HELP I NEED SOMEBODY (NOT JUST ANYBODY)
THE FOLKTALE'S HELPER IN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES OF RECOVERING ALCOHOLICS

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Help! I Need Somebody (Not Just Anybody)

The Folktale's Helper in Personal Experience Narratives of Recovering Alcoholics

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Abstract

This thesis explores the personal experience narratives of nine recovering alcoholics through the lens of folktale scholarship. Using Propp's structuralist model developed for folktales, I analyze several narratives and examine the role of the helper in both the *Märchen* and the turning-point personal experience narrative. I explore the role Alcoholics Anonymous plays in the recovery of its members and the use of the personal experience narrative as therapy and a catalyst for healing.

Acknowledgements

This is not a work about the hero. It is a work about the helper.

While I am the hero of my own narrative, I could not have made it this far without my helpers – my supervisor Diane Tye, without whom I would have been totally lost; Professors Diane Goldstein, Jillian Gould, Philip Hiscock, Martin Lovelace, Gerald Pocius, Paul Smith, and Cory Thorne for all their teachings and words of advice; Sharon Cochrane and Cindy Turpin for being my moms away from home; fellow students Heather Read, Sebastien Despres, Lynn Matte and Joy Fraser for their assistance in myriad ways; Becca von Behren for stopping me from leaving Newfoundland; my father Ed Baker for always believing in me and being the catalyst for this undertaking; my mother Ellen Hagman for questioning me and forcing me to figure out exactly why I was doing what I was doing; my step-mother Ellen Baker for her teacherly assistance; my step-father Mike Armstrong for his always hardline advice; Nora Trask for being unbelievably awesomely wonderful in every way; Seth Dewees for pointing me towards an important connection; and everybody who listened to me whinge for over a year.

Thank you.

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Introduction and Overview

I am full of pulled pork.

After a large meal at a restaurant called the Alchemist in the summer of 2006, my father and I wandered the streets of Waterbury, Vermont. Often, after our father-son dinners, we would go for long walks in the setting sun, and the talk would turn to our pasts. It was on that particular late summer evening that he asked if he had ever told me the story of the night that he stopped drinking for good. I remember listening to him and feeling the gears in my head turning, and the flash of recognition as he got to the part in the story where Late Larry made his appearance. I recall the feeling as my heart quickened and I thought to myself, Oh my God, this is just like a folktale! As in my father's life, Late Larry's interjection would change the course of my life too...

The seeds of the thesis you are about to read started to grow on that evening, but they had been planted nearly a year before that. The current work truly started as a synthesis between all three of my first year courses in the Folklore department of the Memorial University of Newfoundland. In Philip Hiscock's Folklore Genres class, we were asked to choose a classic folklore work to study and present to the class. I chose Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale.* This was my introduction to structuralism, which Philip informed me I would either love or hate. I suppose since I am still using structuralism, I must feel some affection towards it. In Diane Tye's Folklore Methods class we were instructed to conduct an interview and transcribe it. I interviewed my father, asking him to tell me a story he had told before, about the time he was almost

killed while attempting to steal a taxicab meter to buy drugs and his subsequent road to recovery from addiction. In Martin Lovelace's Folklore Theories class, our final assignment was to analyze a folklore text using four different theoretical approaches. I wrote that paper on my fathers narrative, beginning with a structuralist interpretation. I presented a shortened version of that paper at Folklore Studies Association of Canada's annual meeting in 2006, and it forms the basis of the first section of Chapter Four.

My first idea for a thesis, however, was ultimately too broad. I wanted to study life-changing narratives. I soon realized that idea was very ambitious for a Masters thesis. I balked at making it more specific however, because I wanted the focus to be on the type of narrative, not the topics. I wanted to explore many different kinds of narratives about life-changing events and draw some conclusions about the nature of narrative from that. Later, I realized I could focus on a particular subject and still examine the structure of life-changing narratives, but at the time I decided to explore a different topic.

Feeling unsure about narratives about the broad category of life-changing events, I hastily changed my focus to narratives about 9/11 by Americans who were outside the United States on 9/11. This was my thesis topic for a number of months. I am still interested in it and may do more on it eventually, but in the end I felt it was too specific, and I became concerned with the same response I received every time someone asked me "What's your thesis about?" When I replied, "Oh, it's about 9/11," the questioner would invariably get quiet, maybe a little embarrassed, and stop enquiring about it. I wanted to write on a topic that I could freely and openly discuss with those who asked, so I picked alcoholism, a topic everyone is happy to talk about. …

Oh.

I've realized since then that my earlier ideas shared a similar theme: that of support groups. I was and am interested in the way that Americans banded together in the days after 9/11, and how Americans outside of the country dealt with not having the same sudden massive support group. As my research on turning-point narratives progressed, I discovered that tellers placed importance on those who help the narrator (the hero of the story). So more specifically than support groups, I became interested in the helper, the person or character in a story without whom the hero would not succeed. And I came to identify this tale-role in newer forms of narrative as well as the old.

Shaping one's life into a story appears to be a natural thing, but for many years the study of narrative within folklore was restricted to myth, legend, and folktale - all frequently familiarly structured stories meant to give people a bit of excitement, to teach, to warn, and to entertain. Sharing one's own life experience can serve the same purposes, but the process can often reach deeper and be more meaningful than with another kind of folk narrative, because the story being related actually happened to the teller. In addition to having a long history, speaking about oneself is particularly widespread in today's society. As Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson remark in *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*:

> There are state-sponsored bureaucracies designed to manage people and facilitate their movement through state institutions. There are numerous nonstate organizations, such as churches and self-help groups, hospitals and talk shows, that provide localized sites through which certain kinds of subjects are recognized and misrecognized. There are the intimate spaces of the family and of sexual exchange. On a daily basis individuals move into, through, and out of these disparate social spaces, and participate in

> specific, yet different, narrative practices through which we become subjects in and of our stories. (1996, 10)

Perhaps more than ever before we are expected to shape our lives into coherent narratives and to share them. Folklore as a discipline is well prepared to provide much needed analysis of this growing field, though personal experience narrative has only been considered a sub-genre of narrative for a brief time in comparison to the major genres. I think that the separation of "traditional narratives" like folktale from "modern narratives" like personal experience narratives is a false one, however, and as I show in this thesis they may have more in common than was originally believed.

An occasion during my third year of college sticks out in my mind. I was hanging out with my friend Chris, who was a year ahead of me in school and graduating in a few months. He was, understandably, concerned about his future. Like many students graduating from college, he had no idea what was next. This particular evening we were on a walk (why do these stories always take place during walks?), and we climbed a couple of blocks of granite, part of an art installation in a nearby park. As we sat perched atop these sculptures, Chris let loose with his concerns and fears. He believed that "this was it," that college was life and his life was over; he had failed to achieve his dreams and goals within the last four years, and now was doomed to an existence of failure; he had reached the end of the book of his life, and it was a short, sad story; and other depressing things along those lines. To alleviate his fears, I said to him "Chris, just think about it this way: And then Chris graduated from college. Chapter One..."

It was a turning point for him, that afternoon. He calls it a "moment of perspective." I did not know then why my comment was such an effective reassurance,

but in the process of researching this thesis I have gathered some idea. People organize their memories into narratives; it helps them make sense. Organizing your present into a narrative will sometimes help you make sense of it as well. I am beginning to realize the potential for such stories to heal the self in the telling and also to heal others in the listening. With words, simple words, we each have the power to not only take control of ourselves, but to help guide the lives of others.

I have always been interested in storytelling. I think the stories we tell are important, and tell us something about ourselves. I have been involved in theatre since I was a kid. The earliest role I can remember is playing Crusty the Crab in the basement of the local library. I put on yearly shows with the help of my brother for family and family friends. I created movies with a series of progressively more sophisticated video cameras with my two high school buddies. I acted in at least one stage production every semester in high school, as well as during the summer at local community theatre. I majored in theatre at college, and performed in a show nearly every semester there as well. I moved to Boston after that and got a job as a tour guide for Ghosts & Gravestones, adopting the persona of the ghost of an eighteenth-century English gravedigger called Headless Jed. And several months after moving to St. John's, Newfoundland, I auditioned for and was cast as Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat in a local production of Cats.

It would be an understatement to say I am interested in *performance.* I have been telling stories my whole life, so it only makes sense that I continued to study them in my pursuit of a Masters degree. This is why I am pursuing a graduate degree, why I am studying folklore and why even though at times I find academia difficult I still continue

on. I love narrative and performance, and folklore appears to be a way to get to the bottom of it all.

In going to graduate school, the question I wanted to answer was *Why?* But as I studied and thought, the question really became *What?* As in *What the fuck?* As in *What the fuck is the matter with everybody?* The world is a confusing and horrible place sometimes, and hard to understand. It seems to me that a good way to begin to figure out what is going on is to study what people are saying about it. Especially what people say about themselves. When people talk about themselves, they not only inform you of an event in their past but they also tell you how they feel about that event in the present day, and in doing so reveal their values to you. And that is the best way to get to know someone, in my opinion.

This thesis is ultimately about the importance of the helper. It focuses on the role of the helper in a particular set of personal experience narratives I collected from a wide range of recovering alcoholics in New England. Nine people who all had different but similar experiences in breaking away from their addiction to alcohol shared their stories with me, narratives of some of the most intimate moments in their lives. In combining my interest in a well-studied narrative genre – the folktale – with the less examined narrative genre – personal experience narrative – I hope to show that the two genres are not so different after all. And I hope to show the benefits of exploring one genre using the tools developed to explore another.

Chapter One begins with a discussion of the genres I have mentioned. I provide a background of the scholarship of the folktale with a particular focus on structuralism, and

an introduction to the genre of the personal experience narrative. I introduce other works that bring together the two seemingly disparate genres. I also discuss my methodology and elaborate further on the history of this thesis.

In Chapter Two I introduce the organization Alcoholics Anonymous and describe how it functions, and I introduce my subjects and their stories. I provide the background of each person and tell their stories through a combination of their words and my own. The moment when an alcoholic decides to stop abusing alcohol is a huge event in his or her life, and the practice of telling that story is already present in AA and other organizations. As folklorist Lee Winniford writes, "The construction of a personal narrative that works for the teller and is validated by listeners is the primary means through which an addict comes to terms with his/her addiction and grapples with the process of recovery" (2001, 63). The nine men and women I interviewed for this thesis illustrate that statement clearly.

In Chapter Three I explore the role of the helper in folktale and the symbiotic relationship the helper shares with the hero. Using a collection of folktales and academic writings I examine the two tale-roles and their interdependence. The first half of this chapter is a review of the tale-role of the helper in the folktale. Using sources from Propp to more recent authors, I investigate the notion that the helper is a necessary and integral part to the folktale, and explore the relationship that the hero and the helper share. In the second section, I explore a selection of folktales to strengthen the ideas I put forth.

In Chapter Four I investigate and analyze several of the stories told by my subjects in greater detail, using the structure of the folktale as a lens. Starting with an

explanation of the connection between Propp and personal experience narratives, I present a turning point narrative in its entirety and apply Propp's functions to it. I expound on the other similarities found in the ten narratives as well. The rest of this chapter further explores the role of helpers in the stories that I collected. In many cases, AA or by extension members of AA play the role of helper, as does God. Mothers, children, friends, doctors, and strangers, to name a few, can also play this role. I discuss the different ways these helpers bring about change in the hero, and what this connection means for the genre of personal experience narrative. Here I focus on the healing power of story and the importance of support groups. I also explore the functional similarity between the folktale and the personal experience narrative.

In the conclusion in Chapter Five I bring together points raised in the previous chapters and attempt to identify my study's contribution to the field of folklore. The personal experience narrative shares qualities with folktale and can be used as a healing force. The role of the helper, very important in folktale, is also very important in stories of turning-points in people's lives. These points, along with a discussion of the limitations of the study and an enthusiastic enumeration of further possibilities, will make up this chapter.

But first, it is important to introduce the genres at the heart of this thesis, the folktale and the personal experience narrative. They are the subjects of the next chapter.

Chapter One:
Literature and Methodology Review

I am here to take you, the reader, on a journey. I am your guide, and I plan to hold your hand and bring you from the beginning through the middle straight on to the end. It is my pleasure to introduce this subject, to present the people who made my studies pleasant and informative, and to share their stories with you. I will take what I have learned, the ideas I have had and found to be true or false or something in between, and lay them bare here before you. I hope that then, when you are finished, dear reader, that you will be changed. Not physically, surely, but that somewhere inside your brain these ideas will sit and in turn come out to others. That my imparting of knowledge will not end with you, just as the knowledge I have gained here does not end with me. And I will share this information with you by crafting a narrative, a narrative peppered with academic resources, but a narrative nonetheless. Because I think that narratives are the most powerful tool we have as human beings.

All this means: I love stories.

My point then is, nearly everybody loves stories. We love to hear them, and we love to tell them. And in many cases, the stories we love to hear share qualities with one another. It is these commonalities that allow us a sense of recognition, and it is this recognition that creates a feeling of satisfaction in most audiences. There is a limited number of basic experiences that, for the most part, human beings share. Staying alive, falling in love, having a family, procuring shelter and food, protecting yourself and your loved ones- these are things that human beings, in general, all do. Experiences like these make us human. And our stories are about those experiences.

