking at American student culture, particularly the group to which sociologists refer as emerging adults (18 to 23 years of age) (Smith, Christofferson, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). I will then weave a vision of this group from scholars who have looked at their trauma, tragedy, faith, and relationships. All of the areas will inform and provide a deeper understanding of this population's journey from trauma to hope. My conjecture is that faith and community are inseparable and a key component in the experience of students who have experienced trauma.

Explaining Hope

There are many ways we can understand hope. In this review, I consider hope as (a) an emotional response to the circumstances of life; (b) a virtue; or (c) a cognitive and intellectual approach to life as reflected in theology and philosophy. Hope also has a polar opposite: hopelessness is often referred to as despair.

Hope and motivation. On one level, hope is a response to life events. It is frequently a reaction to our experiences: successes usually reinforce a sense of optimism and increase hope, while failures often undermine and decrease hope (Snyder, 1994). Individual experiences in the past and present frequently determine responses to life. Often an individual bases their hope for future success on successful experiences in the past. Theologically, hope can be built upon how we have interpreted the ways God has acted in the past, as revealed in Scripture and in our lives. The things of God we have seen or heard become part of the hope we have for the future (Dawn, 1992). Educational researchers have found that the classroom experience is quite similar. Past success is a determining factor in students' anticipating the possibility of future accomplishments (Snyder, 1994).

Hope is a defining characteristic as well as a skill for leaders. According to researchers, hope involves intentionality, reflection and strategy (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). It is a major part of leading small and large communities. Good leaders need a sense of personal hope, as well as the ability to foster and impart hope to the lives of others. Kouzes and Posner comment that leaders are critical for morale in challenging times; they are the ones who remind their organizations about hope. "Hope enables people to transcend the difficulties of today and envision the potentialities of tomorrow" (2007, pp. 341). Hope can be learned; as Lopez indicates, "the hopeless can learn to be hopeful" (2010, pp. 41-42).

Social and behavioral scientists have tried to understand the nuances of hope for the individual. Some equate hope with optimism, yet hope is much deeper and richer (Minkowski, 1970). It is more than optimism, because no matter how the world might be falling apart, hope sustains the dreams of men and women (Deneen, 1999). Hope goes beyond the tangible to become an element that encourages a person to strive even when circumstances seem overwhelming (Deneen, 1999). Abraham Maslow (1971) suggests that hope is tied to plans, goals, and dreams individuals have for themselves. Crapanzano (2003) concludes that while desire and hope are interrelated, desire often leads to inaction, while hope propels an individual to act. Minkowski (1970) acknowledges the relationship between hope and desire and suggests that both go far beyond expectations to fulfillment. However, he distinguishes between hope and desire; explaining that hope is “sublime” and desire somewhat “commonplace” (p. 101). For instance, hope might be a longing for relational reconciliation, and desire rooted in material gratification. As Deneen (1999) suggests, hope comes from beyond our current circumstances or ourselves.

In the classroom, either the presence or absence of hope can affect a student’s ability to learn (Snyder et al., 2002). When trauma and stress become a regular part of students’ lives, despair or loss of hope can have a negative influence on their success (Snyder, 2002). The converse is also true: an increase in hope has a significant positive impact on a student’s academic achievement. Bressler, Bressler, and Bressler (2010) note that students with higher levels of hope achieved higher levels of academic performance. Snyder (2002) links high levels of hope with motivation. This motivation helped students move toward their aspirations and goals. For instance, when a student did well in a new subject, that success increased his or her interest and willingness to participate in the broader discipline. Researchers observed that high

levels of hope are associated with past success, anticipating possible “future school success” (Snyder, 2002, p. 824; see also Snyder et al., 2002) and this hope translates into extra determination to succeed.

In assessing the level of hope in a student, Snyder found that the initial step was to help a student gain a greater self-understanding. To lead a student in this direction, Snyder (1994) developed a simple tool called the *Trait Hope Scale*, a questionnaire that looks at personal goals and how students hope to accomplish them. The scale prompts the person to reflect on his or her “capacity to produce cognitive routes to desired goals” (Snyder, 2002, p. 299). Further, it examines how individuals view their own ability and capacity to start and move toward their dreams, goals and hopes (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). In the scale’s language, students must have both *pathways* thinking and *agency* thinking. Pathways thinking consists of the thoughts an individual has about his or her ability to develop a strategy for accomplishing identified goals, and agency thinking is the individual’s ability to sustain a commitment to completing those goals (Snyder, 1995; Snyder, 2002).

Hope and health. While hope has a role in education, it also has a place in human health. Therefore, it is important to touch on Maslow’s (1954) observations regarding the origins of health and its place in the hierarchy of needs. He linked an individual’s health with the ability to establish personal goals that promoted full human living, as reflected by men and women who he described as *self-actualized*. Maslow saw these goals and an individual’s self-actualization as components of hope and thus integral to health and healing as vital parts of human needs.

Immunologists connect hope with medical health and well-being (Groopman, 2003). In the late seventies, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Medicine Psychoneuroimmunology program invited Norman Cousins (1989) to join the staff. While not a

physician or a researcher, he had written about positive emotions and their potential positive physiological effects, particularly on the immune system. Cousins asks, “If emotions such as hope and purpose actually produced physiological change, exactly what mechanisms and pathways were involved?” (1989, p. 3). The UCLA School of Medicine embraced this search for the role of emotions in healing, in spite of the skepticism from the greater scientific community. Cousins noted that the community was skeptical that something as unscientific as emotions could affect health and disease. Over ten years of scientific studies, the researchers determined that emotions can and do affect the immune system. Numerous studies began demonstrating how the brain transforms hopes and expectations physiologically into chemicals that affect a patient’s health (Cousins, 1989). The researchers demonstrated that there seemed to be a real connection between emotions, thoughts, and immunity from disease. Further, when researchers define hope as a will to live, it becomes a significant factor in the recovery of patients from cancer surgery (Cousins, 1989; Groopman, 2003). If a patient has a sense of hope or even the desire to live, then the possibilities of their recovery, while not guaranteed, considerably improve.

Hope as a virtue. The discussion of hope in Christianity spans the centuries, going back to the biblical reflections in Paul’s letters (I Cor. 13:13; Rom. 8:24), and David’s psalms (71:5; 119:43; 130:5). Hope was seen as a virtue, something of high value. It was “the virtue that orients us to fulfillment, the virtue by which we consistently seek, despite hardships” the great possibilities of life (Wadell & Davis, 2007, p. 146). In a small handbook, written at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine (354-430) reflected on how individuals should view hope as beyond themselves. Hope is both (a) temporal and (b) future-focused, but in either case, the fulfillment of that hope is determined externally from our own actions and resources (Augustine, 1947).

The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) viewed “the object of hope as a future good, difficult but possible to obtain” (Aquinas, 1981, p. 1236-1237). In his theological discussions about hope, Aquinas asserted that hope was not a solitary experience. He observed that men and women are more capable of hope when they are in community. As humans, we are prone to discouragement and liable to abandon our hopes unless there are others who support us (Aquinas, 1981); others help us remember our goals and dreams.

The reformer, John Calvin, (1509-1564) describes the interrelated roles that hope plays with other virtues. He specifically references the connection between hope and faith, saying, “faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when his truth shall be manifested” (Calvin, 1960, p. 590). Calvin connected hope to the belief that the things God has promised will actually come to fruition. He also wove hope with faith; he believed it reinforced and strengthened faith when it wavered. Simply, hope continuously sustains and strengthens faith.

Josef Pieper (1904-1997), a twentieth-century Catholic philosopher, further develops this interconnectedness between the virtues. In his view, hope arises from God. Pieper observes that hope is an expectation for sharing in God’s eschatological blessings (1997). Pieper affirms the historical and theological understanding that theologians built the idea of hope on the foundation of God’s grace, mercy, and power (1997). Pieper also articulates the interconnectedness of hope with faith and love. He observes that in terms of sequence, faith, “takes precedence” with hope and love following in that order. In reverse, “love is lost first, then hope, and, last of all, faith” (p. 103). In other words, he writes, “in the order of perfection, love holds first place, with faith last, and hope between them” (p. 103). While Pieper does not list hope as the primary virtue, he understands it to be the bridge between love and faith (1997).

Biblically, hope is more than having objectives, goals or viewing circumstances positively. Many theologians believe hope is much deeper than optimism. There is a future element of anticipation in biblical hope (Volf, 2006). Yet there is also a present element that the implications of future hope should also affect the daily lives of men and women. The scriptural hope has a sense that in the future, God will make wrongs right, injustice will be dealt with, and the wounded will be made whole. Yet there is also an immediate expectation that hope should shape current perspectives and actions. As Fernando (2010) observes, “The events of the past and present are seen in relation to what is yet to come” (p. 151). While some understand that hope is anticipating the future, it also has implications for the present.

In Christian theology, hope is more than seeing life as a glass half-full. Hope is more than being optimistic. Wright (2008) affirms that hope is a cornerstone of Christian doctrine. Theologians link hope to the biblical vision of the end of time when God will make all things right. Wright observes that this perspective is accurate but only half of the story. Hope also has a transformative power for the present. Wright (2008) suggests that neither Jesus teaching nor many biblical writers intended to create a separation between the present and the future. While Christians can anticipate that God will one day make the world right, there is no reason for them to delay in trying to redeem the world in order to bring about that justice (Wright, 2008). There is a sense that humans have a role in this transformation.

Another major twentieth century theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (1975), also believes that hope is more than optimism and positive thinking. He sees it as central to faith in Jesus Christ. Reflecting on Calvin, he agrees that hope is the belief that those things promised by God will surely come to fruition. He observes that despair is not the absence of hope, but that “the pain of despair surely lies in the fact that a hope is there, but no way opens up towards its fulfillment”

(Moltmann, 1975, p. 23). Moltmann understands hope to have current implications and anticipation for the future. It is rooted in the core of Christianity. He writes that Christian hope “embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it” (p. 16). Hope anticipates the future, yet begins to unfold in the present.

Despair: the opposite of hope. Secular philosophers have wrestled with definitions of hope for centuries (Bloch, 1986). Throughout its history, Christian thinkers (theologians, pastors, mystics, and laypeople) have also grappled with hope’s definitions and implications (Bloch, 1986). While hope is central to Christian doctrine, it is prudent to look at the opposite of hope. In these reflections and conversations, they emphasize the centrality of hope by understanding what hope is not. The opposite of hope would seem to be hopelessness (“Hopeless, adj.,” 2012). However, one of the recurring themes is that the opposite of hope is not necessarily the absence of hope; it is also more than pessimism or dejection. It is better to understand hope’s antithesis as despair. It is being able to see a solution to a problem or a needed change, but having no idea or means to get there.