The stories that people choose to tell also indicate what they think is funny and/or interesting and what they feel is important. Folklorist Steve Zeitlin writes, "Stories are most often told about out of the ordinary events, those which harbor some excitement and conflict" (1982, 6). This holds true for both the folktale and the personal experience narrative, which are the foci of this current undertaking. One of my goals is to show that even though these two narrative genres are seemingly very different and treated as such by folklorists, they are also strikingly similar, and the separation of genres is largely imposed. In particular I point to the tale-role of the helper as proof of this. In my studies and in my fieldwork, I have noticed that the helper is a character that is present in many forms in the personal experience narrative, much as Propp's tale-role appears in the folktale.

The folktale and personal experience narrative share similarities, as well as have their myriad differences, and in the following pages I explore them both. I also review several key works in both genres, and outline my own approach to the topic at hand.

Folktale

"Narration is ageless," says Linda Dégh in her essay, "Folk Narrative." She continues, "The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization" (1972, 53). It would be impossible to say how long folktales have been told, but the study of folktales can be said to have began with the Grimm brothers in 1812 with their publication of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen.* The publication of these German tales spurred both study and collection

of the tales of other nations, including Aleksad Nikolaevic˘ Afanasev of Russia, (Dégh 1972, 54) from whose collection Vladimir Propp culled his one hundred tales for his landmark study, which shall be mentioned shortly. The term *folktale* can refer to a wider range of prose narrative, but this current work focuses on the subgenre known as the *Märchen*. Folklorist Stith Thompson, writing in *The Folktale* published in 1946, states, "… the term is usually translated by 'fairy tale,' or 'household tale.' … A Märchen is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous" (1946, 7-8). The *Märchen* is what most people think of when they hear the word *folktale*.

The scholarship of the folktale has moved through several incarnations since the early 1800s. The "heritage theory" of the Grimms asserted that folktales were created by their own Indo-Germanic races and then spread to others through "migration and culture contact" (Dégh 1972, 55). The "historical-comparative" method of Theodor Benfey suggested that folktales migrated and were disseminated by people, but from a different starting place – India. Arguments were then made for a polygenetic origin, that tales might come into existence independently of each other and that similarities were simply due to life experience being similar; this was called the "historical-geographical school." Various indexes and methods were created in the early twentieth century to help classify and organize the growing number of collections (Dégh 1972, 55-58), among them Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, which provides a cataloging of the multitudes of motifs appearing in folktales, and the work of Vladmir Propp.

As I indicated in the Introduction, I was introduced to Propp in my first semester of graduate studies. As a new student, I feel by being introduced to the world of folklore through Vladimir Propp, my future course of study was shaped. Born in St. Petersburg in 1895, he was a formalist who graduated from St. Petersburg University in 1918. Ten years before officially becoming a professor of Folklore, he published *The Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928. It was not translated into English until the 1950s however, so its effect was not felt on North American scholarship until that time.

Propp broke the folktale into "functions," in a way that had not been done earlier. A function is what Propp determined to be the smallest bit of action in a folktale. He distilled the folktale into thirty-one distinct moves that, while not always all present, always appear in the same order. Thus, as stated by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson in the introduction to the first edition of Propp's *The Morphology*, Propp "departs from the smallest narrative units, the motifs; he defines the motifs in terms of their function, that is, in terms of what the dramatis personae do, independently of by whom and in what way the function is fulfilled" (1971, xxi). His breakthrough, according to Dundes, was that he "realized for the first time that entirely different tales types shared the same basic structure" (1999, 122).

In *The Morphology*, Propp began by discussing the "History of the Problem" and talking about how previous attempts to classify folktales went awry; he felt that division into categories was unsuccessful and division into themes was total chaos. He claimed that the Aarne-Thompson tale type index is flawed because a clear-cut division of types does not exist and division into motifs is still not small enough. Propp proposed his own

method of classifying folktales, "a study of the tale *according to the function of its dramatis personae*" (1971, 20). He chose one hundred tales, all of which are what Aarne calls "tales of magic," Thompson describes as "wonder tales," folklorists call "*Märchen,*" and most people refer to as "fairy tales." From these tales, (chosen from the collection of the nineteenth century Russian folklorist A.N. Afanas'ev) Propp developed his thesis. One might argue that only one hundred tales is not enough for a serious study, but Propp claimed that if repetition within the tales was great, then one needed only a limited amount of material; if this was not the case, then a larger corpus would have been required. However, the repetition of fundamental components in Propp's sample is striking. Based on these similarities, Propp put forward four fundamental rules about the structure of a typical fairy tale:

> 1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
> 2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
> 3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
> 4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.
>
> (1971, 21-23)

Propp delineated thirty-one functions, from α (the initial situation) to W (wedding) [See Figure 1], each with a series of further specifications. He also pointed out and defined seven different "dramatis personae:" The Villain, The Donor, The Helper, The Princess and her Father, The Dispatcher, The Hero, and The False Hero (1971, 79-80). These discoveries allowed Propp to map his one hundred tales and catalog similarities among them in a way that had not been done earlier. By separating content from action, Propp introduced a new way to classify the folktale.

Figure 1: Propp's Functions of Dramatis Personae

α = the initial situation [not a function]

ß = absentation
γ = interdiction
δ = violation
ε = reconnaissance
ζ = delivery
η = trickery
ϑ = complicity
A/a = villainy/lack
B = mediation, the connective incident
C = beginning counteraction
↑ = departure
D = first function of the donor
E = the hero's reaction
F = provision or receipt of a magical agent
G = spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance
H = struggle
J = branding, marking
I = victory
K = initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (paired with A)
↓ = return
Pr = pursuit, chase
Rs = rescue
O = unrecognized arrival
L = unfounded claims
M = difficult task
N = solution
Q = recognition
Ex = exposure
T = transfiguration
U = punishment
W = wedding

(1971, 25-65)

Here Propp explains the advantages to such a system, after presenting a sample tale:

> If one were to write out all functions of this tale, the following scheme would result:
>
> $$\gamma^1 \beta^1 \delta^1 A^1 C\uparrow \left\{ \begin{matrix} [DE^1 neg.Fneg.] \\ d^7\, E^7\, F^9 \end{matrix} \right\} G^4 K^1 \downarrow [Pr^1 D^1 E^1 F^9 = Rs^4]^3$$
>
> Now let us imagine that all the tales in our material are analyzed in a similar manner and that a scheme is made as a result of each analysis. What does that lead to? To begin with, it must be said that decomposition into components is, in general, extremely important for any science. We have seen that up to now there has been no mans of doing this completely objectively for the tale. This is a first, highly important conclusion. But furthermore, schemes may be compared, and then a whole series of those questions touched upon previously will be resolved. (1971, 99)

The complicated scheme above allows for tales to be logically broken down into their components and compared to one another. The numbers in superscript indicate the specific method of each move, for example, whether the hero flies through the air (G^1), travels on the ground or water (G^2), or is led (G^3) (1971, 51).

Propp's work is certainly not without flaws, as he himself admits. As mentioned above, he looked at only one hundred tales. Further, his morphology may work well for Russian wonder tales, but when applied to the folktales of other countries the theory may not hold up quite as well, although it has been shown to work cross-culturally (See Gilet 1998). Propp's method also ignores context, opting to focus only on action. Although it makes no claims in this regard, lack of context limits the method of analysis.

Other scholars have built on Propp's work, filling in gaps and developing his ideas. For example, Bengt Holbek's essay "The Language of Fairy Tales" expands on

Propp's theories put forth in *The Morphology of the Folktale*. I should take a moment and mention that this article is in large part responsible for and has had a large influence on this current work. It was through reading this article that I started to think about the relationship between the folktale and the personal experience narrative. Thus, I owe much to Bengt Holbek.

Holbek advanced Propp's ideas by combining his functions with Elli Köngäs-Maranda's models of tale-roles. Köngäs-Maranda defined opposing tale-roles in 1971, constructing them in the form of a cube in the "dimensions" of age (young, old), status (high, low), and sex (male, female) (Holbek 1989, 47). By taking what Propp discovered and relating it to the culture and people from which it originated, Holbek posits that tales were used as a way to talk about things that were not talked about otherwise. Holbek writes that:

> All of these problems are real or possible events in the communities in which fairy tales are told. At the same time, all of them are sensitive, even painful, subjects that cannot easily be brought into the open. ... The tales solve the problem of dealing with these matters by treating them as if they were events in a purely fictitious world and by disguising the participants, whereas the nature of the conflicts is hardly disguised at all. (1989, 49)

This is an idea indicated by Propp himself in his assertion that it is the *actions* that are important, not who does them (1971, 20-21). More recently, Peter Gilet, using techniques similar to Holbek's, distilled Propp's thirty-one functions into only five moves: The Initial Situation, The Interaction with the Helper, The Interaction with the Princ/ess, The Interaction with the Adversary, and The Return of the Hero. He then checked the moves against a wide variety of tales from different geographic locations,

finding that his simplified moves did indeed work when placed against other countries' tales. I explore Gilet's work further in Chapter Three.

Holbek's assertion that folktales were told so that people could talk about touchy subjects is instrumental to this study. It led to me ask this important question: if when someone speaks about a sensitive subject but does not feel the need to disguise the players and the situation, is the structure the same? In other words, should not personal experience narratives share a structure with folktales, considering that they are often different ways of telling very similar stories? A full exploration of this idea will come later in this thesis, but first let us turn to a brief overview of the other narrative genre central to this study, the personal experience narrative.

Personal Experience Narrative

In 1967, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky wrote "Narrative Analysis: Oral Verisons of Personal Experience." Though written from a linguistics perspective, the article was very influential to how folklorists study personal experience narratives. Labov and Waletsky, "... identified several formal and functional properties of personal narratives, thereby contributing a methodology and a theoretical perspective for further inquiry on this genre of oral narrative discourse" (Robinson 1981, 58). By defining narrative, they shaped how it would be studied and understood by folklorists for years to come (eg. Braid, 1996). Their work attempted to tackle the tricky question of how to analyze such a new and varied genre of narrative. The paper was very technical, peppered with graphs and charts and complicated diagrams. Among their claims are that "such

narratives are so designed as to emphasize the strange and unusual character of the situation" and that "many narratives are designed to place the narrator in the most favorable possible light" (1997, 30). They defined narrative units and concluded that narratives generally reflect the original order of the events they are describing. This format, of separating narrative into smaller components and studying the order in which those components appear, is similar to that developed for studying folktale. Labov & Waletsky referenced Propp early on in their work, and rightfully so – all three were trying to tackle the tricky question of how to chronicle and categorize the structure of genres that, in their respective times, seemed to balk at such attempts.

Ten years later Sandra Stahl introduced the personal experience narrative to the world of folklore in her 1977 essay, "The Personal Narrative as Folklore." Stahl wrote several pieces on the personal experience narrative, as well as editing a special double issue of the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* on the subject. In her several works there is an overarching dialogue between the author and dissenting members of the folklore academic community who question the validity of the personal experience narrative as a viable folklore genre. In her introduction to the special double issue of the *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, she asks the question that her opponents raise: can a "true story" be folklore? She answers critics by claiming that the personal experience narrative deals with traditional *themes* and thus fulfils that necessary aspect of folklore. She argues, "If enough elements can be shown to be 'more traditional than innovative' perhaps the discipline will feel safe in accepting the personal narrative 'as folklore'" (1977, 12).

Sandra Stahl, from the beginning, claimed that this "new" genre was just as "traditional" as the "old" genres of narrative, such as folktale:

> A personal narrative by conventional standards would be considered a new story rather than an old one; that is, we could not say that the performance of a personal narrative involves a traditional resource of the class "tale type" or "traditional plot." However, the performance will involve a number of other traditional aspects such as traditional structure, use, attitudes, or idioms. Some of these aspects "must conform to past usage, to stories of the same kind if the story is to 'work' " The newness or oldness of the story is a relative matter then, dependent on the degree of traditionality exhibited by the totality of the performance. There are certain aspects of personal narrative performances that will be characteristically traditional and these will be treated later in this essay. The plot of any personal narrative is, however, nontraditional almost by definition. Nevertheless, the plot of a personal narrative is not entirely "new" even though it is based on an experience that is seemingly personal and developed in a story that is seemingly idiosyncratic. (1977, 14)

Her work explored and helped define what the discipline now accepts as the personal experience narrative.