As noted above, Moltmann wrote, “The pain of despair surely lies in the fact that a hope is there, but no way opens up towards its fulfillment” (1975, p. 23). Centuries earlier, the Italian theologian, Aquinas linked despair with apathy, or *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins (Aquinas, 1981, p. 1255). He saw the two as mutually reinforcing and destructive. Wadell and Davis, reflecting on Aquinas, write that despair is a belief “that moral and spiritual excellence, however admirable, is impossibly beyond [individuals]. For these people, *acedia* is the paralyzing spirit of dejection that robs them of hope” (2007, p. 134). Aquinas saw despair as a pervasive sadness that immobilized the individual (Aquinas, 1981). Theologians understood

acedia as despair coming from a mix of slothfulness and lethargy. It brought a man or woman to resignation, asking, *what is the point?*

Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish philosopher who influenced twentieth century existentialism, suggested that alienation had its roots of despair (Kierkegaard, 1954). He called despair a “sickness unto death” (Kierkegaard, 1954, p. 146). Evans (1984), examining Kierkegaard’s philosophy, suggests that men and women are more acutely aware of their estrangement from one another in these modern times. He writes that in the late twentieth century, “Alienation was most visible ... [among] people who in their own words no longer ‘cared,’ who just didn’t see the point of trying” (Evans, 1984, p. 74). Evans sees the sense of marginalization, loneliness, and alienation experienced by many in western culture as having arisen from acedia, apathy, fatalism or “the sickness of despair” (1984, p. 74).

Wadell and Davis made further observations about alienation. They write, “Acedia is a dejection of the soul – a moral and spiritual torpor – that leads to the trivialization of oneself and one’s relations to others” (2007, p. 136). That relationship to others becomes a theme in understanding the nuances of hope. The opposite of hope is more than hopelessness or lack of hope; it is being able to envision a solution to a concern but being unable or despairing of having the means to reach that objective. The opposite of hope is a despairing and ultimately paralyzing resignation that nothing can change, and the isolation and alienation from other men and women that comes with it.

Student Culture

The world of the American undergraduate is complex. Much of popular culture depicts it in embellished and entertaining ways (Platt et al., 2001; Sandler et al, 1999; Field et al., 2007;

Reitman et al., 2003). Facts about universities and their students are available in individual institutional profiles, demographic information, and required Cleary Act crime statistics. All of this information provides a glimpse into the life of any given university. There is also a growing industry focused on describing and understanding student culture (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Willimon & Naylor, 1995). In many of these works, it is not unusual to come across adjectives such as *harassed*, *broken*, *cynical*, *depressed*, and *damaged* to describe this group of students.

Students in the shadows. Traditional undergraduates arrive on campus with a growing list of concerns, tragedies, medications, illnesses, and negative experiences (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Upon matriculation, they join a community of peers who are encountering similar challenges with hormones, personal identity, faith development, academic disorientation, and complex relationships. For some students, past and current lives dovetail neatly with their college transitions, but for others there is a collision of worlds.

At any point in time, a student could manifest symptoms of post-traumatic stress due to trauma that could be years old or very recent. The pressure-cooker environment of academic seasons often causes students' anxiety and desperation to boil to the surface. Panic, stress, eating disorders, despair, and suicidal ideation are part of their life, becoming normative for many students. All these experiences have an impact on their emotional health, which then ripples out to their academic success (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009; Bressler, Bressler, & Bressler, 2010; Snyder et al., 2002).

In 2004, Kadison and DiGeronimo published a volume outlining what they observed to be current and future concerns for the mental health of American college students. As

practitioners and researchers, they observed increased stressors in the lives of students. These stressors ranged from personal and external expectations and sleep disorders, to family dysfunction and experiences of violence. In some cases, the stressors were so paralyzing that the hopelessness led to substance abuse, self-harm, and at times suicide (see Smith et al., 2011). The researchers noted that the traditional college student of 17 to 22 years of age encountered significant identity issues during this age. Decisions of vocation, lifestyle, character, relationships, and faith tended to arise during this period (see Smith & Snell, 2009; Dudley, 1999). The variables of collapsing family dynamics, changing sexual mores, and the increased chaos of life that the authors identified can wreak havoc and create complexity in student lives.

In a longitudinal study, Smith et al. (2011) sought to understand further and to discern the characteristics and nuances of the lives of teenagers and emerging adults. Smith and his colleagues came to the conclusion that even though emerging adulthood is often portrayed in popular media as “so nice, so fun, so sexy,” the reality is that it reflects “a dark underbelly of disappointment, grief, confusion, sometimes addiction” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 228). They describe emerging adults as “morally adrift” (p. 19). These young adults have great difficulty making decisions that will enable them to navigate their lives with some level of wisdom. When occasions arise when they must make wise and discerning assessments, they discover that the process for doing so is much more difficult than they anticipate. A common feature in their lives is that individuals decide their own morality; there are no absolutes due to “the difficulty, and even impossibility ... of trying to sort out the difficult moral issues” (p. 22).

Many emerging adults hold the worldview that there is no truth beyond themselves, they create their own reality, truth, and moral response to the world (Smith et al., 2011). Smith calls them “moral individualists” who believe “that it is wrong for people to morally judge other

people. Each person has to decide for themselves” (p. 23). In order to make decisions, their guiding ethic gravitates toward pursuit of happiness, expediency and whatever will benefit themselves. Smith and colleagues find that “... one in three emerging adults admit being prepared to violate the moral right or good if it helped them and they could get away with it” (p. 65). The refusal of these young adults to establish absolute standards, ethics, or morals originates from a focus on themselves.

Konrath, O’Brien, and Hsing (2011) observe that empathy among domestic college students is dropping, and Twenge et al. (2008) observes that there has been an increase in narcissism among college students. Smith et al. (2011) identify that emerging adults have decreasing interest in civic affairs, volunteerism, charity, or social justice concerns. They seem uninterested in participating in their communities, unless it is a virtual community. They are increasingly concerned with themselves to the exclusion of concern for others. Linking these observations, McPherson and Brashears’ (2006) concern about growing social isolation by young people suggests a pattern of a dissolving commitment to the idea of community.

Not surprising, this self-focused approach to life has led many students into situations where other people and events confront them with decisions that have led them to painful consequences. Extreme consumerism, intoxication, unchecked sexuality, and little interest or care for society or their neighbors ripple negatively through members of this group (Smith et al, 2011). Looking at college students, Smith notes that poor decision-making skills, the prevalence of substance abuse, unrestrained sexuality, and selfishness have consequences, saying:

More than 400,000 college students ages 18-24 also report having had unprotected sex as a result of drinking alcohol. More than 100,000 college students every year report having

been too intoxicated to know whether they had consented to having had sex. Finally, more than 97,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape. (pp. 112-113)

The results of lifestyle and other choices lead some young adults to some challenging and painful outcomes.

Smith et al. (2011) suggest the challenges faced by emerging adults arise partially from society and their environment. The decisions they make connect to the behaviors modeled by adults in their lives as well as to their own values. Regardless, the consequences are real, sometimes self-induced, sometimes initiated by the decisions of others. Smith suggests that culture and the media's focus on sexual behavior, substance abuse, and self-absorption without consequences has directed the trajectory of this generation of young adults' "dark side" (Smith et al., 2011). When he and his researchers trace the roots of those attitudes, they conclude that those older than emerging adults must be ready to acknowledge their role in passing on this inheritance (Smith et al., 2011).

Students and technology. Turkle (2011) focuses her writing and research on the impact of technology on our culture and young adults. She particularly tries to understand the character of "digital natives," a group including emerging adults and traditional-aged college students who have grown up in the digital world. She observes that technology tends to have a seductive side that draws people into its sphere, often responding to "our human vulnerabilities" (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). For instance, a young man may be experiencing loneliness, so social media technology creates the perception that he has 800 Facebook friends; the Facebook experience suggests that he is not isolated and lonely because he has so many friends. Yet in reality, many of those electronic relationships are illusory. While some have genuine relationships, many Facebook

friends having no lasting presence or resilience that one might expect in friendship. The false sense of community created by social media outlets prompts Turkle to observe that many emerging adults are feeling isolated but fear anything but a surface-level relationship (Turkle, 2011). As electronically connected as they are with each other, they have a feeling that they lack intimacy. They desire – but fear – intimacy. Others have noted a growing narcissism, self-focus, and diminishing empathy among the current American college student (Twenge et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2011). However, student culture is more complex than just simple selfishness. A growing sense of loneliness and fear of intimacy add to the sense that “all is not well among emerging adults ...” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 193).

Students and spirituality. Loneliness and intimacy are intangibles which touch on issues of significance and meaning for a person, as in the question “Am I known by my community and do I have any significance in their midst?” This question and its variants often are a part of a person’s spirituality (Parks, 2000; Small, 2011; Astin & Astin, 2011). It is difficult to define what faith and spirituality look like for American college students, yet a growing number of scholars attempt to do this.

In 2005, Smith and Denton published *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, a comprehensive look at American teenagers (13- to 17-year-olds) and their relationship with religion and spirituality. Using material gathered by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), they identify the complexity and depth of teenage spirituality. They also observe that contrary to popular wisdom (Smith & Snell, 2009), religion is a significant part in the lives of American teenagers (Smith & Denton, 2005). This religiosity is surprisingly conventional and not defined by rebellion or alienation. Even with the influx of immigration reshaping the demographics of America (Small, 2011; Pond, Smith & Clement,

2010), researchers note that the suggestion that there is a “dramatic” move to “religious pluralism” in the United States is not substantiated by research and that the “idea is simply an overblown and erroneous claim” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 261). They observe that in spite of conventional wisdom and personal anecdotes, the most significant place of spiritual influence in adolescent lives is their home and parents. The impact of parents and family on the lives of young adults is significant (Smith & Denton, 2005).

In other observations on the spirituality of young adults, sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2007) published a study and broad reflection on the impact of emerging adults on American religion. In his book, he identifies that many are what he calls “tinkerers” (Wuthnow, 2007, pp. xvi-xvii). He notes, “A tinkerer puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand” (Wuthnow, 2007, p. 13). Our fragmented world provides a constant sense of sensory overload, and emerging adults have become comfortable making all the information they receive make sense (at least to themselves). The picture he paints is one where emerging adults are resourceful, gathering theology, community, faith, and ethics from diverse areas, creating a congruent paradigm for themselves. They are atypical, innovative, and unusual in their approaches to faith. This approach becomes the basis by which they make sense of life, relationships, decisions and faith.

Smith and Snell (2009) published *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, a follow-up to their previous work. The researchers interviewed the same individuals with whom they spoke in *Soul Searching* (Smith & Denton, 2005). These participants were now between the ages of 18 and 23; the interviewers wanted a new glimpse into their religious and spiritual lives as older men and women. The researchers observed that many characteristics and approaches to life were still similar. The individuals’ commitments to

relationships were still high, yet there was also a focus on themselves. Along with the self-focus, they did not seem prepared or equipped to make wise decisions; they made decisions according to the group with which they spent time. In terms of ethics and morals, emerging adults “simply choose to believe and live by whatever subjectively feels ‘right’ to them” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 292-293). In the face of pressures, they had difficulty “being able to decide what they believe is really true, right, and good” (p. 293). Interestingly, this observation stands in contrast to Pond, Smith, and Clement’s (2010) study which noted that young adults are similar to older people in believing that “are absolute standards for right and wrong that apply to everyone” (Pond, Smith, & Clement, 2010, p. 18). However, it was not clear from this study that believing in absolute standards manifested itself in their lives.

In 2011, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA published the results of a multi-year study called “Spirituality in Higher Education,” involving surveys and interviews with 112,232 respondents (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2003-2010). The purpose was to understand the spiritual lives of American college students and discern how they grew spiritually in college. The researchers define spirituality simply by what they considered to be a person’s inner life and how the student described it – their values, their affective response to life, and how they make meaning of their circumstances (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). According to the findings of this research, the relationship component of spirituality was very important. They observed that their “connectedness to one another and to the world around us” is a part of how their spirituality is developed (p. 63). They also discerned that while these students did not particularly support charitable enterprises as a demonstration of civic involvement, they believed that care for others was “an expression of one’s spirituality” (p. 63). The researchers noted that college students expressed these feelings particularly “wanting to help” those who were struggling and hurt (p.

64). Students want to be involved in the lives of others but not necessarily in an organized, activist manner.

Students and community. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) note that “‘helping others who are in difficulty’ and ‘reducing pain and suffering in the world’ represent activities that are driven by an empathetic understanding and strong connection the self feels for the other” (p. 65). These findings reflect Konrath et al.’s (2011) observation that there has been a decrease in empathy among college students over the past 30 years. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) also observe that charitable involvement, such as volunteerism and activism, was “the only spirituality measure that shows a net decline during the college years” (p. 69). Yet, when charitable involvement was seen as helping others at a personal level, there was a significant increase in involvement (p. 70). In terms of volunteerism, charity, and social justice concerns among emerging adults, these findings are in agreement with Smith and Snell’s (2009). However, the concerns for those “in difficulty” demonstrate the importance of relationships for college students and may have been missed by some researchers.

Subsequent studies of these data generated by the Higher Education Research Institute identify the power of spirituality and faith in group identity and cohesion. Spirituality is significant in drawing students together to provide support for one another (Bowman & Small, 2013; Brandenberger & Bowman, 2013; Waggoner, 2013). Others also identify the significance of religion, spirituality and faith in providing a community for marginalized students (Small, 2008; Small, 2011). One area requiring further attention is how the observations Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) gathered about charitable giving and concerns for their peers has implications for understanding this generation.

John Dalton is a practitioner and scholar who spent several decades studying and writing about the importance of values and character in the education of college students. In writing about the role of a campus culture for students, he states, “The forms of connections they create reveal the substance and meaning of community life on campus” (Dalton, 2006, p. 165). More specifically, he observes that the spiritual life of students provides a way for them to make meaning of their experiences and studies. Their faith establishes a foundation that provides them with the psychological and emotional safety to connect their learning with their life. He observes that for college students, “[t]he spiritual journey almost always involves traveling companions” (Dalton, 2006, p. 171). One of the significant elements of this journey is that it becomes a “quest for meaning and purpose” which “leads students beyond themselves in ways that help them appreciate and connect with others and experience a greater sense of responsibility for helping and understanding them” (p. 171). This appreciation and connection shapes and encourages their sense of empathy for others (Shore, 1997). At the same time as students are looking for the “transcendent and sacred,” they are led “inevitably to the desire to connect with others” (Dalton, 2006, p. 172). The needs that students have for both meaning and relational significance will often come together at the same juncture.

For college students, this connection with a community creates a sense of belonging, intimacy, and security (Dalton, 2006, Parks, 2000; Purdy, 1999). They gain tremendous support from each other during a time of their life that is full of transitions (Phillips, 2002). Boyer (1990) links the depth of a student’s educational experience with the quality of his or her campus community. Sharon Parks (2000) provides foundational understanding for the importance of community, particularly within the world of college students’ spirituality. With the goal of encouraging maturity in the lives of college students or what she calls “human becoming.” She

recognizes that the process “depends upon the quality of interaction between the person and his or her social world” (Parks, 2000, p. 89). Maturation begins in a solo environment, but “[w]e need a place or places of dependable connection, where we have a keen sense of the familiar: ways of knowing and being that anchor us in a secure sense of belonging and social cohesion” (pp. 89-90). She notes that as young people mature, the presence of a community around them enables and facilitates that growth, especially in that the community “poses a trustworthy alternative to earlier assumed knowing” (p. 93). Parks observes that development and growth of young people are most significant within the context of a community where truth is told and grace is extended.

The maturation of a college student is often linked to the realization that there are consequences to actions and that the consequences are not always good. As many have demonstrated, young adults are often in the midst of pain, angst and loss of their own or others’ making (Smith et al., 2011; Turkle, 2011; Winner, 2005). Writing about grief, Sittser (1995) observes that it is a shared experience, in the sense that all humans encounter some sense of loss. From his own experience he notes that it is also a lonely and “solitary experience” (p. 154). The company of others allows movement away from the trauma or tragedy of an experience. Reflecting on the role of the community, Winner (2005) writes, “Confession puts us in the company of people who can speak truth in love to us, about our sin, about the need for amendment of life” (p. 160). This confession becomes a step towards reconciliation and healing. However, it is not just the value of the community for the individual; sometimes it is the value of the individual for the community. Encouraging new students in the Yale community, their dean suggested, “Self-withholding shyness, a relatively sympathetic vice in the world at large, is a disaster here, since when you hold back you deprive the rest of us of what you could have taught

us” (Brodhead, 2004, p. 19). He challenges students to view their education as a mutual investment where they give as much as they receive. He particularly encourages them by saying that they have the means of providing great value to others regardless of background or aptitude.

Summary

This review of literature moved from an understanding of the multiple dimensions of hope to a look at the culture of undergraduate students with a focus on the challenges in their lives and a look into their spiritual lives. I have sometimes overtly and sometimes implicitly brought the idea of community into this conversation. The review has shown the theological notion that hope cannot be experienced alone, that loneliness is a prime concern for young adults, and that within the spirituality of young adults there seems to be a level of concern for those around them. The purpose of this review was to provide some insight into the hard situations and transitions in the lives of young adults. It also demonstrated faith and community plays a part in their lives. The review also shows that hope is not a common feature of young adult existence.

Although emerging adults are very connected with peers through technology, they are also lonely and isolated, unsure and afraid of intimacy. Technology connects them to a greater number of people, but there is little evidence that these connections have much personal substance. When considering hope, the loneliness and isolation experienced by students seems to reinforce their inability to find hope. The pursuit of hope is not a solitary endeavor; hope seems to happen in community and through the agency of relationships. These individuals feel increasingly isolated and unsure of their place in the local and national community. At the same

time, the commitment to relationships among this age group is high even if young adults are not sure how to deepen them or if the depth frightens them.

The voices in this conversation do not all agree, and existing studies have not answered how a person travels from trauma to hope. Simply stated, there is not a consensus about the shape of faith and spirituality among college students. Nevertheless, there is something going on in their lives beyond the physical realm. Scholars and researchers provide divergent data in order to describe this demographic. All these voices provide observations and vocabulary that assist in trying to piece together an understanding of what moves a student from tragedy to hope.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how some college students move from a place of tragedy to a place of hope. I sought to uncover and discern the steps of that journey. Using a convenience setting and purposive sampling, I focused on gathering data from student leaders at an evangelical university in the Pacific Northwest. I identified these students through my own contacts and the recommendations of my colleagues.

In this study, I sought to answer the following questions based on personal perceptions of these questions:

1. What helped college students who go through tragedy move through despair to hope?
2. What other factors played roles in individual college students' experiences of transformation from tragedy to hope?
3. In what way did spirituality play a role in transforming college students' experiences of tragedy into hope?
4. How did each participant define hope?

I explored these primary questions. This chapter describes the process that I took in implementing this research.

Setting

I focused my research on specific university students. These students were from a private evangelical university situated in the Pacific Northwest, with a multitude of graduate and undergraduate programs. For the purposes of this study, I focused only on undergraduate students. The university had about 2100 total undergraduates, with approximately 1,200 of those

being residential students during the year in which I conducted the study. Although the university is connected to the evangelical Quaker church, less than 10% of the student body identify themselves as Quakers. However, many students identify with some evangelical stream of Christianity.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

In order to discern how college students move through tragedy to hope, I gathered data by interviewing traditional-aged (18-23 years old) college students who also had a formal leadership position in the campus community. I focused on students who had a self-identified faith because I believed this might be a factor in moving from tragedy to hope.

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies, as described by Patten (2008), with seven participants. I identified these participants from my personal or colleagues' relationships. As my purpose was "not to generalize the information ... but to elucidate the particular" (Creswell, 2013, p. 157), the number of participants was adequate for the purposes of this study. All of these participants personally experienced a phenomenon or incidence of trauma or tragedy in their lives.

I did not intend to function as a therapist in these sessions, yet there was the potential for creating distress by encouraging students to reflect on their tragedy and trauma. Therefore, I provided contact information for counseling resources to all students in case this occurred. I also sought to identify participants who experienced their traumatic incidents at least two years prior to my initial approach so that there was some time difference between the event and occasion of the interviews.

Research Ethics

Respect is one of my primary guiding considerations. I took a number of steps in order to demonstrate respect to the participants and maintain my integrity as the researcher. I informed the participants of the intent of the study and role they would play in it if they consented to participate; full disclosure was beneficial for both the researcher and participants. I obtained a letter of consent from all participants (see Appendix A). Through the letter of consent, I assured students that they would remain anonymous and that what they told me would remain confidential.

Students who participated in this research study could have experienced some mental distress. Prompting students to reflect on their traumatic or tragic experience can generate some mental anguish or concerns. To minimize this possibility, I invited only participants who experienced their traumatic incident at least two years prior to my initial contact. This provided a time gap helped mitigate some of their concern. Further, all students at the university had access to a campus counseling center staffed with trained counselors. I provided information on obtaining counseling services available for the participants should they need it. I also reminded participants on many occasions that they could choose to cease their participation at any point in the process.

I implemented these procedures so that there might be no sense of deception or manipulation at any point in this study. Looking at the many roles I have on the university campus, I needed to be careful about how I recruited participants, interviewed them, and reported their experiences and perceptions. As mentioned above, I used purposive and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013), recruiting students through personal and colleague relationships. When speaking with potential participants, I introduced my roles and intent, along with the request that

they consider participating in this study. My current role as a judicial officer for the institution presented an ethical challenge. This role could have raised concerns for some possible participants. Therefore, I explained the purposes of my research to my supervisors and the slim possibility of students self-disclosing details of lifestyle violations that would normally lead to institutional sanctions. For the purposes of this research, my supervisors gave me approval to forego this role and lay aside the need to respond institutionally to any information arising from my research. In light of this, I communicated to potential participants that they should have absolutely no concerns about confidentiality. Their reflection and comments would stay under my care and security. I had no institutional obligation to report or respond to the things they say for the length of their career as students. My hope was that this assurance would provide participants with a greater sense of security and the freedom to be candid in what they discuss. Incidentally, some of the details shared with me would normally have been reportable concerns.

I did not interview anyone under the age of eighteen. However, I did consider a respondent if his or her experience of tragedy and trauma occurred when the responder was under eighteen years old.

Research Design

The research was a phenomenological qualitative study of experiences of loose similarity (Creswell, 2013, p, 148). This approach examined lived experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 76), and its intent was to discern the nature and impact of a traumatic or tragic experience or phenomenon, and then to understand the consequences from the perspective of the participant (Creswell, 2013, p.137). While the details of the experiences did not have to be similar, the experiences were significant enough for me to consider them as defining moments in

participants' personal stories. The individual participants themselves determined the defining moments. The study was exploratory in nature and I met with the participants for initial and follow-up interviews. I also supplemented these data with field notes and a field journal (Creswell, 2013, p. 149).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I utilized the following in my approach to collect data. After a participant gave consent to be part of the research, I conducted an initial screening and open-ended interview, taking notes of that interaction. In many ways, this process is similar to an initial field interview where rapport is built with the purpose of identifying potential participants for this study (Neuman, 2007, p. 296). After I had identified the participants, I conducted structured, open-ended interviews that I recorded and had transcribed. In these interviews, I asked general, exploratory questions. After these steps, I conduct follow-up interviews, when necessary, in order to clarify and expand on details broached in previous conversations (Creswell, 2013, pp. 161-162).