In his 1981 article "Personal Narratives Reconsidered," John Robinson explored scholarship on personal experience narrative and reframed many earlier ideas. Although that was now over twenty-five years ago, his thoughts are still illuminating. Robinson reevaluated the claims made by Labov and Waletsky, specifically their ideas about what constitutes an appropriate narrative topic and their proposed procedures for tellers to "make the point" (1981, 58). Robinson argues, for instance, that one of the assumptions implicit in Labov and Waletsky's article is that "narratives are told only to demonstrate the narrator's meritorious qualities" (1981, 61). He counters that often personal narratives are shared to highlight negative aspects of the narrator's personality, as is true with the subjects of this thesis. Robinson's conclusions that personal narratives are not always

about "remarkable or unusual experiences," that "the point of a story can be implied or unknown," and that the "formal organization of personal narratives is jointly determined by norms of conversational etiquette, the discourse structures of narrative, and the pragmatic functions that prompt narration" (1981, 85), are important as they expand ideas of what might be considered a personal experience narrative. Equal, if not more helpful, is his overview of the evolution of personal experience narrative research from the time of Labov & Waletzky to the early 1980s.

Some writers have identified the healing power of personal experience narratives. Two major works from this perspective are Eleanor Wachs's *Crime Victim Stories* (1988) and Elaine Lawless's *Women Escaping Violence* (2001). Both Wachs and Lawless believe that in the process of relating the story of a personally difficult experience, a teller goes through a process by which she or he comes out on the other side a different person. Additionally, in the sharing of stories a teller not only heals herself but also helps others heal or avoid hurtful situations in the first place. In *Crime Victim Stories,* Wachs interviewed the victims of crimes about their experiences and found that the traumatic experience of being robbed or raped became easier to deal with once it was talked about. Wachs claims that these types of narratives serve as cautionary tales, teach street smarts, and entertain. She also argues that "...the stories have therapeutic value. They enable victims and others concerned about crime to cope with traumatic experiences by allowing them to express their anger in a culturally sanctioned way" (1988, 62). Elaine Lawless's book is based on her experience as volunteer in a home for battered women, where she observed and interviewed a number of women who found themselves in abusive

relationships. She discovered that in asking them to "speak the violence" of their experiences, they were able to deal with their pasts in a way that was impossible before. In a chapter entitled *Turning Points,* she says:

> ...it is in the speaking of the violence that the women begin to emerge as beings *separate* from the violence. It is through the telling of their stories that the women begin to sort things out, to name and acknowledge the violence, and to reflect on their own sense of self and how it has and has not emerged for them. (2001, 122)

This is a topic I explore further in Chapter Four.

Several scholars have focused specifically on transformative or turning point personal experience narratives. For example, Richard L. Ochberg's "Life Stories and Storied Lives," written in 1994, explores why we tell the stories we do, and how this reflects on and shapes our own personal identities. Comparing his subject's life to a story, Ochberg details how plot, appeal to audience, and argument are all factors present in the life lived as well as the narrative told. Adital Tirosh Ben-Ari's 1995 article "It's the Telling That Makes the Difference" mirrors my thesis's argument that structuring one's past into a story is the final step in that experience and that telling the story is important to understanding the event. The article investigates how a mother and son deal with a life turning point (the son's coming out) by creating narratives about it and explores ideas of privacy and intimacy in reconstructing past experiences. Dan P. McAdams and Philip J. Bowman analyze narratives about turning points in "Narrating Life's Turning Points: Redemption and Contamination." They identify sequences of events in the narrative lives of what they call "generative" adults, people who care dearly about the "well–being of future generations" (2001, 10). Through the contrary sequences of redemption and

contamination, they chronicle the way that certain people tell stories about themselves. Lee Winniford's 2001 article, "Examining the Legendary Base for the Telephone Road Subculture's Personal Experience Narratives," while focusing primarily on the telling of legends in the AA community, is also an important piece of literature for my study. Winniford has an acute understanding of recovering alcoholics, and her observations will be utilized later.

Dick Leith's article "Living with a Fairytale: 'The Green Man of Knowledge'," is a wonderful exploration of the intermingling of a specific fairy tale with one man's autobiography and understanding of himself. Leith finds that his life and current view of himself have been shaped by his relationship to this tale through multiple retellings and studies. A Newfoundland version of this tale is analyzed in Chapter Three.

In the study that follows, I draw on the works I have just outlined to examine a specific genre of personal experience narratives in their relation to the over arching life-changing, turning-point narrative. I also compare that subgenre structurally to folktale. After reading Holbek's essay, I envisioned an application of the folktale's structure to another genre of folklore, the personal experience narrative. In doing this, I continue to address the long-standing issue of the presence of *tradition* within the relatively new genre of the personal experience narrative that Stahl initiated several decades earlier. However, I am not by any means the first to explore this link. For example, Gerald Thomas, in his article "Other Worlds: Folktale and Soap Opera in Newfoundland's French Tradition," asks "How, then, are soap operas an extension of fairy tales?" (1980, 346) His paper argues that soap operas replaced folktales in the lives of French

Newfoundlanders living on the isolated Port-au-Port Peninsula; that the folktale is the natural antecedent to the modern soap opera. He cites as the main similarity their subject matter, as both forms deal with the "attempted thwarting of the union of the hero and heroine," who "...constantly struggle to be united in the face of adversity" (1980, 346-347). Thomas also mentions some more "technical" similarities, such as Axel Olrik's "Law of Two to a Scene" and the physical setting of the stories (1980, 347-348). Vivian Labrie's essay "Help! Me, S/he, and the Boss" in *Undisciplined Women* applies Propp's structuralism to modern day films. She explores the plots of a pair of folktales and several films that focus on the workplace and the relationships that develop there between the hero of the film or folktale, their boss, and an intermediary that helps the hero move up in the world. Through a series of analyses, Labrie explores similarities in structure and roles of the heroes and their helpers in films and folktales. She states, "The mixing of fictional genres, folktales, and movies is compelled by me feeling that they share a common topology linked somehow to everyday life" (1997, 152). Labrie shows that seventy years later, Propp's functions are relevant in popular entertainment because folktales, like films, reflect real life. More recently, Diane Tye's article "The Traditional Craft of Christmas Form Letters" explores the connection between the structure of folktale and that of the modern day Christmas letter. She likens the annual Christmas letter to a folktale with the writer as hero and the events of the previous year as the various tasks the hero must complete to achieve his or her goal. Tye writes, "Christmas letters are less about what happens to us than how we handle it. The trials and the successes are vehicles, like the symbolic elements Holbek identifies in Märchen ... Just as in Märchen, tests and

rewards are linked in Christmas letters" (2001, 208). My thesis extends these connections of the folktale to contemporary forms of narrative that are more personal in nature.

My journey to this current study was touched upon in the Introduction. My thesis topic arose from my study of a personal experience narrative my father told me; the story about the moment he decided to stop taking drugs. I applied a Proppian structural analysis to it because, taking a cue from Holbek's essay, *The Language of Fairytales,* I imagined that narratives such as the one my father told not only might be similar to folktales, but *ought* to be. They should be because they are the *same stories* that have been told for a long time but in the interaction of father and son in private, or alcoholic to alcoholic in a meeting, the metaphors can be removed.

This idea that the story a recovering addict tells about the turning point in his or her life - the moment when he or she stopped abusing a substance and started on the long road to recovery - shares a structure with the folktale is central to my thesis. If this turns out to be true, and these two seemingly disparate genres share structures and functions, then the larger genre of narrative can open up to new methods of investigation. Methods of studying narrative might be expanded to include cross-genre analysis and conclusions would be drawn that otherwise might otherwise remain hidden.

Fieldwork

I settled on the topic of alcoholism partially due to the personal connection it has to my life. My father is a counselor and a recovering alcoholic, so the idea has always been close to me. The plan to collect a series of such personal and potentially fascinating

stories appealed to me as well. I interviewed my father for a second time, as well as eight of his friends and associates, collecting personal experience narratives from a total of nine recovering alcoholics who are either living in or have lived in the state of Vermont. My informants were five men and four women, all sober for ten years or more. My father, being a member of AA for over twenty years as well as an alcohol and drug counselor in my home town, offered his assistance in finding subjects for me to interview. He would phone his friends and associates and explain my current project to them. He then asked them if they would be interested in submitting to an interview with his son. In the cases of those who agreed, my father would then give me their phone numbers and I would call and introduce myself, setting up a time and place to meet. All the interviews took place in the homes of my subjects – I felt this was the best place to collect their narratives, as we would be discussing personal matters and any public place would be inappropriate. I came home to Vermont for a month, intending to conduct my interviews before and after the Christmas festivities.

I drove all around the state of Vermont in December of 2006 and January of 2007. Vermont in the winter is a beautiful place. It was a relatively mild winter, and the drives were nearly always beautiful. As most of the interviews took place in or around my hometown, most of my interviewees knew me from when I was younger. There were several comments along the lines of, "My, the last time I saw you, you were this tall!" and "Goodness, you've grown."

As mentioned in the Introduction, the first person I ever interviewed as a folklorist was my father, over the phone. For the purposes of this thesis, I also interviewed him in

the den at his home. One thing that was very clear to me from the beginning was the effect a recording device has on a subject. People are very aware they are being recorded and this affects their stories. Interviewing my father presented some ethical issues as well since he may have felt he had to consent to the interview, as I was his son. I made it clear to him many times that he was not obligated, and he insisted that he wanted to be interviewed.

The other ethical issues surrounding this topic are also complicated. I wrote one ethics proposal for my original 9/11 project; the main concerns of the committee then were of causing emotional distress to my subjects and my subjects feeling pressured to agree to interviews because of their relationship to me. These concerns were also brought up when I submitted my ethics proposal for this project. In addition there was also a concern about barriers to anonymity. I have decided to use only first names in my thesis and transcriptions, as is the custom in Alcoholics Anonymous, to address the problems of barriers to anonymity. Any identifiable information in the interviews has not been included in this thesis.

While the interviews may include descriptions of negatively charged events, they are essentially positive stories, therefore the interview process presented minimal risk to my subjects. Importantly, I interviewed individuals who already tell these particular stories in public or semi-public contexts such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings. In addition, the events my subjects described were events that occurred many years ago in their lives, and all of them have been in or are still in counseling. I offered the contact information for the Vermont Health Services

Association and included a sentence on the release form indicating that if they did suffer any emotional stress, they should contact the VHSA. I made sure participants understood they could withdraw from the study at any time. I was aware of the possibility that my subjects might feel they must contribute because of their relationship to me or to my father, and thus I made it clear that their participation was completely voluntary, and that if they did not participate it would not adversely affect my study, our relationship, or their relationship to my father.

At first, my interviewing technique was stiff and awkward, and I was not getting the results I had hoped for. But as I interviewed more people I became more comfortable with the experience. After I arrived at my informant's home, I would shake hands if appropriate and make conversation until it seemed the right time to break out the recording equipment. As I was setting up the recording equipment I would hand over the information sheet and release form for them to read over and sign. Once that was done I would hit record and settle back. Originally I started the interviews by just asking my informants to tell me about the moment when they decided to stop drinking. After a few interviews I realized that this was not getting me the kind of stories that I needed, so I rephrased the question and asked about the time that they hit rock bottom and their life started to turn around. As the interviews progressed, so did my questioning, but on several occasions I found my subjects discussing things and events that were not entirely relevant to my study. However, I did not feel it appropriate to just ask them to stop, so I allowed them to elaborate and digress. Some of the information offered in those cases is useful when exploring the narratives themselves.

This interviewing process was informative for both my thesis topic and also for who I am as a researcher and as a person. These interviews were initially a terrifying experience for me, as doing things for the first time often is. But unlike my first kiss or my first day of kindergarten, this was an experience I was going into alone, without a peer around. A lone field researcher, going into people's homes and asking them very personal questions, armed with a microphone and a laptop and my mumbling, question-asking self. The process, of course, like many things, got easier over time.

In interviewing a variety of people about their experiences with addiction, I often found myself thinking about my own personality traits as well. In learning more about how former addicts think and act, I learned about the qualities in myself that I share with alcoholics. For example, when my subjects communicated an enlarged sense of importance or expressed a tendency to slip into depression I recognized myself in them. This is not surprising; as the son of an alcoholic and with a family history of alcoholism, it makes sense that I would share some traits. There was also the unexpected realization that many of the adults I knew from my childhood my dad knew through AA. This project overall gave me a new appreciation for my father and what he did for his family. He spent decades of his life addicted to drugs and drinking, and within three years of my birth he had stopped both completely. It was an incredibly hard thing to do, and hearing his story and the stories of his peers has helped me to understand the difficulties an addict faces and the important role that a support group plays in difficult times.

My interest and enthusiasm for technology informed my interview process. I used my new MacBook computer to record all of my interviews using a program called

Audacity. The program saves the files as WAVs, a high quality audio format. I conducted my final two interviews using the program Skype, which essentially turns my MacBook into a telephone. The Skype software is free, but I purchased the capability to call regular telephones and also to record those conversations. My last two interviews were over the phone with a husband and wife, who were happy to help and provided some of my most informative material. Once all the interviews were completed, I burned them all to a DVD and placed it in a secure location. The interviews and their transcriptions were deposited in the archives at Memorial University upon the completion of this thesis.