Parallel to these interviews, I generated field notes that provided information about the context of the interview, my own reflections about the responses provided, and other details pertinent to making these data provided by the interviews more robust. These notes provided a greater depth to the transcription of the interviews (Neuman, 2007, pp. 288-291). I also kept a personal field journal during the research study. The journal was a running commentary on the process and reflections of my own experience, highlighting my approach, changes in strategy and methodology, and new questions to ask participants (Neuman, 2007, p. 291). The interview transcriptions, field notes, and journal became the basis of my analysis. Due to the highly

confidential nature of these data, they were (and are currently) kept secure and locked in a filing cabinet. Three years after I complete the dissertation, I will destroy all these data.

In handling these data, the first step was to start coding the findings. I began coding by identifying words, phrases of significance or observed patterns presented in the interviews and notes; this was open or initial coding (Neuman, 2007, p. 330). Axial coding took the analysis to another level by organizing the codes developed in the open coding into structured major and minor categories and identifying relationships and connections between them (Neuman, 2007, pp. 331-333). The next step was to focus on these coded data, gather them into similar themes and give the themes labels to provide further clarity and understanding; this was the process of selective or focused coding (Neuman, 2007, p. 331). Finally, I searched for connections between the thematic data and theoretical constructs. I identified where themes began to cluster together and reflect similar or related theoretical ideas, which is thematic coding (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). These differing levels of coding were important to interpreting and understanding this research in a congruent and organized manner.

Understanding, interpreting and explaining these data required the realization that each participant's own self-awareness and understanding provided insight into their experiences. Additionally, these data themselves provided some of the means by which I interpreted and described the phenomena. My personal challenge was to let go of my own preconceived assumptions.

The final steps in data-analysis involved creating narrative reflections that provided congruent meanings to the events (Creswell, 2013, p. 189). My overall objective was to create an accessible and meaningful narrative that explained the phenomenon described by the participants.

Role of the Researcher

My having a number of roles in the university posed a potential challenge to, but also informed, this research. I am pursuing this research as part of my doctoral work, so I do have a stake in its success. However, I am also an administrator and judicial officer at the institution where the participants were (are) students. When a lifestyle infraction was discussed during our interviews, I was given permission by my supervisors to keep this information confidential unless the participant desired that I follow up with his or her reflections.

I am also a follower of Jesus, which provided me with some insight into the faith dynamics experienced by the participants. It also had the potential for creating some bias in my interpretation of the findings. Because of this potential, I needed to have an attitude of humility, respect and curiosity as I engaged with these data.

Lastly, my professional and academic roles, which revolve around undergraduate student life and culture, provided me with insight into the demographic I studied. I believe that this insight was an asset rather than a liability. Candidly, I like this age group and feel directed by God to extend them kindness and mercy.

Potential Contributions of the Research

Every generation needs and seeks to be understood within its own context. While this research will provide a micro-glimpse into the lives of certain students, I hope that this study will provide some understanding of how to enable, equip, and encourage students to move from tragedy to hope. This research has the potential to provide a primer and some helpful insight into how college students learn. Further, this study can also provide some contribution to the larger

public conversation about this young adult demographic of the American population. I believe that many of the circumstances of their lives have traumatized many of this generation of current traditional undergraduate students. Unfortunately, much of the tragedy and trauma they have experienced originated from a previous generation. I found that this realization of my own generation's responsibility was a prophetic challenge. The greatest research contribution of this research is to spur on further understanding in how to mitigate the pain experienced by emerging adults. If I can help answer how hope is brought into the lives of these young adults, this research will be a significant achievement.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

The idea of hope is tied to the future in such a way that it “transcends the difficulties of today” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 341) and people see hope through the lens of the possibilities of hope for tomorrow. Researchers, educators, and theorists link hope to goals, plans, and dreams (Maslow, 1971; Snyder et al., 2002). Hope is a theological paradigm that helps individuals focus on more than their current circumstances and thereby to realign themselves with the possibility of a better future (Augustine, 1947; Aquinas, 1981; Calvin, 1960). For the current generation of undergraduate college students, hope is often fleeting. They are often a wounded and hurting generation (Kadison & Geronimo, 2004; Smith et al., 2011) due to their own decisions or decisions that others have made which affect them (Smith & Snell, 2009; Turkle, 2011).

The idea of brokenness or damage characterizes this undergraduate generation (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004), but they could be described more accurately as people trying to figure out how to navigate the loneliness of a digital and real world (Turkle, 2011). The isolation of their virtual world has led to an increase in narcissism among students (Twenge et al, 2008), a decrease in empathy for others (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011), and an increased sense of loneliness (Smith et al., 2011). This development has manifested itself in a decrease in volunteerism (Smith & Snell, 2009) and charitable giving by college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011); researchers use such indicators to assess an individual’s concern for others.

However, to complicate matters, this is only one side; there has also been a trend where friends in genuine need became the focus of great generosity (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Dalton, 2006). In further attempts to understand this generation of college students, researchers

have found that spirituality became a significant mitigating factor to the isolating elements of technology (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Dalton, 2006). An increase of empathy or kindness for others often led toward a deeper sense of relationship, community, and belonging (Dalton, 2006; Philips, 2002; Shore, 1997). In a world where pain and isolation are common for these students, community and personal faith brought significant hope into their lives.

The purpose of this research was to examine how current evangelical college students at one faith-based university understood community and hope in the aftermath of tragedy and trauma. Using individual interviews within a phenomenological framework, I explored (a) the nature of specific personal life tragedies among students; (b) the process of transformation from despair to hope; and (c) the ways that students personally experienced hope. Specifically, my research yields a greater understanding of the response to trauma among young adults. More broadly, it informs college and university leaders' understanding as they attempt to create a culture of hope within their student population and campus communities.

The guiding and central questions for this research were the following:

1. What helps college students who go through tragedy move through despair to hope?
2. What other factors play a role in individual college students' experiences that are transformed from tragedy to hope?
3. In what ways does spirituality play a role in transforming college students' experiences of tragedy into hope?
4. How does each participant define hope?

The value of this study lies in the insight it provides into the lives of students. While this focused, qualitative research should not be the basis for making global assumptions and

assertions, the results can inform how educators build their communities. These data can assist in understanding the importance of hope for this generation of college students.

Characteristics of Participants

In this study, I used a purposive sampling approach to identify four possible participants. Peers and colleagues identified four additional participants. My initial meeting with each participant was a screening interview, explaining the purpose, hopes, and possible impact of the research as well as clarifying the details of confidentiality for participants. We also discussed some of the basic criteria for participants and examined each person's desire to participate. These meetings were brief, taking no more than fifteen minutes each. These students further identified a few of their own peers as possible participants. Several of the students suggested as possible participants chose not to participate due to lack of interest or time constraints. In the end, seven students participated in this study.

I completed the subsequent interviews over an eight-week period in the first three months of the academic year (September to November 2013). Participants were intrigued by the possibility of others hearing parts of their story. Interestingly, some had never processed their experiences with another person (family, friend, or professional). Some also identified the cathartic role of being able to tell their story. These students had not made certain connections about relevant details until the moment of the interview.

As I reviewed and assessed these data, I was able to discern themes that were common to each story. Some themes were obvious, but others were more subtle. In the following section, I will make observations about the students in general, provide details about each participant's context, and note the themes that arise from these data.

General (group) characteristics. I interviewed seven individuals: three men and four women. Their eclectic experiences did not take away from the commonality they shared. All called the West Coast home, even though the place of their birth or extended family residence might have been elsewhere. One was an immigrant; another was the child of immigrants. All the students were in their early twenties. Each had siblings who played a role in their stories. All had been, or were currently, student leaders at a faith-based university in the Northwest. Each student acknowledged striving to live faithfully to his or her beliefs. Without exception, they identified themselves as followers of Jesus even though that journey had been a struggle at times. Some of the stories were quite dramatic, but not all. Each had elements of distress, but each had points of celebration and joy as well.

Three of the participants were victims of abuse (physical and/or emotional). Six of the seven had traumatic experiences that were a direct result of the decisions of others. The seventh participant experienced a medically-related situation exacerbated by certain relationships, and mitigated by others. Each student found support in youth groups, church, school, or family. However, in all their stories, an older individual appeared to have had a supportive role. At times, this same individual also challenged the student to step away from identifying himself or herself through the lens of the tragedy or trauma.

Without exception, the students also reflected on God's presence throughout their experiences. While not always identified in the midst of the trauma, upon reflection, the students were able to interpret events in such a way that they discerned God's mercy or presence. They sometimes also noted redemptive illustrations or lessons. Regardless of the interpretation, all the students chose to draw spiritual meaning and significance from their life experiences.

Specific (individual) characteristics. The first student (S1) interviewed was a Caucasian male from the Pacific Northwest. He came from a church-attending family. He had little memory of his younger years due to what he described as “childhood amnesia” (S1). Details become clearer for him after his sixth grade year when his father began drinking after a decade of sobriety. A life of “living hell” (S1) defined by violence, anger, and unpredictability ensued because of his father’s alcoholism. The student, his mother, and sister endured this volatility until his father passed away from cancer during the participant’s junior year in high school. After his father’s death, a mentor/pastor encouraged him by observing, “God is going to use you one day” (S1). This belief provided a lens through which he understood his experiences. The support he found among his university community also reinforced this understanding. Related to his plans for his own future, he has resolved to encourage “those who are in need of a brighter future” (S1). Seeing himself as a survivor, he concluded that his purpose in life was to bring encouragement to others who had experienced significant trauma.

The second student (S2) was a Caucasian woman, also from the Pacific Northwest. She was majoring in a health-related discipline. Her brother had a decade full of life-threatening illnesses involving multiple organ transplants, extensive hospital stays and multiple complications. His constant need for medical care shaped her desire to care for others. These illnesses and other challenging circumstances stretched and strained her family. These added stressors included the need to support members struggling with lifestyle choices, substance abuse, attempted suicides, and unplanned pregnancies. She and her family found support in friends and her geographical community. A friend of her mother became a mentor, providing a place to ask questions and process her complex life experiences. The participant “felt comfortable” (S2) with this woman; “she knew a lot of our story already, so I didn’t feel like I

was betraying anybody” (S2) by speaking with her. The student articulated a vision for providing health care, but dreamed of one day having a home that served the needs of the community’s children: “If they need food or homework help, ours would be an open and safe home to come to” (S2). One of her personal strengths was the ability to empathize with others and discern how to demonstrate compassion to those in need.

The third student (S3) was an African-American woman whose family originally came from what she describes as “the South” (S3). Her faith and her church community are a significant part of her experience. In her pre-teen years, she resided as a hospital patient for six months; four months of which she remained in a coma. She had an unidentifiable neurological condition that “erased” (S3) many of her abilities and skills, requiring her to relearn how to walk, talk, read, write, and perform other basic functions. Her parents married and divorced each other twice, the final separation occurring during her hospitalization. Her prognosis after hospitalization was to be a resident in an assisted living facility. Many did not anticipate that she would live, let alone go to college. As she says, “I really am not supposed to be here now” (S3). Her mother became her role model: “My mom and God were the consistent things” (S3). Understanding her experiences has provided her with a distinctive challenge to others:

Hope comes in knowing that there is hope for tomorrow regardless of your circumstances or what you’ve been through. I have had a pretty crummy life or some pretty crummy things happen. Just knowing that there is hope and redemption [brings joy]. (S3)

Her view of these illnesses went far beyond herself; they were a means by which she was able to encourage, support, and challenge those around her.