This chapter discussed the paths leading up to this current project: the literature of folktale and the literature of the personal experience narrative that come together in this thesis, the story of how I got to this point in my studies and the account of how I conducted my interviews. Now that the paths of the past have converged here in the present, we shall move on to the paths leading away from this point – the story of the rest of this thesis and beyond. In the next chapter I introduce my nine subjects. They are all different ages, with different careers and histories, pasts and futures. But all of them are members of AA and all have an addiction to alcohol that they overcame. I hope that by sharing their stories structural similarities will become clear and the lessons they have learned will emerge, indicating the ability of the turning-point narrative to heal and help others.

Chapter Two:
Alcoholics Anonymous and Narratives of Recovery

> *This is the way I describe my hitting bottom. If you've ever skipped a good stone on a smooth lake, you know how it skips off the surface? Pshoo pshoo, pshoo, pshooooo. Well, my bottom is like that. I was traveling a hundred and ninety miles an hour, I hit bottom at an angle, bounced off, kept traveling at a hundred and ninety miles an hour, hit bottom again at almost the same angle, took off again, came down hit bottom again, several times, maybe five or six times. When I hit bottom for the last time, there was no skin left on my face – I sunk to the bottom of an ice cold pool, was drowning, and heard, 'Do you want us to help you?' and said, 'No.' Then, Late Larry appeared. And he said, 'Come on.' So I went. That's the way it is for me, you know, I'm telling you as a therapist, I see people who hit bottom and hit bottom and hit bottom and hit bottom and some of them just keep hitting bottom, they don't get better, some of them die. (Ed 2007)*

This is an introduction to the nine people I interviewed, all of whom live in or are originally from the state of Vermont. My intention is to give the reader an insight into the lives of my informants through the stories they tell. I will be using a combination of summary and direct quotes from the interviews. First, however, allow me to introduce the organization that binds them all: Alcoholics Anonymous.

Lee Winniford states,

> All twelve-step programs – especially the prototype AA – operate through the sharing of personal experiences. The construction of a personal narrative that works for the teller and is validated by listeners is the primary means through which an addict comes to terms with his/her addiction and grapples with the process of recovery. Storytelling becomes thus absolutely crucial, a matter of life and death. (2001, 63)

Storytelling becomes not only a matter of life and death, but also a method of transference from death *to* life. Of, like an alchemist, transmuting the experience of a horrible life situation into something to be proud of, something useful to be used to heal others and to heal oneself.

The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous was a man known as Bill W. He was sinking into the desperation of an alcoholic on the edge of death and on the precipice of giving up for good. An associate intervened, telling Bill that he had found God and had stopped drinking. Bill was skeptical of trying such a thing himself until the friend suggested he choose a *God of his understanding.* Bill was open to this and the two of them, at that moment, became a group, founded upon the tenet of bringing help to others. His story makes up the first chapter of the book the two men eventually created.

New members of AA must familiarize themselves with this book, the "Bible" of Alcoholics Anonymous. The official title is *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism.* But those in AA refer to it as the Big Book. It acts very much as their holy text. The Big Book lays out twelve steps that an alcoholic must take to recover from alcoholism. It should be noted that even when an alcoholic has stopped drinking entirely, they are still considered, within AA, to be an alcoholic. A recovering alcoholic is *always* recovering. No one ever becomes a *recovered* alcoholic. The danger in such a label should be obvious; one who is no longer an alcoholic would be able to drink again, and as we shall see in some of these stories, the result generally would be relapsing into dangerous drinking habits.

The Big Book is comprised of stories just like the ones I collected from my interviewees. It contains the aforementioned Bill's story as well as many others, and the famous twelve steps. Here they are, for your reference:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to our sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him.*
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continues to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him,* praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (2001, 59-60)

There are several mentions of God in the twelve steps, with a not totally convincing emphasis that it does not have to be the Christian God if you do not want it to be. Nevertheless, the third step in the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step program demands, "Make a decision to turn your will and your life over to the care of God *as we understand him,*" for a reason, allowing for people with varied religious beliefs to embrace the tenets of AA. The concept of *"a Power greater than oneself"* is at the cornerstone of AA and, in a way, an apt description of Propp's concept of the helper. The twelfth step is a sort of feedback loop, a rule that continually regenerates the membership of the organization, attracting new members as the last step of the healing process.

In addition to being given a copy of the Big Book, members of AA attend meetings. Meetings can be any day of the week and take place in a range of places, from school gyms to church basements. The meetings begin with introductions ("My name is

_____, and I am an alcoholic."), and generally follow with a member or members telling their story, the same stories that I have collected and shared within these pages. Here my father describes that process and why it is so important to those in AA:

> I remember once when I was invited to chair a meeting, and when you chair a meeting at Alcoholics Anonymous, you qualify, and qualifying means you say, 'I'm Ed, I'm an alcoholic,' and you tell them a little story, about things that you did when you used to be drinking alcoholically or taking drugs like a drug addict. You tell them a little story. It qualifies you. And the first time I was asked to chair, it was a big honor. I had only been in the program a couple months and had been to these meetings and the chairperson always qualified and I always listened but I never really understood. So I said to Jim, I said. 'Jim,' I said, 'Jim, I'm gonna chair a meeting, and uh, what is this qualifying? What do you do?' So he says, 'Well, you know, you been to meetings, you know, you get up there, you say your name, and you qualify, you tell them some dumb shit you used to do when you were an alcoholic, you know, you used to wake up in the morning, you used to steal money from this one and that one, used to drink on the job or you got arrested, you know, you tell them something to prove that you're an alcoholic. You qualify.' I said, 'Oh,' I said 'You mean, I have to tell a story about when I was an alcoholic to qualify?' He says 'Yeah.' I say, 'Why would I want to do that?' He says, 'So we'll trust you.' I said, 'You mean that I have to tell these people I was a dishonest sneak thief bum for them to trust me?' And he says 'Yeah!' And I said, 'Oh, okay!' And that's the thing about Alcoholics Anonymous is that they trust you, they believe in you when they find out that you're one of them. You see? That's where it becomes worth something. 'I'm Ed, I'm an alcoholic.' 'HI ED!' They're all happy you're an alcoholic. (Ed 2007)

During a phone conversation with my father in 2008, he explained that in AA alcoholics are encouraged to share their *experience, strength, and hope*. This is the way that new members first begin to heal, by listening to the stories of others who share their experience, strength, and hope. When a veteran member tells their hitting-bottom story, a new member identifies first with the experience, and then with the hope.

Members are encouraged to share their stories in the following format: How it was, what happened, and then how you are today. Or as Bill W puts it in the Big Book,

"Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" (2001, 58). First they speak about what it was like in the past during their addiction. That is the *how it was* part. That is followed by hitting bottom, the *what happened* part. And then it is followed by the person they are and they life they have today. My father remarks, "There is a stark juxtaposition… a tremendous difference between how you were and how you are today" (Ed 2008).

The focus in AA is put on discussion of oneself, as opposed to preaching, talking in theory, or talking about something that is impersonal. My father: "You're always talking about yourself. You don't want to preach about stuff. You talk about what it was, what happened, and how you are today" (Ed 2008). Joanne describes the traditional format the narratives take here:

> Well you know, you give, like a third of your talk is about your circumstances growing up and maybe a third of it is about from the time you picked up a drink until the time you put down a drink, and then the next part is usually from the time that you put down the drink until present. And for me, actually things did start to change after a while. I started talking more about recovery. It was like, you guys all know. If you're here, you already know what's happened to me. But for me the recovery was in the steps and that was my most important thing. And then that's what I talk about the most, was how my sponsor treated me, how, the steps I took to change and that became the most important thing for me to talk about. (Joanne 2007)

Joanne mentions her sponsor, a concept in AA whereby new members are paired with a veteran member who guides them. By encouraging members to structure their life narratives in a certain way, Alcoholics Anonymous is structuring their lives a certain way. The end result is life change through story.

My father tells me there is an old saying in AA: "Take the cotton out of their ears, and stuff it in their mouths" (Ed 2008). The organization pressures its members to pay attention to the words of others rather than focusing so much on themselves. This is mirrored in what my father calls, "The deepest belief in AA - By helping others, you help yourself" (Ed 2008). The basic understanding is, according to my father, that if you did not have others to help, you would drink. The relationship goes both ways, with new members being helped by older members and older members needing the new members to keep them sober. AA is all about helping and being helped. This concept is returned to and explored in Chapter Four.

I will introduce the AA members I interviewed in the order that I met them. In this way we can go through their stories together, and you as a reader can get a sense of what it was like to be there with me, learning about my subjects. I start with the first, or more likely second (perhaps third) person I ever met (*how many nurses and doctors were generally present at the birth of babies in 1980? And was the father allowed in the room, or was that still in the age of the men pacing back and forth in the waiting room, passing out cigars? I digress...*). The first person I interviewed was my father.

Dad

Dad, known to the rest of the world as Ed, turned sixty years old in November 2007. We are close, and have finally reached that point in a family's life where a father and son can also be friends. As I write these sentences I am sitting on a couch in the study of his home in Morrisville, Vermont, where I also conducted my second interview with

him. The story I asked him to tell me on the occasion of our second official interview was the one I mentioned in the Introduction, and the reason I settled on this particular subject. Dad's father died when he was just a child, and he points to this event as the "kernel" which seeded the rest of his life's events. From an early age, he began drinking and was an active "hippie," road tripping, doing drugs and alcohol, and being personally destructive.

After many misadventures, my father ended up back in the Bronx. He remembers what he describes as his lowest moment, in his early twenties, alone and homeless in an abandoned building on his birthday (which was also Thanksgiving that year):

> ...it was just such a lonely, unbelievably lonely moment, to have it be Thanksgiving and my birthday and be homeless and ... and he [a friend who was the superintendent in a building in the very poor section of the Bronx] let me stay in one of the vacant apartments upstairs, and it was old and cold and old linoleum on the floors and dirty windows and empty, and it was Thanksgiving and my birthday. (Ed 2007)

While this moment was a low point, it did not yet give him the desire or motivation to change. That would come later. Although the full story of his pivotal experience is told in detail in Chapter Four, I will summarize it here. At this point in his life both of his parents had died. He was addicted to drugs, and had taken to stealing taxi cab meters from Gypsy cabs – cabs "sorta outside the system." On one such attempt he was nearly severely beaten by a group of angry Puerto Ricans he was trying to rob. The timely intervention of some police officers was responsible for his survival. The judge told him he could go to jail or go into therapy for drug addiction, and he chose the latter. He stopped doing drugs but started drinking. He became a licensed social worker and a full-blown alcoholic. The two roles did not interfere with one another until he and a

colleague took a work situation into their own hands "one Saturday afternoon [while] drinking beer and peppermint schnapps." While intoxicated they confronted and beat up a client of theirs, a teenager living in the therapeutic community my father directed. This event prompted his superiors to force my father to get counseling. There he met Jim, the subject of another interview in this work.

Jim listened to my father minimize the problems his drinking caused, focus on the negative aspects of others instead of himself, and be a generally troublesome client. Since my father continuously claimed not to be an alcoholic, Jim entreated him to try a "controlled drinking experiment." He was allowed to drink exactly two beers a day – no more, no less. My father recalls:

> And I could drink my two beers and I'd be like in heaven, it was what I was waiting for, this moment, twenty minutes, fifteen minutes, whatever it took to drink two beers was the moment I had been waiting for and I would drink these two beers and as soon as I got done with the two beers I would begin waiting, almost consciously, for the next night at eight o'clock. And I did that every day. And finally it dawned on me that this was no way to live. I couldn't live with this excruciating sort of waiting for this two-beer experience and then repeating this waiting for this other two-beer experience. (Ed 2007)

He decided to make a change and attend an AA meeting. As fate would have it there was a church next door to his home at the time. He looked out the window and watched the men standing around outside, smoking their cigarettes. But when the time finally came, he stayed inside, watching, as the men filed into the church. He was devastated. The moment of truth had come and he had failed. As he gave up all hope, suddenly he saw a man ambling down the sidewalk. This was, as my father would later

find out, Late Larry, and because of him my father started the road to recovery from alcoholism. This story is presented in full in Chapter Four.

Today my dad has been completely sober for over twenty years. He is a successful drug and alcohol counselor and happily remarried for over a decade. He lives in Morrisville, Vermont in a beautiful home on a large piece of land with two cats, and he is well respected in the community. After our interview I gave him a big hug – I was struck by the fact that he gave up alcohol for us, his family. He looked at my brother and me, his two sons, and changed his habits for the betterment of our futures. No matter how hard it was he stuck with it and that made me happy and proud.

Bill

My father's friend Bill was the second person I interviewed, but the first person I interviewed with the intention of using what I learned for my thesis. As this was my first official interview as a folklorist, I was nervous that I would stammer, stumble, say something offensive, or do something inappropriate. As I pulled up to the house I gathered my courage and my bag and walked to the front door. Bill met me with a smile and a handshake and led me inside to the living room, where his wife offered me a glass of cider and some cake. I accepted, worried about spilling it on the thick carpet.

Bill was sixty-six years old at the time of our interview, and had been sober for nearly twenty years. He had just officially retired, although he was still fulfilling duties for his organization – he showed off his new Blackberry with pride. Looking at him and listening to him speak, you would not think that twenty years ago he was on the verge of

drinking himself to death. Today he is energetic and independent, concerned not with where to get his next drink but how to get his e-mail off the small handheld device.

Bill started drinking heavily soon after college, developing a "love-affair with John Barleycorn," his slang for whiskey. He slowly but surely slipped from a casual drinker to a man whose drinking controlled his life. Alcohol seemed to be all he needed, and it became something he did because he felt it was the thing to do, rather than wanting it. A concerned friend suggested he talk to a "confirmed alcoholic," which Bill did, but as Bill was not yet, in his words, "at the bottom" he was not ready to change his ways. He was spending less than half of each day sober, and every day he woke up "with that feeling of oh Jesus this is another day do I have to go through this." He smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and ate only at dinnertime, and by then he was usually too drunk to care about what he was eating. His health deteriorated; he gained fifty pounds, his liver distended, his eyes were in bad shape, and he was fighting type-1 diabetes. His mother visited one Christmas, and along with his family and friends she tried to hold an intervention. It was to no avail. He decided that there was no way he could get better, so he would just drink until he died.

His doctor told him he had to be checked into the hospital or he would die. Bill went home, drank two beers, and checked himself in. He remembers feeling at the time that those were the last two beers he would ever have. While laying in his hospital bed two men visited him and he had his first twelve-step meeting right there. A male nurse who was also a recovering alcoholic heard of his problem and spent a few hours with him. Bill left the hospital three days later a changed man, feeling very different from

when he checked in. Says Bill, "What's startling is I can still remember, I can almost re-experience *the change.*" He filled the hole in his life that had been left by alcohol with the things he really loved, seeing the views in his home state of Vermont for what seemed like the first time. Here he describes how his outlook changed after getting sober:

> I could begin to identify with other people's emotions. Which was something I couldn't do before. There were just a lotta things that were different. [*laughs*] I used to, it was the ego, but I can remember I used to, there was a rock in the lawn out here that I mow, I have a riding mower and have now for, we've lived here for thirty eight years in this house, and every time I would mow, I would hit that rock. And, it was like, psychologically, I knew I was gonna hit that rock, but I keep telling myself, 'Naw, I'm not gonna hit that rock,' and I'd hit the rock. – And one day, in sobriety, not too long into sobriety, I'm riding along on the mower, I come up to the rock and I said, 'I don't have to hit that rock, I could go around it.' And that's what I did. You know? It was just, the difference, in thought process. Was unbelieveable. Why didn't I realize that before? I have no idea. (Bill, 2006)

Today, Bill has been in the same profession for fifty years. He moved from regional to state to national positions in his field, eventually being honored with the highest honor in his profession. His liver has healed almost completely, he weighs the same as he did when he graduated high school, and he is a proud grandfather. At the end of our time together, Bill repeated his belief that "the miracle happened and it was an outside intervention from a higher power, not from anybody on this earth that did it for me." His insistence that it was from outside that his change came, and not something he did himself, will come into play further in later chapters.

Theresa

Theresa, another associate of my father's, welcomed me into her home and we set up at the kitchen table. I asked her name and her age, and she launched into a full history of her life, including details from her parent's lives before she was born. Her sprawling story wove in and out of history, back and forth in spurts and drags, painting a picture of a life that was, very early on, shaped by alcohol. Born in New York in the late 1930's, her first drink was at the age of six at a party in Manhattan. Growing up in an Irish-Catholic neighborhood, drinking was a usual activity in her household; guests often had a highball in their hands before they even sat down. She did well in school and got a job on Wall Street right out of high school.

To escape her abusive father she married at the age of eighteen. She and her husband moved to Connecticut and it was here she discovered a whole new world of drinking. Unlike "in New York City, [where] everybody drank a highball," here they drank martinis. She "developed a love-affair with gin," (as Bill developed one with whiskey) and moved to bourbon when whiskey was not doing it for her anymore. She would budget $5 a month to buy a bottle of whiskey, and she would frequent different stores so as to hide her alcoholism. In her words, "I was inebriated a lot," even after she had her first child at the age of twenty-seven. She was always trying to "deny and control" her drinking. She started drinking wine, eventually drinking cooking sherry. Her husband got so worried about her drinking that they moved to Vermont, where her life changed dramatically. She was bored, and her alcoholism progressed, getting worse instead of lessening. She had thoughts of suicide. A self-professed "kitchen-drinker,"

Theresa never found herself in a bar or in bed with a strange man. She just drank at home and hid the proof. She drank and drove. She was always hiding it, mostly with success. Her father moved up to Vermont as well, and like her, the slow life-style of Vermont increased his drinking. Soon she was dealing with both his problem and hers. She was feeling lost and out of sync with everything.

On July 29, 1980, she drank a half-gallon of Gallows Hearty Burgundy, ("a day like any other") knowing she would be drunk by the time her daughter got home from school. Standing at the ironing board she said to herself, "Dear God, I cannot do this anymore." At that moment her friend Gary – a man who had drank more than her at one point in his life – entered her kitchen. She did not know it at the time, but her husband and daughter had approached Gary and asked him to help her. He came there for her, and took her to Maple Leaf Farm for her first AA meeting. At that meeting Theresa was amazed as she watched a well-dressed woman who owned a Cadillac talk about her problems with alcohol. It was here she realized that she was not the only one. Her friend Helen next took her to a meeting in the neighboring town of Stowe, where she said, "My name is Theresa-" but could not finish with the traditional "-and I am an alcoholic." She recounts:

> I can't tell you anything more about the meeting, but I came home, took my coat off, walked in the bedroom, sat at the edge of my bed and looked in the mirror above my dresser. And I said, 'My name is Theresa, and I am an alcoholic.' And I said, from that day on, something just came off my shoulders. I surrendered, is the word I know today. (Theresa, 2006)

Something happened inside of her at that point which she cannot define, but something changed. Her life got better after that and she describes it as a wonderful

journey. Alcoholics Anonymous, and Helen, "the lady who helped me more than anything," became an integral part of her life. Today she "wakes up every morning without a headache" and has regained her self-respect and self esteem. The relationship she has with AA and the friendships she has developed through AA have become the most important things in her life.

Thanking her, I left Theresa's house, got into my car, and drove directly to my next interviewee, Mary "the Broad."

Mary

Interviewing Mary, or as she is known among some of the people I interviewed, "Mary the Broad," was a fascinating experience. It was clear from the moment we met that her nickname was well deserved. Mary was a tough lady and one who had seen a lot.

Mary turned seventy-nine the day before our interview. She became alcohol dependant somewhere in the vicinity of fifty years before that, at the age of twenty-nine. After a "ten year do" she quit drinking. Although alcohol was in control of her life for only about ten years, it had a lasting effect. She still attends meetings today and AA is an integral part of her life.

Within a year of Mary's birth, her older brother died, her sister's appendix burst, and the family house burnt to the ground. Growing up, the young Mary began to believe that these terrible occurrences were connected to her. She was the point of reference the family used when talking about those dark times, as her birth occurred so close to them. Hearing her name always mentioned in connection with these terrible things created low

self esteem. Her first drink was when she was sixteen, at a friend's father's restaurant; it was a rum and coke. It got her drunk and a friend walked her around the block until she sobered up enough to go home. When she was a junior in high school her mother was admitted into an institution and remained there until she died decades later. Her father died right after she graduated from high school. She describes a moment at her father's wake where alcohol started to take control, although this is still a full ten years before she considers her self as alcoholic:

> My mother's in the nuthouse and my father dropped dead, so ya know, please. So my Uncle Carl who was married to one of my aunts, my father's sisters, carried a flask. It was a little sweet he always had a flask on him. So he poured me a drink and it calmed me down. (Theresa, 2006)

At twenty-one she married a man who used to drink a water glass full of whisky before going to work and be fine. She wanted him to join AA, but could not convince him. He came from a big family, which she loved, and she felt especially close to his mother. It was her mother-in-law's death that unhinged her because she felt like she had lost an anchor. She turned nasty when she drank but tried to hide it and control it by, for example, becoming a Girl Scout leader in her daughter's troop because "everybody knew Girl Scout leaders weren't drunks."

Mary's turning point started when she blacked out. She had been drinking at a party, arguing with a man from Chicopee, Massachusetts, and the next thing she remembers is waking up on the couch at home. She learned later that a female friend had taken her home, but to this day she cannot recall the details. This scared her. Around this time too she decided she wanted a divorce. She flew down to Mexico and got one (at least she thinks she did – she does not speak Spanish). The man she wanted to be with

instead of her husband told her, "If you don't stop drinking, we'll never have anything going." She points to this as the final impetus to stop. She later married this man, who was a casual drinker, and she stopped drinking altogether. It was a difficult change for her and she could not quite get through the fifth step, which is "to admit all your faults and write 'em down and share 'em with somebody."

Like Theresa, Mary had an experience at an AA meeting where an "absolutely drop dead gorgeous, I mean built like a brick outhouse and curly hair and everything else" woman surprised her by telling a story of her own alcoholism. This woman, Stella, had shown up to her own first meeting with a suitcase saying she did not know anyone else and was going to die and just needed somebody to bury her. She had at one point been sleeping in different hotels with anyone who would buy her a drink all up and down the east coast, and at the time that Mary met her, had been sober for eight years. Later that night at a coffee shop Mary unloaded her story on Stella, telling her details that she was not comfortable sharing with me. This event was what finally allowed her to put her drinking behind her.

Andy

As I pulled into the driveway of Andy's home I was hit with a rush of memories. The home he shares with his wife Joanne is a place that I visited several times in my childhood, as they were friends with my parents and used to have parties that we would attend. Barns on two sides and the sprawling house on the third surround the short driveway, with the dirt road alongside all of them. Their land stretches back towards

where I know there is a path and pond that I used to go swimming in. There are a few horses grazing in the distance, and a cat lounging on the porch as I walk up the front steps and decide which door to knock on. I pick the right one.

Andy let me in, familiar, and explained that Joanne had to run out, so I would have to return to interview her. So he and I sat down in their living room, and I set up the recording equipment. Andy turned forty-nine on the day I interviewed him. Of all my interviews, Andy and I talked for the longest, and it was mostly due to the fact that I saw so much of myself in him and his story. As a storyteller Andy has a lot of skill. Of my nine subjects, he was among the most eloquent and concise, and further seemed to have a very strong understanding of his past and the path that led to his present.

Andy's first drink was at a neighbor's house when he was a young child. His mother killed herself when he was fifteen; he points to that as the reason that he started drinking in earnest. The emotions he was feeling were so uncomfortable and painful that he felt he needed something to stop it, so he drank and did drugs. For nearly twenty years he drank and did drugs "to excess" and for ten of those years he was a blackout drinker. He could not pass a bar on the way home from work without going in and getting drunk. He first wife left him, and he stopped drinking for nine months solely to convince her to come back to him. He attended AA meetings, stayed sober, and when he asked her to get back together and she refused, he started drinking again.

When Andy finally got sober in 1992, a multitude of events led to his cessation of his drinking. The day after he had started drinking again, he headed towards New York with a girlfriend. On the way he started drinking while driving. He got into an argument

with his companion and she got out of the car. Sometime after that he blacked out while driving and hit a car. He proceeded to hit two more cars and noticed the police were chasing him. He pulled over, got out and urinated on the side of the road, then jumped back in the car. The police pulled him out, beat him up, and arrested him. They tossed him in the drunk tank, and he passed an unpleasant but not unfamiliar night at the police station. In the morning a man who Andy knew from AA dropped in. The fellow had a habit of going around to the drunk tanks and helping the people out of them. He vouched for Andy and the police let him go. Andy took a cab to where his car had been towed, paid the fee, and drove away. In less than a minute he had remembered and started drinking from the bottle of whiskey in the backseat. He went to work, had a laugh about his misadventures with his coworkers, and went home. There, he drank a few Miller Lights, sat down, and contemplated his future:

> So I finished the beer and I sat there for a minute, and I said to myself, 'I can't do this anymore,' I said, 'I'm thirty-three years old and I'm going to jail, again, and I don't think I can do it anymore. I don't think I can stand being in jail anymore, I don't think I can stand drinking anymore, I just don't think I can do it.' (Andy, 2007)

That was the last time he drank. He does not know why; he is not sure what happened but he thinks it was because he had been down before, but not down in so many ways at the same time. AA helped him to stay sober, giving him a community of people he could count on who knew what he was going through.

After our interview, during which we had ignored several rings of the telephone, Andy finally picked up the phone. We discovered that his wife Joanne had a flat tire and

was calling for assistance, and had been for the entirety of our time together. I hoped she would not be too upset, thanked Andy for his story and lessons, and left.

Jim

This interview was special. I arrived early and spent about twenty minutes standing around outside Jim's house and garage. An American flag waved from the garage, flying above a sign that read "VIP Parking Only." I smiled to myself, thinking about how the juxtaposition of sign and icon were strangely appropriate. I looked down at the river winding its way through the Vermont landscape in the dreary January morning, and started wondering what exactly it was I was doing here. *Why was I driving around the state, interviewing friends and associates of my father about events that happened decades ago? Why was I spending the majority of my year in St. John's, Newfoundland? Why was I studying folklore? And why did I settle on this topic in particular?* This thesis was turning out to be one of the hardest things I had ever done, and some days I wanted to throw up my hands and walk away, but something was stopping me.