The fourth student (S4) was another Caucasian woman from the Pacific Northwest. She was currently pursuing a degree in the social sciences. She experienced both hunger and homelessness on numerous occasions in her life. Her father was an alcoholic and a drug user during much of her schooling. During that time, her mother stayed married but began to date other men. Often left alone, the student and her younger brother were required to fend for themselves with little support. Extended family lived out of the state, and neighbors were not aware of the family dynamics. Toward the end of her junior year of high school, her father committed suicide. Psychologists subsequently diagnosed the student with PTSD related to this trauma. Shortly after her father's death, her mother began seriously dating other men. In her first year at college, the student's mother became engaged and proceeded to move into her fiancé's home. That summer, due to space constraints, the student was not welcome into her mother's new home. The student was required to stay wherever she was able to find a place to sleep, often her car. At the end of the summer, she returned to university for her sophomore year as a student leader. She had been peripherally involved in drugs but was able to remain drug-free for that entire year. However, the despair of being "forgotten" by her mother over Christmas holidays led her to alcohol and participating in "dangerous situations" (S4). Throughout her life, significant individuals (librarians, youth workers, and teachers) had helped her rise out of despair. Through these interactions during high school, she saw university as a possibility for her future. Important for her ability to hope, she came to understand there was something "bigger" (S4) than her experience. Seeing her peers through the lens of her own experience suggested a message she wanted to give to them: "I think that to feel the grace and the redemption of the Lord is seeing that I have a place to exist in the world ... it's worth it to

keep going, because there's something better” (S4). In her estimation, her experiences did not define her; her sense of significance was much broader drawing on her faith and purpose.

The fifth student (S5) interviewed was an African man who immigrated to the USA eight years earlier. He was also majoring in a health-related field. He experienced extended separation from his family on multiple occasions. His parents divorced when he was young, with his mother immigrating to the US and his father staying in Africa. The student remained with his father until 2004, when he joined his mother on the West Coast. Part of the impetus for immigration was the lengthy period of civil war violence and political instability in the nation of his birth. Across the miles and years, his father’s voice still had influence in the way he lived his life. He last spoke with his father when he was leaving the country: “My dad told me that it is time to grow up, time to be a man” (S5). The memory of his father’s words provided clear expectations and direction for how to live as an adult. He found support in myriad places (church, school, and sports) and articulated a desire that he might be able to be a “voice for the voiceless” (S5). Beyond the challenge to be an adult, he saw his experience as a marginalized young man as an impetus for caring and advocating for those weaker than himself, particularly those who are part of marginalized communities.

The sixth student (S6) interviewed was another Caucasian man from the Pacific Northwest. His story is less dramatic but still significant because it reflects a story common to many of his peers. He had realistic ambitions of playing professional sports, but sustained multiple injuries during his high school years. The injuries brought a readjustment of his dreams, hopes, and desires. His intentions and aspirations shaped his early identity, and he subsequently had to reassess his values and priorities after his injuries. A catalyst moment for him was when a university professor started to pose questions about the student’s strengths and

vocation: “You have been given talent by God. Why would you not want to be a good steward of that? What's keeping you from wanting to be a good steward of that?” (S6) These simple reflections and challenges were shaping how he saw his future.

The seventh student (S7) interviewed was a woman of Middle Eastern descent, but of American birth, and living on the West Coast. Her parents immigrated separately to the US. Through a network of connections, they met, courted, and married. The student’s background involved physical and emotional abuse from a father who was an alcoholic and drug user. He is currently in remission from cancer, originally linked to his substance abuse. Family, church friends and others have played significant supportive roles in her life. Her father’s illness was a trigger for major reconciliation between father and daughter. This reconciliation has been part of the celebration unfolding for her family. Understanding her experiences through the perspective that “God has something so much greater in the future” (S7) shaped how she relayed her story.

Institutional characteristics. The university where the seven students currently attend is in the Pacific Northwest. The undergraduate population is just over 2100 students, with 1200 of those students living in campus housing. Fifty-nine percent of the student body are female. Further, just over twenty-seven percent of undergraduates are domestic students of color, with another five percent being international students. The university is faith-based with a diverse campus spiritual life among the student body. While not all students consider themselves followers of Jesus, faith does permeate all areas of the campus community. With the increase in professional programs, the university has moved away from a liberal arts focus for all students, yet it still identifies itself as a provider of a broad and holistic education.

Analysis of Data

The following section provides reflections and notes from the interviews I conducted. The findings helped answer the research questions by manifesting different themes. At times, the findings were clearly relevant to the direction of the research; sometimes the reflections were less obviously applicable and needed context to discern their relevance.

Finding #1: Continuous support. The first major theme is the support a student received through and after their experience. This was consistent with the observations of Parks (2000) and other researchers (Bowman & Small, 2013; Brandenberger & Bowman, 2013). It was a common theme among all the participants. The support received was vital to all participants. It was also essential for that support to be present when participants began retelling and processing the events of their story.

Individual agents of hope. Regularly the participants made similar observations of the importance of this support. One observed: “Having people ... in my life, just to help ... paint that picture, take the bad and make it good, it's been amazing” (S2). The men and women around them helped make sense of their experiences. The support looked different, but these relationships provided hope and helped the students move off the path to despair. One participant illustrated the importance of these relationships by describing an interaction she had with a woman committed to her success.

One time just to test her, I told her I wasn't going to college, she was so mad! I loved that! I liked that she was mad about that! This was cool because she cared. In high school, teachers really cared too. (S4)

Other participants noted the significance of individuals in their lives:

My mom's friend ... with her expertise she always helped my mom figure out what they were giving me and let her know ... explaining stuff. She was there and helped my mom and ... me. Washing my hair, all that stuff My godparents came to visit me a lot. They still come down to visit sometimes. (S3)

My youth pastor, would every so often [say] ... I'm always praying ... that God will break your heart or something will happen to you... that will make you realize your need for him. I remember thinking that is kind of mean.... I became close with one of the girls on our trip ... she got pregnant and she chose to abort the baby. That was [a] 'God breaking my heart' moment. It was killing me from the inside. Through being a leader, ... sharing that with my staff, it was like moving forward. (S5)

Five participants (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6) found individual support in their schools. At times, a school librarian, teacher, or counselor would celebrate their academic achievements and help the student dream of what he or she might do. Sometimes it was someone who would simply journey with the student through his or her process of grieving and questioning.

Occasionally these and other mentors would provide counsel, but often they would just be present and show kindness. One student observed: "A lot of [support] was from my youth pastor and his wife They took me under their wings a lot because I was scared to talk to anyone about it" (S7). Support also came from close family friends; these relationships were particularly valuable as the student would not have to retell his or her story in order for the friend to understand. One student described the significance of these relationships:

...one of my mom's best friend, we were good family friends with them. I asked her to be my mentor. And over time, I felt more comfortable with her because she was my

mom's friend, so she knew a lot of our story already. I didn't feel like I was betraying anybody ... I don't know what I would have done in that situation without having her there just to listen and ... to verbally process things. (S2)

Food, shelter, housing, vacations, and the costs of counseling were all ways by which others extended support and care for the students. Sometimes it was extravagant, as one student noted:

Somebody heard our story and they had a charter plane. They let us have it. So when we got the phone call, we could have the plane free and they flew us down there [to the hospital]. All these really, really amazing things. (S2)

At other times, it was simple hospitality and kindness. Another participant described her experience:

In high school, my mentor – we would visit her parents a lot. I spent Thanksgiving with them one year. It was really nice. And even though it [was] awkward, because I [didn't] actually fit there; even to see how the parents interacted and stuff ... [it was] genuine communication that I'd never seen. (S4)

The value of individuals taking the time and investing their resources in each participant was profound for the students. Sadly for some (S1, S4), receiving kindness was a new experience. For others (S2, S5, S7), it was part of being a community where reciprocal kindness was common. Sometimes receipt of kindness was humbling and awkward, but the students' gratitude for the support was very apparent from their stories.

Communities of hope. Communities would often offer their support as well. Church members, classmates, neighbors, and employers would provide listening ears, inquiring about

health, providing physical support through meals, funds, or shelter. They would also extend prayers and show interest in their lives. One student observed that neighbors and friends said: “We are going to support you through this. If you need a place to stay if you feel unsafe, our home is always open” (S1). Another noted the support she found in her church community by stating, “At that point ... we’ve been going to a church for 20 years now, the same church. We had amazing support from family and friends. During the whole time we had great support” (S2). Other participants, observing the support they had found, stated:

When everyone else found out; they were asking me what was going on that night So I told them, and after I did that, I think it really helped and people were a lot more supportive than negative like I thought they would be. (S1)

When I got to high school, there were these older girls, juniors, and they were really involved in Young Life ... they kind of like adopted us in a way They were probably my first friends that actually asked about my life [since] no one knew anything that was going on. (S4)

I had a solid support[ive] group of friends. Whether or not the faith aspect was there, they were supportive. I think my parents [also] played a bigger part in it than I realized. (S6)

All found some form of consistent encouragement from their communities; “family and friends helped me process that year, and also having school as an outlet, to go and be safe” (S2). While at times some experienced misunderstanding and loneliness, they were able to acknowledge afterward that segments of their communities tried to be supportive.

Not finding support. Some students saw potentially supportive communities slip into insensitivity, gossip, routine, and judgment. One noted the fatigue induced by the constant interest of others in her situation, commenting: “At one point, I stopped going to church because it would come up every Sunday and I could not handle it. I stopped hanging out with my friends for a while [also]” (S7). With sadness, one participant noted the loss of this needed support by saying:

“We went to a [bible study] group [where] ... me and my mom discussed and ... were talking about how he was having a drinking problem One of the women ... decided that it would be okay to tell other people in the church that this was going on To this day she [mother] has a hard time going to any church service.” (S1)

Both internal and external negative dynamics came into play. Discouragement, perplexity, and anger were all part of their experiences. One participant experienced particular embarrassment and frustration when things spilled over and affected his relationships: “I didn’t want my dad to be there because I didn’t want to be embarrassed, because he would verbally abuse me” (S1). During a birthday party, his father arrived; the participant recalled: “I broke down in front of all my friends and said, ‘I’m really sorry, but you have to leave because this is an unsafe place’” (S1). Another noted how difficult it was to have a hard story: “You don’t want people to know, it’s kind of embarrassing” (S4). She continued by providing the following observation:

It was hard being around a lot of girls who had families, because at least where I came from, all my friends had really crappy families too. I know not everyone [here] has a good family, but a lot of people do I would pretend I did not want my mom to show up for homecoming weekend I am figuring out, I don’t think I can play at this for much longer, I don’t think I can be unknown for much longer, because it is hard to do

that. (S4)

Other factors experienced by some participants included feelings of discouragement and depression: “I was holding it for so long, it was killing me from the inside” (S5). As one participant observed: “My faith wasn’t necessarily strong enough to even be angry at God” (S6). Nevertheless, afterward, he recognized that “God was working in that experience whether I realized it or not” (S6). With hindsight, the participants were able to discern God’s presence in the midst of the despair and pain.

One student became frustrated when the condition of the one responsible for his pain suddenly changed. He noted this distress by stating: “I was told that my Dad’s cancer was in remission and I was livid. I was so mad. I wanted him to die now. As bad as that sounds ... I [did not] want him here anymore” (S1). His frustration increased when his church community seemed quick to forgive his father. Doubts about whether this change was real propelled the student to anger:

He started to go to church ... he rededicated his life to Christ and stopped drinking for the last six months he was alive. That was somewhat frustrating for me. It seemed to me like he was [a] fake ... it seemed to me like [he was] only doing this because [he had] cancer (S1).

Years later the student was able to look at this situation with more mercy and kindness in spite of the pain he had experienced.

Some held on to their stories closely. One student commented: “I usually do not talk about some of my stuff ... my story of the abortion” (S5). Some kept their hard stories to themselves. In some cases, extended families and neighbors had little idea of the experiences the

students were experiencing: “All of our family lives in California, so we were alone up here” (S4). Alienation, aloneness, and anger resulted from episodes when they could not find support. They would use words such as embarrassing (S4), lonely (S5, S6), frustrating (S1, S2, S3, S4, S7), awkward (S4, S6), and afraid (S1, S4) to describe their experiences.

I will provide more details below, but in retelling their stories, the students often chose to show grace and mercy to others. The participants tried to not to wallow in their pain, and unless asked, they did not want to dwell on those who hurt them or their difficulties. As one participant said, “[I choose] not to dwell on our issues or our difficult past or things that hurt us or people that have hurt us ... God has something so much greater for us in the future” (S7). They deeply felt that there was more to their future. These assertions revealed recognition of the hurt they experienced, but also recognition of hope for the future.

Finding #2: Spirituality. As seen from their quotations listed below, all the students noted the role of faith during and after the incidents of trauma. They also gave their faith a prominent place in understanding their experiences. Additionally, their spirituality and faith often informed what they hoped to do in their future.

Finding meaning and purpose. Not all participants were followers of Jesus at the onset of their experience; however, some students had been believers in Jesus since their early years. Two did not identify themselves as Christian (S4, S6) when they were younger, but noted that they were familiar with elements of Christianity through grandparents or other family members. All are currently believers and trying to be faithful; the complexity of their own lives makes their spiritual lives unique. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that their faith provided significant reasons to live in hopeful manner and not to exist in a state of victimhood. As one stated: “hope

is knowing that God has something so much greater for us in the future and I can only overcome that through Him” (S7). For some, a sense of hope stemmed from the way that their faith provided an avenue by which they were able to see that their experiences had a significance they had not originally been able to discern.

One participant observed the transformative impact the experience had on himself and he wanted to be able to extend that same blessing to others. He commented:

[What] I thought was going to be the end of the world turned out to be something amazing in so many ways. [It] has changed me for the better How God can use you ... and how you can share your story to inspire others and to give others hope ... is my goal. It's to inspire others and to give hope ... it's important for people to hear I want people to feel like they are being heard and they are not the only ones out in the world, that they are needed in the world and they are here for a purpose. (S1)

Another noted the manner by which God was able to sustain her, and she desired to provide that encouragement to others experiencing difficult challenges. She remarked:

Just to see redemption and that's always what I've wanted for [in] my life There's ... so much hope in that, and I think a lot of ... joy comes in that [also], when you are able to help people through their hard times, ... that is something I've always liked to do. (S2)

A third observed:

I would say hope is knowing that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Not giving up. I think a lot of times during my story and growing up I wanted to give up but there was always something that kept me going. I knew that there was something more

... God does those things for our good and his glory even when we can't see it Hope is knowing that God has something so much greater for us in the future. (S7)

The quotations above mark the significance for these students of identifying that there was more going on than was apparent to them in the midst of their circumstances. Whether it took the form of sustenance, redemption, or hope, each of the students quoted here identified the presence of God.

Sometimes their spiritual lives offered stability. As one commented: “my mom and God were the consistent things” (S3). In retrospect, one noted the immaturity of his faith, he acknowledged that his faith “wasn't even necessarily strong enough to even be angry at God” (S6). However, upon reflection, he noted that “God was working in that experience whether I realized it or not” (S6). One admitted that she did not understand how, but she believed God was present: “I think I always knew that I didn't always understand certain things about God, but I always knew that He was there” (S2). Another describing her experience noted that she was “relying on God instead of freaking out or doing it on [my] own” (S3). While experiencing distress and disruption, a “relationship” with Jesus became a stabilizing force in some of their lives. Jesus was the “only person that I felt had peace through all the craziness” (S7). Their faith provided significant stability during their experiences and after, and enabled them to endure during times of distress and uproar.

Some of the factors in their experiences related to their identities. One stated: “the only thought I ever had about the direction I wanted to go was taken away from me” (S6). His experiences shook both his present and future: “[this experience] took my feet out from under me, in what I was so confident in doing” (S6). Sometimes a participant lost a specific skill: “my

identity had been built around baseball” and “art in high school” (S6). Each of their experiences shook them. However, they slowly began to understand their experience and it became part of their identity.

As mentioned above, support often came from individuals who already had a presence in the lives of the students. The support involved challenging and broadening the students’ understanding of their experiences. These individuals would help the students begin to discern the greater meaning behind the events. While it might not have been easy to grasp an exact meaning, every student articulated that there seemed to be more that was going on than just the outward appearance of events. Some participants articulated belief in the redemption of their experiences by discerning a possible undefined purpose for these experiences. The supporting individuals were often catalysts for this reflection: “Is God using this as a time of transformation for you?” (S6); “There is something greater than you in this?” (S4). The students rose to high expectations. These expectations were as varied as dreaming about college, trying student leadership, mentoring of children or peers, and even receiving additional rigorous classroom assignments. These actions became means by which teachers, mentors, and friends raised expectations for the students. In doing so they enabled the students to achieve goals and glimpse hope for achieving things they had not dreamed were possible: “I got engaged this summer” (S2); “I’m debating whether to go to grad school right way” (S3); “I could actually have healthy relationships and if I do have a family, have a healthy family” (S4). Because of these achievements, they anticipated the possibilities of opportunities they had been unable to discern in the midst of their trauma.

Purpose and meaning. As the students sought to understand their experiences, their counselors, mentors, pastors, and others became a critical presence in their lives. Youth leaders

would suggest, “God is going to use you one day.... It will get better from here” (S1). School counselors would encourage others by helping individual students get a glimpse of what their future might hold. After trying to make sense of this initial experience, over time one participant began reflecting on her circumstances: “Christ is the reason why my Dad and I were able to have our bonding experience” (S7). “He [Jesus] is the reason why I was able to forgive my Dad, because who am I to say I am better than my father, because I am not” (S7). Some participants noted the reconciliation that was occurring because of the trauma or tragedy. There was actually little questioning about why God let this happen to them. Their reflections touched on the positive impact of the experiences on their faith: “my faith keeps being sharpened and strengthened through all of these experiences” (S5). The reasons for God’s action or inaction were never in doubt. The participants would often come back to the affirmation that “he [Jesus] just brought so much peace in my family” (S7). Their faith became an increasingly significant part of how they viewed their experiences and the aftermath. As others who have studied young adults have noted, such understandings touched and shaped my participants’ lives and the lives of those around them. Dalton (2006) discussed the power of deriving meaning from experiences. He noted that the ability to draw meaning or purpose from each participant’s experiences was a significant piece of his or her narrative. Dalton (2006), Parks (2000), and Wuthnow (2007) all noted the importance of faith and spirituality in the process of developing meaning from experiences.

The ability to draw metaphors or illustrations was universal among my participants. Each of the students learned or matured through their traumatic experiences. One participant had a particularly poignant lesson drawn for her by her grandmother:

He [brother] had ... ten different tubes going into him My dad was leaning over the

bed, and all my brothers were crying My grandmother was ... “that’s the best example of what God is to us.” My brother ... didn’t know my dad was there, I think he sensed his presence My dad would lean over him and [say], “It’s ok, I’m here, you’re doing ok, we’re going to get you through this.” That’s what God is to us, we don’t know that he’s there ... but he wants the best for us and he’s right there. (S2)

The lessons each student learned were ongoing, and the impact of those lessons increased over time. At the time of the interviews, some were still processing these lessons. However, others were a little farther along on the journey to understanding their pain. As one observed: “It’s really cool to look back and see something that I thought was the end of the world turned out to be something amazing in so many different ways and how it’s changed me for the better” (S1). There was also a regular sense of gratitude: “Even though there is a lot of hard stuff, there is so much blessing in all of the things I’ve been going through ...” (S2). While they were not happy that hard things had happened in their lives, my participants were thankful because they began to glimpse the positive things that arose from their terrible experiences.

As one reflected on her future, she suggested, “faith defines a lot of my dreams and goals” (S2). Others similarly acknowledged this observation, but had wishes that were more general for the future than concrete goals. One participant noted the presence of God through his experience, commenting how curious he was about the idea that “God can use you in so many different ways and how you can share your story to inspire others” (S1). Sympathy and compassion for others was a strong focus: “I want people to feel like they are being heard and they are not the only ones out there in the world” (S1). They were particularly concerned with peers who were downtrodden and discouraged. One participant stressed that he wanted to communicate to those who are in despair that they “are needed in this world and they are here for

a purpose” (S1). While articulated with differing words, this became a regular theme for the students.

Finding #3: Character traits. Each student displayed an awareness and growing concern for others who had or were enduring hard things. They did not believe that their experience was particularly unique, and therefore were able to empathize and support others who experienced similar pain. They believed that they were able to provide support and kindness to those who experienced pain in general, regardless of its origin. Their experience of hard things had shaped and transformed their character.

Concern for others: Empathy. As suggested above, in the midst of their stories, there was often a subtle theme of focusing on others. Shore (1997) and Dalton (2006) noted the ability of students to draw meaning from their experience allowed students to develop empathy for others. In the midst of a particularly painful story, one participant sat back, sighed, and stated,

[I try] to not take other people’s lives for granted. Getting to know people’s stories and being super intentional, instead of always worrying about this, this and this for the future, or this thing in the past makes me bitter. So I ask, “How is it making me a better person today? (S7)

Another noted, “When I feel like I do not have much to give, that’s the time when I realize how much serving makes me happy, and it brings me joy” (S2). These students went beyond sympathy to articulate a deep sense of empathy for those encountering pain; they expressed a concern for those hurting regardless of reason.