I had nearly decided to leave when Jim pulled up in an old pick up truck. I started to think that perhaps I was at the wrong house but he got out and smiled, shook my hand, and explained that he had been in town, meeting with a young man who he had recently convinced to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. From the moment we met, I realized that here I would be interviewing a real live helper, in the flesh. This was an important event in the process of this thesis – to realize that the "heroes" of these narratives I was collecting were also many times the "helpers" of the narratives of others.

At the time of our interview Jim was seventy-five years old. His father had been "a rip-roaring drunk," and both his older brothers and older sister were alcoholics. His first drink was at fifteen. He and a friend found a bottle of his parents' wine and drank it. It was the first time he drank and the first time he got drunk. In 1963, at the age of thirty-two, Jim was losing his successful asphalt business because every time somebody paid him in cash he would spend it on alcohol. He would go to great lengths and huge expense to satisfy his need. At times he would charter a plane, fly to Syracuse, New York, and spend three or four days in a hotel, drinking all the while. Once he started drinking, he could not stop. His wife never saw him drunk because when he got drunk in town, he would sleep in his car and go right to work the next day. They had three children at the time and his wife stated she was going to leave him. She called a number she found in the paper for people having problems with drinking. The man she contacted called Jim and asked him to come to a meeting. The man picked him up, took him to a meeting, and Jim never drank again.

Even though he stopped drinking, it took him years to learn how to change his behaviors. Here he relates a story he often tells at meetings:

> In the wintertime, from here to the Interstate it was all dirt roads. This here road that I drive on...the one in Jericho... was dirt. Twenty miles of dirt road and I had to drive fifty miles. I used to be late to work in the wintertime. Come in there ten, fifteen minutes after eight o'clock. Used to work eight to four-thirty. And I had a boss that was a son of a gun... And he says to me, he says, 'You come in here late one more time I'm gonna give you five days off without pay.' Got my attention. And I'd been sober maybe four or five years now. So, the following week, I was on time every day. The third week, I come in about five minutes after eight, and Charlie says '[Jim], you're late today.' And I says 'Jeez Charlie! I was on time the last two weeks,' I says. 'What are you getting on my case for?' He says, '[Jim], you're *supposed to be on time for work.*' You see, I thought that I

> was doing all the stuff that was right. I wanted a pat on the back for doing something right. People do this automatically and they don't always want a pat on the back. (Jim, 2007)

Jim's story here is simpler and shorter than the others, because the bulk of our time together was spent discussing his current role as a proponent of AA. I got caught up asking him questions about how he assists others and the history of AA. From the time he stopped drinking to today, he has personally helped hundreds of people to get sober. One of those people is my father. I will discuss Jim and his role further in Chapter Four.

Joanne

I returned to Joanne and Andy's home to interview Joanne a week after my interview with Andy. I was welcomed as an old friend, I patted the cat, and Joanne and I retired to the computer room to conduct a short interview. The dryer was drying on the other side of the wall, which added a small and constant hum to our conversation.

Joanne was forty-seven at the time of our interview. She had her first drink at the age of eleven at a friend's party up in the woods. She excitedly told her mother about it later that night and received a sound spanking. Three years later she drank again, from a small bottle of Southern Comfort, once more out in the woods. For her sixteenth birthday her mom bought the keg. Says Joanne, "and it wasn't that they were bad parents or delinquent themselves, everybody did it." She graduated high school, went to college, continued to party, and discovered cocaine in her second year. For the next eight years her drug and alcohol use accelerated, until her moment of clarity on an island in the Caribbean.

She was there with her husband at the time. They went out and she was ordering two drinks at a time, because "it takes a really long time for this guy to get back here, and I'm just thinking ahead." The last thing she remembers is being down on the beach with her husband and then she woke up in their hotel room the next morning. This was her first and only blackout. She looked around and saw evidence of last night's activity that she could not recall doing. The idea that she had shared something so intimate and could not recall it sickened her. She went out onto the balcony, looked at the ocean and the slowly dawning realization that she had a problem started to wash over her:

> ...It was like seeing a mirror, and this great life painted all over it, and in a split second it shattered, and behind that mirror was a mirror of what it was really all about. And it was horrifying. It was just, uh. You know, that whole thing was not true. And I was denying and making things so much better thinking that my life was so much better than it was, and it wasn't until that moment and all, you know, that son of a bitch, everything is real? Ever hear that? S-O-B-E-R? Son Of a Bitch, Everything's Real, and that's really what it, it was like all of a sudden I was hit with the reality of the whole thing. Like I wasn't just a nice girl who drank too much, I was a drunk. (Joanne, 2007)

So here she was, with this new understanding of herself, stuck on a tropical island. For the next four days she held this knowledge inside of her, not wanting to tell her husband before she had a chance to tell her therapist back home. She got home, and her therapist told her to tell her husband. She did, very nervously, to which he replied, "Yeah? So what else is new?" Like other alcoholics, she had thought she was hiding her alcoholism, while to her friends and family it was all too obvious. She joined AA immediately and never had a drink again.

Her husband had wanted to leave her but chose not to because he felt she would need help in her recovery. He was aware that after ninety days of sobriety in AA you get

a ninety-day medallion. So he decided to stick around until she got that far and then tell her. Three months after her first meeting her grandmother died, and he decided to put off telling her for a little longer. Had he not cared for her, had he not stayed and supported her even though he wanted to leave, she is not sure what might have happened. But eventually they did get a divorce, and she met and married her second husband, Andy. Andy and Joanne share a beautiful house in Vermont and despite the occasional flat tire, she is happy and secure.

Brad

This was the first of two interviews I conducted over the phone. Brad and Lana (both of their names have been changed) were among the smoothest and more informative of my interviews. Using the program Skype and my computer, I called them at their home. Brad and Lana have been friends with my father for years and years and they readily agreed to being interviewed for my thesis. Brad's story was fascinating and tragic. Listening to it over the phone was an odd experience, because I could not show my interest and was restricted to verbal cues. This interview and the interview with his wife were much shorter than any of the other interviews, which perhaps was a product of doing it over the phone.

A shocking childhood secret came out in the course of our interview; Brad had been molested at the age of seven while coming home from an afternoon at the movies. It was something he only had begun to deal with in his early sixties and he feels it had an effect on his need to drink. His father died the first year he was in the Army, when he was

twenty-three. So going into his early twenties he had already experienced two traumatic events, which, in those days, people just did not talk about. He bottled them up and kept going.

He started drinking when he joined the Navy at the age of eighteen. Some of his fellow enlisted men got sick of him being the only one not drinking and took him to a bar. He does not remember anything past the first drink. He learned the next day that he got "absolutely drunk out of [his] mind," got in a fight, lost half his uniform, fell off the gangway going back onto the ship, and got thrown in the brig. All this on his first drink.

From then on he craved alcohol. He drank all through the war; he drank anything he could get his hands on from moonshine to codeine-laced cough syrup. He also shot morphine from the first-aid kits off the life rafts. When he got out of the Navy he married and became a controlled drinker who for fifteen years only drank on the weekends. This soon got out of hand though, and one day he was caught going into work at a prison half-drunk with a pocketful of pills. They let him off easy, allowing him to pay a fine and resign instead of being fired. He feels they enabled him to continue living this destructive lifestyle.

In October of 1982 he had triple-bypass open-heart surgery. Two months later, in recovery at home, he drank a tumbler-full of vodka and immediately blacked out. He woke up in a Veteran's hospital after going through detoxification under restraint. He was ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment and it was then he realized the issues he had never dealt with that affected his outlook on life. He never wanted to drink; he *had* to drink. It was something he needed to do. As he says, "I was addicted to alcohol and

alcohol ruled my life." When he returned home from the hospital he stayed in his apartment for five days, not daring to leave for fear of picking up a drink. He prayed to the "God of his understanding" for guidance, for help, for anything:

> So I remember getting on my knees again, and asking, as I say, the God of my understanding for help. And, again, I sat on the edge of my bed and waited, desperately wanting to drink, more than I had ever wanted to drink before. When finally, being so frightened of that first drink, I stepped outside, and the man who had become my sponsor in the program was working on his deck. My apartment was on the end of his house. I went up to him, and just shaking and frightened, I just grabbed a hold of him and said, 'Ya know, Joe, I wanna drink.' And I remember him standing up and looking at me and just saying, 'It's about time.' He took me to a meeting which was for beginners, a place called Pause Awhile, which was a counseling for alcoholism, and I spent two or three hours there talking to a woman in the program and that began a series of three or four meetings a day just constant meetings. Slowly I began to realize that I could not do this alone which I had tried for years. That, you know, I could only do it if I relied on the hand of others. And that's, that was the end of my drinking. (Brad, 2007)

Brad was eighty-two when I interviewed him. He got sober when he was fifty-eight. He found himself relying on people twenty or thirty years his junior to guide him through recovery. Through the process he realized that he needed to take the control out of his own hands and give it to someone else – that was the key to his winning the battle with alcoholism. Whether it was the hands of his fellow AA members or the hands of the "God of his understanding," he could not do it alone. And he is glad he finally realized that.

Lana

When I was done talking to Brad he put his wife Lana on the phone. This interview was short as well, again due probably to the dynamics of interviewing over the

phone. Both of her parents drank and both joined AA when she was twelve. Lana started drinking when she was thirteen years old. Her parents were "party people" and always out. She recalls feeling angry at a young age from being left alone so much. She in turn became a party person herself, drinking frequently and blacking out often. She was a "party girl" and did not believe there to be anything wrong with her drinking habits. She got progressively worse. On one occasion she came home, spilled sweet and sour sauce all over the dog, and broke the dish she had borrowed from her mother. The next day a friend called and asked what she was going to do about her drinking. This was the first confrontation. She was thirty-eight.

She was in deep denial for many years because she felt that she knew too much for it to happen to her. She was too aware of the disease and the ramifications of it since her parents were both alcoholics. She had a feeling in the back of her head for a few years prior that things were getting out of control, but she was not admitting it. So she told her friend she would quit. And she tried. She stopped drinking for a while but was miserable. Drinking was an anesthetic. When she stopped drinking she was "very angry, very volatile, not nice or pleasant." She was alienating people around her. About three years after she had "quit," another friend of hers ended up in the hospital in a coma due to her drinking. When her friend got out of the hospital and was ordered to attend AA meetings, Lana went with her because she knew the people, she knew where the meetings were, and because her parents had gone. She started attending the meetings along with her friend and here was where her life started to turn around. She changed the people she hung out

with, changed her behaviors, and stopped drinking for real. She has been sober now for twenty-four years.

* * *

Nine different stories, all different situations. But all have similarities: each person was controlled by drinking and now is in control of that aspect of their lives. All nine of these people crossed over from one way of life into a new way of life. And they all did it with the help of others. In many cases, the help of a specific person made all the difference. My father said, "there's some mysterious quality, there's some serendipity, there's some unmeasurable variable, sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes there's these things that you just can't pin 'em down, there's no formula for it" (2007). According to what has been learned from these interviews, an external force in one's life often creates the mysterious quality he references. If that force is not present then change is much harder, if not totally impossible, to implement. And that mysterious force is the very subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three:
The Helper in Folktale

> ***On the helper:*** *"The enlisting of their aid ... is usually the motivating force in the action of the tale. They are not merely accessories to the plot but are so necessary to it that their absence is almost unthinkable."*
> *(Thompson 1946, 67)*

This chapter explores Stith Thompson's claim that the helper is not merely a secondary character present simply to fill out the plot of the folktale, but an integral and important tale-role without which the folktale would be incomplete. This chapter discusses the role the helper plays in the folktale through analysis of other scholars' definitions and examples, followed by an exploration of a specific folktale. I argue that the helper is not only necessary to develop the plot of the folktale but also serves to make the audience more sympathetic to the hero. Researching this thesis, I found surprisingly little scholarship that specifically addresses the helper and the helper's role; it is my hope to partially remedy that and to demonstrate that the helper is an extraordinarily important tale-role.

As mentioned earlier, Vladimir Propp, the famous Russian structuralist, defined the tale-role of the helper in his 1968 work, *The Morphology of the Folktale*. He studied one hundred folktales and extrapolated thirty-one moves, or functions, which he claimed were present in all folktales, and always in the same order. He also pointed out seven "spheres of action": the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. Propp claimed that spheres of action are distributed among the characters in the folktale in three different ways:

1. The sphere of action exactly corresponds to the character.
2. One character is involved in several spheres of action.
3. The reverse case: a single sphere of action is distributed among several characters.