One illustrated his experience of deep theological and spiritual questions arising out of a sense of loneliness and isolation: “Why would the God I love to serve put all of this crap in my

life” (S1). His own experience of isolation provided an understanding of the loneliness experienced by others: “I felt like when I was going through that situation that nobody else was going through it” (S1). With emotion, he asserted: “I need to share because I want people to feel like they are being heard and that they are not the only ones out there” (S1). The participants’ experiences provided them with a sense of the importance of understanding other victims. They tended to be aware of the consternation and confusion others experienced: “A lot of them have questions they don’t know how to ask” (S1); “Most people ... have questions, but they don’t know how to ask them” (S3). One desired to be an advocate for those who could or would not speak up: “Being a voice for the voiceless” (S5). Simply put, their experiences helped them consider others with kindness and mercy: “I always had a passion just to love all different kinds of people” (S2); “I still want to help people” (S5); “It made me more considerate to others” (S3). One simply stated “kids need to hear hope in their lives” (S1). Another one, reflecting on her experiences remarked,

I study systems in society and I know how broken society is. I think if grace is ... a real thing, it is worth the suffering part. I know some people suffer and they die ... that is why I hope for grace. (S4)

For her, suffering made sense only if there was eventual grace and hope. This was another central theme for the participants. They anticipated being agents of grace and hope for those who have also suffered pain, loneliness, and despair. As one participant stated: “I realize how much serving makes me happy ... it brings me joy” (S2). However, as another observed: “The way I can love people better now, is knowing that it’s not all coming from me” (S4). She had a sense that her ability to extend kindness as part of her faith and relationship with God.

Concern for others: Turning empathy into action. One of the results of gaining some understanding of their experience was the growth of concern for others or empathy. Along with that characteristic was a desire for action. While none asked the question, each had a plan or intuitive notion for how they might display that empathy in their lives.

One student remarked that he wanted to bring “encouragement for those who are in need of a brighter future” (S1). Another noted her desire for “helping people with their self-esteem” (S3). One observed that he still had not decided on a vocation, but that his purpose was to aid others. He said: “I think it will have ... something [to do] with helping people Helping people in need, or helping those who can’t help themselves Being a voice for the voiceless” (S5). One reported that her approach to others had shifted. She noted that she tried

not to take other people’s lives for granted. Getting to know people’s stories and being super intentional, instead of always worrying about ... the future or ... the past. If I am intentional and loving, and them [and ask] let’s do life together; I think that affects their future and my future. [To] not live in such a negative environment, but make ... every single day something positive. (S7)

Her observation was that her responses to others had a significant ripple impact upon a person’s future. For instance, if she responded to someone unkindly, that response could have long-term negative consequences for the individual.

Another participant described a dream that she had for the future. She anticipated what it might be like when she and her fiancé set up their home:

[I want] to try to be there for other people. I would love to have a home that the whole community knows is open to the public; ... everything in my house, my couches will

have beds (pull-out beds), and I want people to know that if they need food or homework help, that ours is an open and safe home to come to. (S2)

The participants' growing sense of empathy shaped their lives and relationships. It informed their future dreams and their current interactions with family, friends, and even strangers. The empathy appeared to have many implications for how they lived their lives.

Definitions of hope. Some of the participants were able to frame a definition or description of hope quite articulately. For others, hopeful actions, dreams, and intentions defined hope. "Hope comes in knowing that there is hope for tomorrow regardless of your circumstances or what you have been through" (S2). Sometimes it was very simple: "It means not giving up" (S7). Some linked their understanding of hope to their faith: "To know the Lord for me means I have a future" (S4). They drew meaning from hope, as one stated: "God does those things for our good and His glory even when we can't see it" (S7). As another observed: "I would define hope as ... encouragement for those who are in need of a brighter future" (S1). It was future-focused: "I would say hope is knowing that there is always light at the end of the tunnel" (S7). One noted the perseverance that hope provided. She observed that: "A lot of the times during my story and growing up I wanted to give up, but there was always something that kept me going. Because I knew that there was something more" (S7). As time progressed, the participants were able to articulate increasingly thoughtful definitions of hope. Opportunities to reflect on their experiences appeared to help in articulating their understanding of hope.

Their dreams reflected an internalized hope, whether or not it was articulated. The dreams were as varied as continuing their education, getting married, or having a healthy family. One student smiled at the thought of one day her patients calling her "Doctor" (S7). Another had a vision of her future home as a central place for homeless children. Yet another had sense of

using his linguistic skills in a manner where he could be “a voice for the voiceless” (S5).

Possibilities for the future became part of their personal definitions of hope.

Part of their understanding of hope was that it encouraged perseverance through hard things. Hope gave them the sense that there was something better or substantive beyond their immediate experiences. The students closely aligned their beliefs and sense of personal significance and purpose; as one student stated, “I have a place to exist in the world” (S4). Bringing hope, inspiration, healing, and mercy to others in the future was a common desire for all the students.

Reconciliation & redemption. Reconciliation of broken relationships was another defining piece of hope. The participants each saw reconciliation unfolding or being possible in the future. There was sadness tied to some circumstances where reconciliation was not possible due to the death of others. However, reconciliation emerged as a theme. One participant demonstrated this through her story of how a father’s illness provided opportunities that were unexpected.

We had a lot of talks and he said I don’t want you to stop your dreams or your life because of me. He said I want to make sure you are doing what you love. That’s kind of where we got a lot more deep. (S7)

Reconciliation with her estranged father was deepening. Another, looking to the near future, saw that rekindling family relationship might be possible. “I am going to move home. I think my relationships aren’t as strong as they need to be” (S6). As he thought about his post-graduation life, he affirmed that reconciling and strengthening these relationships was very important to him; they were part of his hopes and dreams.

It's one of the only chances I will have My family always has a good time together, but we have no depth I would like to go and change the way my family approaches each other ...spark something. (S6)

Others also noted the desire for reconciliation with family members. In observing positive things that arose from her trauma, another observed, "Redemption [is] working out my relationship with my dad because that's affected my other relationships" (S3). She intertwined reconciliation and redemption in her understanding of hope. In a very candid manner, one student explained her response to her father's illness and abuse:

Jesus Christ has forgiven me for my sins – who am I to say I couldn't forgive my dad? So it took me 17 years to get to that point I have seen through the harshness of addiction. I [also] saw so much light. If it wasn't for my Dad's addiction I don't think our relationship would be where it is now. (S7)

Her experience and reconciliation became a means for providing others in similar circumstances with a glimpse of hope.

It was common for reconciliation of relationships to be part of the redemption of a tragedy or trauma. One noted, "I am really curious to see where these things come together" (S6). He was intrigued about the implications of reconciliation for his life. Another noted, "I really like the reconciliation aspect of stuff" (S4). One participant had taken hold of reconciliation as a desirable part of processing her experience: "I believe if there's reconciliation at the end, then that's what kind of makes me okay with the state of the world" (S4). Her sense was that in spite of the terrible things she had experienced, if there was a way to bring good out of those experiences, then she could accept her own trauma.

For my participants, redemption was a significant aspect of defining hope. In some ways it proved a freeing element for the students. One remarked, “Redemption for me is making choices now that I can be an adult” (S4). Referring to her goals, redemption became synonymous with her hopes. Another one stated, “To see redemption, that’s always what I’ve wanted for my life, from a really young age, that’s my goal” (S2). Another noted “I’m so upset about all the terrible things that are happening now to everyone and in the past, and the future ... all of that. It’s like I don’t think it is worth it if there isn’t redemption in it” (S4). Her conviction that there was an ultimate reconciliation and redemption of relationships had become a central part of her faith.

Summary

Relationships, faith, community, and personal fortitude all seem to be elements in understanding how some college students move from trauma to hope. Agents of hope seem to have been as diverse as librarians, school counselors, youth pastors, family friends, and parents. Each student was, or currently is, in a supportive community of peers. Each is currently growing and strengthening that hope. Each has a growing sense that there was a reason for the experience. Along with this increasing discernment and understanding of their experience is a growth in their empathy, or concern for others. This factor informs their current lives and shapes their future dreams and vocations. Interestingly this empathy seems often to come with an action plan. Empathy has implications for how my participants live their lives. How they demonstrate empathy differs markedly depending on their circumstances. All believe in the redemptive possibilities of their experience. It is particularly important to the participants that their experience has the possibility of reconciliation and redemption. The idea that something positive could come from the trauma or tragedy is powerful in the understanding of the participant.

Faith is important for a number of reasons: (a) it provides a “reason” for the circumstance; (b) it provides some solidity and stability in a time of chaos; and (c) it provides the possibility for a different response to the natural despair that the participants initially experienced. An agent of hope refers to men and women who brought support and mercy by their very presence. Sometimes they brought more than was obvious; sometimes they seemed to have hope for the participant even when the participant themselves was unable to find hope. These agents were able to impart a vision of what that hope might be even if it was not very clear to the students. Someone else’s hope for an individual seemed to be a factor. This seems to be particularly true when the students had no hope for themselves. Someone else’s hope seems to be one of the factors that help move students from despair or tragedy to hope. Interestingly, even if the participants only discerned this element intuitively, they stated in their own words a desire to do this very thing for others.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Concluding Thoughts

Introduction

In my work with college students, I noticed that some of those who have experienced profound tragedy did not consider themselves to be victims. This prompted me to ask why they did not adopt this identity when they could easily have done so, and why hope and not despair seemed to characterize their lives.

Summary and Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to examine how a sample of evangelical students currently attending the same faith-based university understand community and hope in the aftermath of tragedy and trauma. To answer my research question, I conducted interviews of a phenomenological nature that explored each participant's experience of tragedy, movement from despair to hope, and experience and understanding of hope. The seven subjects I interviewed were all American citizens and of approximately the same age, but differed with respect to sex, state of origin, race, ethnicity, economic status, and life experiences. My findings provide an enriched understanding as to how to respond to young adults who have suffered trauma. They also can inform, and are in fact informing, the ways in which the leaders of colleges and universities can create a culture of hope among their students.

Discussion

Four questions guided my research, the most important being, "What are the principal factors that enable college students who suffer tragedy to move through despair to hope?" I also asked, "What additional factors play a role in this transformative process?" The latter question differs from the first in that it allows for unexpected factors. Before beginning my research, I anticipated that relationships, community, and faith were playing a significant role in the

subjects' lives. My findings confirmed these assumptions. However, I did not expect that two of the factors, empathy and meaning-making, would be as important as they were.

Support. My first finding is that students need to experience support to move beyond the experience of tragedy or trauma, and that agents of hope provide this support. In the case of the subjects of this study, these agents were men and women who worked as librarians, school counselors, teachers, and youth pastors, or who were simply family friends. They had invested in the participants' lives before the trauma, so it was natural for them to continue to do so afterwards. They assisted them in discerning the meaning that underlay their particular experiences of trauma, even if that meaning had to be deemed a mystery. The agents of hope also helped the subjects to recognize and interpret the faith-related dynamics of their particular situations and helped them wrestle with their existential questions. In so doing they helped the subjects move from the devastation of the tragedy to hope.

Both during and immediately after the trauma, supportive individual and communal relationships played an important role in the life of each participant. Indeed, pain and despair only became magnified if a particular participant was alone, a finding that the work of McPherson and Brashears (2006) corroborates. Sittser (1995) also found that supportive relationships often provide the initial impetus that enables the victims' of a devastating experience to discover meaning.

For the subjects of the present study, this support often took the form of encouragement, or of observations that either challenged the sufferers' interpretations of their experiences or simply enabled them to see that there might be more to them than met the eye. With the assistance of a community, and of personal relationships that both sustained and challenged them, the subjects began to perceive that their experiences had not happened in a vacuum (Parks,

2000; Dalton, 2006). This individual and communal support would also often express itself in physical or material ways. The agents of hope also went as far as to impart a vision of hope even when the participants themselves had little or no hope. The sense that others might have hope for their lives played a crucial role in moving the subjects away from despair.