(1971, 80-81)

For the purposes of this work, I am going to combine the roles of the helper and the donor under the umbrella of the helper. I am not the first to do this by any means; Peter Gilet and Satu Apu, among others, have also considered the two tale-roles as one and the same. Gilet I will get to later, but Apu says in *The Narrative World of Finnish Fairy Tales* that, "the role of hero's helper and that of the donor of magic objects … are very similar to one another – often the same character acts as both donor and helper" (1995, 165). Propp himself acknowledged that the donor and helper were often the same character (1971, 80). I feel this is an adequate and appropriate combination, as both the donor and the helper "help" the hero. Thus, the helper can give the hero something the hero needs to succeed (the donor's function), or can directly guide the hero along his or her journey.

I define the helper as the *character without whom the hero would fail.* As Lüthi observes, the hero "always meets precisely those otherworld beings who know or are able to do just what is necessary to accomplish the task at hand..." and, "…these advisers are by no means omniscient, but they always know whatever needs to be known at the given stage of the plot" (1986, 30). The helper often comes along when all seems to be lost, and often when the hero is on the brink of failure. Without the timely intercession that the helper provides, the hero can advance no further. Already we can see parallels to the narratives of recovering alcoholics.

In defining the helper's actions, Propp highlights the tale-role's importance. He assigns the following actions to the helper:

- The spatial transference of the hero
- Liquidation of misfortune or lack
- Rescue from pursuit
- The solution of difficult tasks
- The transfiguration of the hero (1971, 79)

To the donor he attributes:

- The preparation for the transmission of a magical agent
- The provision of the hero with a magical agent (1971, 79)

Furthermore, he indicates three categories of helpers:

- Universal helpers capable of fulfilling all five of the helper's functions
- Partial helpers capable of fulfilling several functions
- Specific helpers, fulfilling only a single function (1971, 82)

He also indicates that helpers that only fulfill one function are usually objects, such as a ring or a ball (1971, 82).

Propp defined the helper in terms of *actions.* Based on the functions that he attributed to the helper/donor, we see that what the helper does is, not surprisingly, help the hero. The helper typically provides at least one of the following services: transportation, assistance, rescue, transformation, testing, and provision. If the helper gives the hero an object, that object functions as an extension of the helper, providing guidance, transportation, or sustenance. Everything the helper does is defined in relation to the hero. The helper has no one to help without the hero, and likewise, the hero needs the help the helper provides. They need each other.

I have discussed what the helper does and what purpose he, she, or it serves. At this juncture it may be important to explore *who* the helper often is. Scholars of the folktale have identified many kinds of helper. Thompson lists several: Supernatural Spinners, Helpful Dwarves or Faeries, The Grateful Dead, The Extraordinary Companions, Helpful Animals, Helpful Horses, and Helpful Devils or Demons. So helpful are the Helpful Horses that Thompson gives them their own category separate from the other Helpful Animals, as the Helpful Horse "...plays a role almost as important as the hero himself" (1946, 59). Gilet offers another list. He writes that the helper "can take the form of an old man or woman, of an old druid, of a hermit, of an animal, a bird, a fish, or a doll, of men with super-human powers, or of an invisible voice" (1998, 93). Different cultures may have specific types of helper, reflecting the history of belief and values in each particular society. For example, Apu lists five helper categories in Finnish fairy tales: animals, the hero's future spouse, "marvelous" creatures (i.e. companions with exaggerated abilities, giants, and the like), supernatural beings (i.e. the devil, a dead person, etc.), and old people (1995, 166).

We can see from these various types of helper that they are often of a supernatural order. The helper can appear in the form of everything from a tiny ant to a recently deceased person, from a fantastic creature to a beautiful and magical girl. If the helper is an animal, that animal is generally a *talking* animal, and therefore supernatural. In *The Folktale*, Thompson devotes an entire chapter to *Supernatural helpers*. Folktales, or more specifically, *Märchen*, are often about a hero from the natural world seeking out and overcoming an adversary from the supernatural world. Thus, the supernatural helper

functions as a bridge between the worlds, a guide who helps the hero relate successfully to the "Other." The helper becomes the necessary channel between the two spheres. S/he or it is a liminal character, living between worlds and sometimes marginal to society (Gilet 1998, 93). As helpers are positioned between the two worlds, they can guide (or more directly *transport*) the hero from one to the other. The helper, supernatural or natural, acts as the link from the hero's previous life to the life ahead and often possesses information that the hero needs to know in order to succeed in his or her quest. If one considers the main players of the folktale to be the hero, the princess, and the villain, then the helper is the tale-role that brings them all together, simultaneously binding the disparate elements of the story as well.

In his essay "The Language of Fairy Tales," Bengt Holbek simplifies Propp's thirty-one moves into five main categories, the second move being the interaction with the helper. Peter Gilet also distills Propp's thirty-one functions down to only five moves:

- The Initial Situation, ("a breakdown of the normal nurturing qualities of the world about the hero")
- The Interaction with the Helper ("a being destined to form a friendship with the hero and to assist him/her in the adventure")
- The Interaction with the Princ/ess ("a special category of helper")
- The Interaction with the Adversary
- The Return of the Hero (1998, 91-100)

Holbek's and Gilet's moves entirely devoted to the helper suggest that the helper plays a larger part in the action than a simple statistical overview of Propp's initial thirty-one functions might first suggest. Viewed in this light the considerable role the helper plays in the folktale is on par with that of the princess and the villain in importance. This is also evidenced by Gilet's definition of the princess as a special category of helper. This

gives the helper's role a whopping two-fifths of the action of the whole folktale. The helper is a companion to the hero, appearing early in the tale and sometimes remaining until the end, if not in presence than at least in effect.

Gilet emphasizes the helper's role in *testing* the hero:

> The most crucial point in the relationship between helper and hero is their initial encounter, where the hero appears often to be tested in some way, sometimes by being given the opportunity of feeding the future helper or of saving the helper's life (or the life of those dear to the helper).
>
> (1998, 93)

Thus, the hero's reaction to the helper dictates their ensuing relationship. The false hero consistently does the wrong thing, whatever that may be, and thus does not receive the same help as the hero does (often, the false hero even receives a penalty for his failure to do the right thing). In this way the helper provides a sort of litmus test for the hero. The response of the hero and false hero to the helper's questions, demands, and/or requests defines these two roles as opposites. The helper serves the very important function of delineating and defining both the differences between the two roles and the reasons why the audience should admire and root for the hero.

The hero is thus defined in part through the helper by his or her reactions. Holbek writes, "The protagonist must show kindness, gratitude, helpfulness, generosity, courage, faithfulness in service, truthfulness, willingness to follow good advice, and to care for the dead, the infirm, and animals" (1987, 51). The hero's actions mirror his or her inner qualities, which are made clear by a process Lüthi refers to as *externalization.* The storyteller does not, and in fact, perhaps, cannot (well, certainly should not), simply *tell* the audience that the hero is kind, gracious, helpful, generous and courageous; he shows

the audience by narrating the encounter between the hero and the helper. Lüthi explains, "Everything psychological is externalized onto the level of actions or objects… and thus is made distinctly and impressively manifest. Nothing remains vague or enigmatic" (1986, 29). The helper exists to show the hero as good and worthy (and conversely, the false hero as bad or unworthy). This supports the claim made earlier that the presence of the helper makes the hero more relatable to an audience; without the helper, the hero has no way to show his or her admirable qualities in action.

Of course, there are many folktales that do not appear to have a helper. Propp maintains that the helper is not always present, but when that happens, the hero takes on the function and the attributes of the helper. Conversely, the helper sometimes performs the functions specific to the hero (1971, 83). I would argue, though, that when the helper as a separate character is absent, the hero is less easily related to by the audience. If a hero needs no outside assistance to achieve his or her goals, then it is harder for an audience to identify with the character. The helper therefore makes the hero more palatable to an audience. Propp addresses this:

> One should also make mention of the fact that the hero often gets along without any helpers. He is his own helper, as it were. But if we had the opportunity to study attributes, it would be possible to show that in these instances the hero takes on not only the functions of the helper, but his attributes as well. One of the most important attributes of a helper is his prophetic wisdom: the prophetic horse, the prophetic wife, the wise lad, etc. When a helper is absent from a tale, this quality is transferred to the hero. The result is the appearance of the prophetic hero. (1971, 82-83)

The "prophetic hero," as Propp calls him, is an example of what I mean by a less palatable hero. If the hero takes on not only the functions but also the attributes of the helper, then the hero as a character is distanced from the listening audience. The hero

who is wise and prophetic is harder to empathize with than the hero who is confused and does not know what is going to happen next, who needs guidance.

I am not interested in turning the helper into the hero. The hero is the hero. The helper helps. Nonetheless, the importance of this tale-role in regards to the development of the story and the development of the hero of the folktale should not be underestimated. The hero is the tale-role most studied by both scholars such as those I have cited and popular writers such as Joseph Campbell. And why not? The hero is the star; he or she is the character that every story is about. But as I have just argued, the helper serves several functions for the hero. Without the helper the hero would fail. And this necessary aspect of their relationship leads me directly to another point, and potentially the reason the hero is so explored and admired: Who could love an invincible hero? If there is no doubt that the hero will succeed, then the story becomes boring. The hero *needs* the helper, not only to help, but also to *make the hero someone to relate to.* Lüthi's description of the fairy-tale hero supports this view:

> The fairy-tale hero is gifted, in the literal sense of the word. Supernatural beings lavish their gifts on him and help him through battles and perils. In the fairy tale, too, the ungifted, the unblessed, appear. Usually, they are the older brothers or sisters of the hero or heroine. They are often deceitful, wicked, envious, cold-hearted, or dissolute – though this is by no means always the case. It may be that they just don't come across any helping animal or little man; they are the unblessed. *The hearer does not, however, identify with them, but with the hero, who makes his way through the world alone – and for just this reason is free and able to establish contact with essential things.* Usually, it is his unconsciously correct behavior that gains him the help of the animal with the magic powers or some other supernatural character … The fairy tale … shows in its heroes that, despite our ignorance of ultimate things, it is possible to find a secure place in the world. (1976, 142-143) [my italics]

The presence of the helper makes the hero more like us in the audience. And the presence of the helper makes the story itself more interesting, or, possibly, simply interesting. If we remove the helper from Gilet's roadmap, then we have the hero introduced, meeting the princess, fighting the bad guy, and going home. The adventure happens in the middle. It is the helper's section. That is the meat of the journey. It is there that we learn the things about the hero that make us want him or her to succeed, and there that the hero makes the transformation from what he or she was before to what he or she has become after, with the assistance of the helper.

To test my claims, I close this chapter by exploring the role of the helper in a selection of folktales from *Folktales of Newfoundland*, edited by Herbert Halpert and John Widdowson. This two volume set published in 1996 is a massive collection, consisting of hundreds of tales collected in the province of Newfoundland over a span of thirty years. The tales are presented as they were recorded, transcribed from storytelling sessions with traditional storytellers on the island. The transcriptions provide copious amounts of detail, from pauses, gestures, and sounds made during the story to the setting and the surrounding environment in which they were told.

I will start with a recounting of one tale, analyze the role that the helpers play, and then imagine what would happen to the hero if the helpers were not present. I will also examine the role of the helper in several other similar tales from the same collection. I will restrict the tales I explore to those that share the motif number G530: *Ogre's relative aids hero* (Thompson 1966, 361). The helper in these tales takes the form of the villain's

wife, his daughter, or an old woman living in the villain's home. Out of the many tales in the collection, these best illustrate the value of a helper. I hope that in this way I can show the importance and necessity of the helper in the art of the folktale, as well as in the broader structure of narrative.

The tale I have chosen to explore in depth is *Greensleeves*. It is classified as tale-type AT313 - *The Girl as Helper in the Hero 's Flight* – as are all the tales I am exploring in this chapter. This tale is similar in structure to *The Head Card Player of the World, The Glassen Pole,* and *The Green Man of Eggum* in the same collection and the Scottish *The Green Man of Knowledge*, among others. Tale-type AT313 is, according to Widdowson and Halpert, "one of the most widespread of modern folktales," and "is found nearly all over the world" (1996, 99). In this particular version of the story several characters help the hero. First he encounters a trio of increasingly elderly brothers who each feed and house him and give him special items. The most constant and crucial assistance, however, comes from Gilet's "special category of helper," the princess. In their notes to this story, Halpert and Widdowson provide a long list of other versions of this tale, further illustrating its popularity around the world. For this reason I think it is a good example to work from.