Spirituality and Faith. One of the research questions I used during my interviews of the subjects was the “ways ... spirituality played a role in transforming college students’ experiences of tragedy into hope.” All seven participants, as followers of Jesus, were trying to work out the implications of their faith for their lives. Hence they were able to find support both from Jesus himself and through their fellow believers. Their faith kept them grounded amid the chaos of their tragic experiences and served as the lens through which they were able to begin to discern the redemptive implications of these experiences and to embrace hope. I also discovered that self-awareness and reflection contributed significantly to the subjects’ ability to make some sense of their shattered lives. They began to see that their experiences had enabled them to identify with others, deepened their relationship with God, and prepared them in some way for the future.

Character. The meaning that supportive communities facilitated and that faith promoted did not consist merely in an answer to the question, “Why did this happen?” The subjects may indeed have dealt with this question as part of the processing of their traumas. However, their growing sense that their suffering had a purpose had more to do with developing empathy for others who had experienced difficult things and with glimpsing the possibility that they themselves could make positive use of what they had undergone. This growing empathy helped the subjects move away from an internal focus and allowed them to invest themselves in others,

to see the hope that was hidden in the pain of others, and to gain thereby a more robust understanding of their own experiences and a deepening of hope.

Hope. The final research question I asked was, “How does each participant define hope?” Not all the participants were able to arrive at a clear definition of hope. Some spoke of hope as an anticipation that their pain would be over (S1) or as a “light at the end of the tunnel” (S7). Others described it as a sense of encouragement, an anticipation of the future (S2, S4). Hope was also implicit in the subjects’ conversation about what the future might hold with respect to education, family, home life, and vocation.

These understandings of hope, which were mediated through both faith and pain, were intimately tied to a sense of vocation that had to do with helping others persevere through pain and hard times. “Encouraging others” (S1), “providing hope” (S2), giving “voice to the voiceless” (S5) were phrases that the subjects used to describe their desire to help others see that “there was something more” (S7) than their own experience. This empathy had a strong theological grounding in that the subjects believed that all relationships and circumstances would eventually experience redemption and reconciliation.

Theological implications. According to the literature, the present generation of college students is “overwhelmed” (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004) and “lost” (Smith et al., 2011). The decisions of others have wounded many students emotionally or physically (Smith et al., 2011). However, today’s college students have also experienced pain from illness or through circumstances beyond anyone’s control, and they are just as prone as any other social group to make poor decisions (Smith et al., 2011). Unfortunately, this understanding of reality can lead to the belief that things cannot change and, ultimately, to despair. As a result, some students either

immerse themselves in hedonism or commit suicide (Smith et al., 2011). Followers of Jesus trying to convey hope to such students can rely on the good news that there is no need to despair, that circumstances do not have to remain the same, and that change is possible.

Programmatic recommendations. Based on both my professional experience and this research I make three recommendations for those working in student development within higher education. The first recommendation is to get to know your students early in their time with you. I have observed that students are able to remain anonymous on a college campus. In order to respond to this possibility, student leaders and professional staff need to show intentionality and diligence in developing connections and relationships with undergraduate college students. Some students will initiate and create their own supportive community. However, many others will not. If a relationship has been developed during a non-crisis or normal time, it is easier and often more natural for supportive relationships to develop and flourish when students go through critical times. Such relationships are preparatory and foundational steps in anticipation of the time when staff will step in to assist students in developing meaning and significance from their traumatic experiences.

My second recommendation has implications for resources and finances. After fifteen years of working with residential students, I have interacted with colleagues from many institutions. Some institutions have professional staff members who oversee a residence hall of upwards of 500 undergraduates with a student-leader staff of a dozen or more. Other institutions have professional staff overseeing residential areas of less than 75 undergraduate students with three student leaders. In my experience, ratios of professional staff to students and student leaders to students are very significant. If the goal is to minimize student anonymity, there must be space and personnel to develop relationships and community. I believe the optimal ratios for

providing space and time for developing relationships are one student leader to a maximum of 24 students and one professional person to 230-250 students. This responds to the need for creating supportive communities for students during crisis, whether academic or personal. It also provides a reasonable balance between personnel requirements and budgetary constraints.

My third recommendation is for student services staff not to fear pushing students spiritually and intellectually. If a supportive community surrounds them and they know an individual is committed to their success by standing in their corner, most will respond positively to the challenge. They may not be happy at the time, and may initially dismiss the challenge. However, my personal observations and the professional literature (Smith et al., 2011) confirm that students often come back to these challenges. That is, over time, they understand and respond positively to high expectations when accompanied with high concern. In fact, doing so is a way for the student to express appreciation to the student life professional for his or her commitment to the young man or woman. This demonstrates that professional educators can have a significant role in the personal lives of college students, particularly so when they experience traumatic circumstances.

Future Research

My findings provide insight into a specific social group, and although this insight is narrowly focused, due to the qualitative nature of the study itself, it can nevertheless inform future research on college students, community, hope, and meaning-making. For example, the question of worldview needs further exploration: How should one frame questions for students who have a deterministic or even fatalistic understanding of life? To what extent do culture and community mores determine the inherent hopefulness of American evangelical theology?

None of the students I interviewed had sought help. Some were already undergoing therapeutic counseling, but they did not regard this as an important factor in their coming to terms with their suffering. This perception needs to be studied in greater depth. Other participants seemed to understand the therapeutic significance of their relationships with others. All of those who came to the aid of the seven participants during their crises seemed to have had an established relationship with them. They seemed to insert themselves more intentionally into the subjects' lives after the subjects' traumatic experiences. These two phenomena also need further exploration.

Over the past few years, educators have engaged in an intense discussion of the phenomena of resilience (Huang & Lin, 2013), persistence (Wintre & Bowers, 2007), and grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). The participants in the discussion are seeking to understand what keeps students on task until they graduate. Future studies could attempt to determine whether points of contact exist between this research and my investigations into the factors that sustain hope.

I regard it as significant that, in a culture of diminishing empathy (Konrath, O'Brien & Hsing, 2011; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011), the subjects evidenced solid concern for others in the midst of their own pain. Empathy plays a crucial role in the development of leadership and community. All of which leads me to ask whether empathy comes from a linear sequence consisting of a traumatic event, followed by an experience of support, followed by a movement toward understanding through meaning-making, followed by an increasing sensitivity to others; or whether the development of empathy happens within a mish-mash of parallel factors. I intuitively incline toward the progressive explanation, i.e., that empathy develops gradually over

the course of a lifetime; I would like to see this hypothesis either supported or refuted by further research.

Conclusion

While I was conducting this research, I came across some thought-provoking insights. The first involves a passage from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in which Bilbo Baggins finds himself in mortal peril and remarks, "What a mess we are in now! We! I only wish it was *we*: it is horrible being all alone" (Tolkien, 1996, p. 170). Bilbo articulates the unbearable loneliness one can experience in tragic and difficult experiences such as the ones the participants in my study had to endure. Educational theorists have repeatedly emphasized the importance of community (Parks, 2000; Smith & Snell, 2009; Dalton, 2006). The relationships and community support that surrounded my participants while in the midst of their hard experiences made their trauma endurable and enabled them to find hope. Isolation contributes to despair, whereas a community can extend grace to each of its members, as Wadell and Davis (2007) point out in their discussion of despair and hope. Paraphrasing Aquinas, they declare, "We are 'much more inclined to be hopeful ... when we have friends to rely on.' Aquinas knew hope is not a solitary virtue, because we always hope together; hope is not something we can achieve ourselves" (p. 147). Bilbo's sense of his need for others is a longing he shares with all who are in pain.

In the course of the interviews, the seven students were able to discern that their experiences involved more than was immediately apparent; latent in the midst of their pain and grief existed the possibility of redemption, grace, and reconciliation. Good things might lie ahead; meaning might reveal itself in the midst of tragedy, or even through it. In his book *The Sunflower* (1997) Simon Wiesenthal recalls an experience in which a Jewish woman reflecting on the holocaust asserts that God must have been "on leave" (p. 8). That God might be on

vacation was the only explanation for the horrors she had witnessed and experienced. The victims of the Holocaust could not make sense of their experiences. When students experience suffering in a vacuum, or if their lives do not make sense, despair comes quickly. However, if they manage, from a distance, to perceive redemption, restoration, or other positive outcomes, then the meaning that accompanies this perception diminishes the potency of the despair (Dalton 2006; Sittser, 1995).

Hope also requires the possibility of action. As I write, the nation is recalling the fiftieth anniversary of the War on Poverty and, in particular, Lyndon Johnson's declaration that "many Americans live on the outskirts of hope – some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity" (Johnson, 1969). Johnson perceived that opportunity empowers victims and thereby provides hope. Victims may have difficulty in discerning the way forward, but a supportive community around them can assist them in determining the next step.

Summary

Ultimately, the results of my research provide new ways of looking at familiar dynamics. The strength of empathy that the participants demonstrated for others surprised me. The professional literature suggests that empathy is rare among many current college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009). The concern for others and the ability to resonate with their experiences demonstrated the maturity of the participants in the study. This was an encouraging finding. Further, the recurring desire of participants to see some aspect of reconciliation or redemption come out of their experiences was also unexpected. The importance of this desire for them caught me off-guard for in my professional experience I have not often seen this strong a desire among college students.

This study provides a reaffirmation of the importance of relationships, community, and faith in the lives of young adults. Tragedy, trauma, and poor decision-making do not have to lead to wasted lives. There is grace and hope for change. Present circumstances do not have to endure. It is simply not true that “this is as good as it gets.”

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter for Consent for Participation

Dear _____ (Name of student):

My name is David M. Johnstone. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at George Fox University (GFU) in Newberg, Oregon. At present, I am conducting research for my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Ken Badley, Professor of Educational Foundations, and Leadership at GFU. I am researching how certain undergraduate students have moved from a significant or momentous negative experience to a place of hope. You are invited to engage in an hour-long personal interview. The questions will be rather general and relate to your background, culture, and experiences.

The findings promise to reveal a glimpse into how individuals who have experienced trauma or tragedy in their lives have found a way to live with hope.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no negative consequences. While the risks are minimal, some of the questions may explore some of your experiences. If these cause any distress, you may choose to decline to continue at anytime or decline to answer any question at your own discretion. If you choose to continue when any questions may cause distress, the resources of the GFU Health and Counseling Centre are available to you. They are staffed by trained and experienced staff who provide tremendous insight and assistance.

The results from this study will be used in my dissertation and future presentations. The interviews will be recorded by digital recorder and then transcribed without identifying the participants. The material will be analyzed in a manner where no one will be personally identified other than to myself. My role as a judicial officer for the university will be suspended during these interviews. I will keep confidential the information you provide, even if it pertains to lifestyle policy violations. I will keep the letters of consent, transcripts, and recordings for three years in separate locked locations in my campus office. I will be the only one with access to these items and will personally destroy relevant materials and delete the recordings three years after completing my dissertation.

If you choose to participate in this research, please be aware that you are contributing to a greater understanding of Christian higher education, your own generation and of the current traditional undergraduate. If you have any questions about this research feel free to call me at 503.554.2315 or email me at djohnsto@georgefox.edu. If you have any additional questions please feel free to contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Ken Badley at kbadley@georgefox.edu.

Thank you for your consideration of this invitation:

Sincerely,

David M. Johnstone
djohnsto@georgefox.edu

I agree to volunteer to participate in this study. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time, and that I may refuse to answer any specific questions.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Date