Jack is a young lad, excellent at cards, whom one day in his front yard is approached by a little man asking to play a game of cards. Jack plays against this man who his mother warns him is called Greensleeves. He wins all three games and Greensleeves tells him he must find the oldest man in the country (this version of the tale

gets a little confused here; Jack starts out looking for the old man but soon is searching for Greensleeves. In other versions he loses the card game and is told that he must find his opponent within a year or die). Jack's father gives him a pair of nine-mile boots to help on his journey. He goes looking, and meets three brothers in three separate houses, each older than the last. Each asks for Jack to give him a haircut:

> "Good night" Jack said "sir. Oh" Jack said "you're kind o' hairy an' dirty."
>
> "Yes" he said, he said "my son" he said "you aint got nothing (to) give us no kind of haircut or shave have 'ee?"
>
> Jack said "Yes sir." Jack said "I'm off for a twelvemonth an' walk" he said. "An' I got all kinds o' that" he said "for cutting off hair an' one thing an' th' other like that."
>
> "Well" he said "come in my son" he said "an' whatever lies in my power for 'ee I'll do." (1996, 82-83)

Jack does as they request, and each brother gives him a gift: a magic pipe that when smoked shows the way to go, a magic ball that when bounced leads the bouncer to their goal, and a huge eagle. The first two items lead him to the next brother, and the eagle takes him across the ocean to a pond where the daughters of Greensleeves bathe. The last brother tells Jack he's got to steal the clothes of the youngest daughter to get her to help him. He finds the pond where the three girls are swimming, and sits on daughter Ann's clothes. She approaches him and requests her clothes back but Jack refuses:

> Well said "The devil may care" Jack says "[if] you don't tell us who it is" Jack said "you'll never get your clothes."
>
> She said "Give me me clothes young man" she said "I'll give 'ee all kind o' money."
>
> Jack said "I don't want no money, I got thousands o' that now." An' Jack said "There's ONE thing I do want." An' … let th' other two girls go on, so they went on up an' John could see what they were goin to do.
>
> Jack said "Now I WANTS to know where your father is to"
>
> (1996, 87)

She finally agrees to help him find her father, as well as help him in any way he needs. She shows him to her father's castle and informs him he must give each of three guards ten dollars apiece to gain access to Greensleeves. Thirty dollars later he is face-to-face again with his adversary. The old man tells Jack he is not yet in the clear:

> "Oh no" he said "you're not clear yet. Now" he said "John" he said "my son" he said "you got to go…tomorrow morn" he said "I got to hide away from you. An' if you can't find me" he said "why your head got to go on a spear."
>
> "Well" Jack said "it's just as well for you to kill me now as first as last. 'Cause" Jack said "you can turn yourself into a bird an' fly in the air an' turn yourself into a fish an' swim the sea, (well) how in the name o' god will I find you?"
>
> "Oh" he said "you GOT to find me. That's it." (1996, 88)

Greensleeves orders Jack to accomplish a series of increasingly impossible tasks, and each time Jack proclaims that there is no way he can do them. Each time Ann covertly helps him succeed. First, she has him collect oranges for breakfast, inside one of which he finds Greensleeves hiding as he begins to slice it in half. Next the old man tells Jack that *Jack* has to hide, and if Greensleeves finds him his head will go on a spear. Ann helps again:

> "An' now" she said "John take…take off your jacket."
>
> "I'll do it" Jack said.
>
> "Oh" she said an' they went up an'…she put her hand up in the mare's mouth an' took out his jaw tooth.
>
> "Now" she…she said "get up. Jack (you)…"
>
> "Oh yes" he'd get up. So she…Jack got up in the hole [o'] the tooth an' they put the tooth back in. Jack fit in there. (1996, 90)

Greensleeves is unable to find Jack. The old man then tasks Jack with finding a gold ring in an eight-hundred-square-mile stable. Ann helps him and against all odds he finds the ring. Finally, Greensleeves hides once more. Ann informs Jack that the old man is hiding

in the form of a bird, and Jack takes a gun and goes shooting every bird he can find. Eventually he turns his gun on Greensleeves and the old man transforms back. After all this Greensleeves announces that he is going to kill Jack anyway. Jack goes to Ann who creates a diversion with some singing cakes, and they escape together on a little mare that can run nine miles each stride. Greensleeves takes off in hot pursuit, but Ann directs Jack to take a lump of froth from the mare's left ear and throw it over his shoulder. It creates a wall that slows Greensleeves down, but he soon breaks through. Then Ann directs Jack to take a lump of wax from the mare's right ear. This turns into a massive forest that stops their pursuer cold. And they both lived happily ever after.

(Structural notation: $\alpha\gamma^{1}\delta\eta^{1}\vartheta^{1}A^{8}B^{3}C\uparrow[D^{7}E^{7}F^{1}]^{3}G^{1}H^{2}I^{2}K^{4}\downarrow PrRsW$)

First of all, without the help of the three old brothers, Jack would never have been able to find the man he sought. By performing a task for each brother, namely cutting their very long beards and hair, Jack gained their trust and the gifts they offered. This is Propp's step XII, *the first function of the donor*, followed by step XIII, *the hero's reaction.* Had Jack not agreed to help each of these men, he would not have gotten past his own front door.

A character or characters assist the heroes of all tales that include motif G530. In *The Old Woman and her Three Sons* (tale number two in Halpert & Widdowson's collection), an old woman warns Jack and hides him from a giant. She then gives him a red ball that he uses to find his way. This particular character, the "old woman in the ogre's house," has been the focus of several articles, all written relatively recently, that

add to the small amount of academic writings on the helper. Daniela Hempen (1997), Rose Lovell-Smith (2002), and Christine Goldberg (2004) all tackle the mysterious role of this character who helps the hero for seemingly no reason other than pity. These three authors, each in dialogue with the other, take several views of the strange woman, from the assertion that she is present to increase the tension in an already creepy tale to the claim that she is indicative of the assistive relationship of women in a world dominated by men. In *Daddy Redcap*, tale number three in *Folktales of Newfoundland* the villain's wife is cast in the role of helper, granting the Jack the strength of many men so he can defeat the eponymous giant and win her hand.

In the rest of the tales (seven through thirteen in this collection) the donors are the brothers Jack encounters (except in the case of tale eleven, *The Glassen Pole,* which skips directly to the encounter with the villain and his daughter). The brothers offer information and/or items that get Jack to where he is going, but Jack's major assistance in these tales comes from the villain's daughter. In *Greensleeves* the acquiring and acceptance of the help of daughter Ann is crucial to Jack's success. The consequence for failure in the tasks that Greensleeves puts to him is death. Finding Greensleeves by himself would have been an impossible task for Jack, as Greensleeves uses his magic to hide in various forms. Each time Ann tells him exactly where to go and how to find him. In other versions of this story, the villain poses a series of impossible tasks to Jack, and the princess helps him overcome them by either telling him the secrets to success or by directly assisting him. If Jack had not got daughter Ann on his side before approaching Greensleeves, he would have been killed the first night after his arrival at the castle.

Had Jack at any point in his journey decided to go it alone, decided that he did not need anyone's help at all, his journey would have been a failure. And this Jack is cast as a very capable young man, who knows how to get around in the world. He's no rube. But without the help of the various helpers he encounters, his goal and quest would have been unsuccessful. As a result of seeking out and accepting the assistance of others, Jack not only succeeds in finding Greensleeves and saving his own neck but he gains a lovely partner and wife. Not to mention a sweet pair of nine-mile boots. Leith writes:

> The course of human life involves innumerable initiations, crises of separation and loss, countless problems involving personal identity. It is impossible to negotiate these difficulties on our own. In 'The Green Man of Knowledge' Jack transcends his difficulties because he is helped to do so. Most important, he *lets himself be helped.* In my experience, letting yourself be helped is not something quickly or easily learned, so deeply embedded is the notion of independence in our culture. It takes frequent reminders: one reason why a fairytale like 'The Green Man of Knowledge' can be constantly revisited, lived and relived. (1999, 182)

The role of the helper is important and necessary in the folktale but as Leith points out the helper also plays an important role in real life. As Holbek describes "there are intimate relations between living conditions and the content of the tales" (1987, 56). Just as the folktale reflects real life, the helper as a tale-role is reflective of a real life counterpart. As the role of the helper has been largely overlooked in academic writings, so I believe has it been overlooked in our day-to-day existence, and I believe this should change. The result could only be enriching.

In the next chapter, I use the folktale structure to analyze the stories of recovering addicts and argue that the helper fills a crucial role in some personal experience narratives as well. The recovered alcoholics interviewed and the taletellers in Halpert and

Widdowson's collection are the same. They are all the folk. They are the same people; to paraphrase Alan Dundes, *we* are the folk (1980, 19).

As Lüthi states in *Once Upon a Time*, "When something has the ability both to attract and repel one so forcefully, one may assume that it deals with fundamentals" (1976, 22). This is why folktales are so attractive to audiences; they deal with fundamentals. The structure and tale-roles are appealing and appear over and over again because they mirror real life and thus real life mirrors them back. The journeys in both the folktale and the personal experience narrative are the same journeys. The stories are archetypal, as is any story about a journey from a bad place to a good place. The helper is the bridge between those two places. The next chapter explores in greater detail two of the transformational narratives introduced in Chapter Two and explores the similarities between all ten narratives. The points I have brought up in this chapter inform these analyses.

Chapter Four:
The Helper in Personal Experience Narrative

> *Stopping drinking's easy. I've done it a hundred times, as Mark Twain would say, but getting that change and that sense of spirituality, that sense of connection is a very difficult thing to achieve. It's real hard work. And not everybody, in fact the majority of people can't do it. And it's not because they failed or didn't try hard enough or didn't work the program to their benefit, it's just that inner thing that turns, that changes, that blossoms inside of you that you never felt before. (Andy 2007)*

In her entry on the personal experience narrative in *American Folklore: an Encyclopedia*, Stahl says that these narratives serve one of three functions, "(1) to entertain, (2) to be a cautionary tale or to illustrate the results of certain behaviors, or (3) to present some aspect of the storyteller's character and values" (1996, 557). I have found that stories of life turning points such as those of my subjects in fact can serve all three functions, and in the case of my subjects all three of those functions are important, especially within the context of AA. As I have been arguing, it is no coincidence that folktales can serve these three same functions as well. In this chapter I turn to the personal experience narratives I collected and explore their structural similarities to folktale as well as their similarities to each other. I also present in their entirety two of the narratives shared by my father, applying Propp's structuralism to the first and exploring the role of the helper in the second.

Similar themes and structural patterns emerge when the personal experience narratives I collected are all put side by side. Surely a larger selection would be more striking, but even with ten some similar patterns become clear, especially when viewed within the framework of folktale structuralism. For example, in many of the narratives, an absentation of or casting out by a parental figure early in life leads the teller to alcoholism

- a major story event present in the folktales that Propp used in his study. In the stories of my father, Bill, Brad, Andy, and Mary, the death or departure of a parental figure is pointed to as an event which triggered dependence on alcohol in their lives. Andy relates the effect the death of his mother had on him:

> I started drinking to excess when I was 15. What had happened was that my mother had killed herself and I just went right off the deep end. I had a lot of mixed up feelings about that and I think that's when I stopped, on some level, developing because what I was experiencing was so uncomfortable and painful that I had to figure out a way to make it stop and instead of working through it and talking about it I just bottled it all up, and drank and did drugs to excess for what, almost 20 years.
>
> (Andy 2007)

My father ruminates on this point a little deeper, his counselor nature coming through:

> I think my story, I think that there was a hidden kernel in my story that was sort of like a radioactive isotope, that hurt me for many years, and I think it was my father's death. I think that was in there, way down deep. Kind of radiating through out the whole story. ... [When did you start abusing alcohol?] I think my father's death really accelerated that process. Because two things happened, I became deeply depressed, and my mother became deeply depressed, so it was only my mother and I living at home so, you didn't want to be at home, because it was terrible to be around her, and it was just sad. So we hit the street, and in the street, you found drugs. So I would say by seventeen, eighteen years old, I was definitely an addict. (Ed 2007)

Propp's first function is *absentation.* The departure or death of a family member is often the "kernel" that spurs the hero into action. In half of the personal experience narratives I collected, the death of a parental figure has a direct responsibility for the state that the teller's lives later reach. This is a point that might be difficult to realize for the teller if not for the telling of these stories.

Many of my subjects describe possessing an inflated sense of importance and unwillingness to learn from mistakes while their lives were under the control of alcohol. Bill and Andy both told similar stories regarding this. Seen in Chapter Two, Bill references his experience running over a rock with his lawnmower every time he mowed the lawn, and the dawning realization that came after he got sober that he did not have to hit that rock anymore. Andy says "So one thing I've taken away from all this is the ability on some level to learn from other people's mistakes, which I could not ever do. I had to do it myself. Stove's hot, I don't believe it, I'm going to burn myself" (Andy 2007). This quote illustrates the mindset shared by many alcoholics: that they are special and the rules do not apply to them. It also illustrates the fact that it was *because of others* that Andy was finally able to change his ways. The other people he met in AA and their stories helped him to change for the better. Joanne says, "The biggest thing that AA did was it made me just like everybody else, because I thought I was superior, I thought that my case was different, … the rules didn't apply to me" (2007). Theresa says:

> I used to, you would start to say something to me, and I would have a better story than you. You hardly got through yours, whatever was upsetting you, I never even realized, that I could supercede you, 'Well, my story's better I gotta tell you mine.' And I say today, I just listen to people, and I nod my head. (Theresa, 2006)

Bill, Andy, Theresa and Joanne all tell of feeling superior in a time in their lives when they were actually much worse off than the average person. It was through the help of their new associates in AA that they realized the truth of the matter. By learning to respect others they gained a newfound respect for themselves.

Other similarities in these personal experience narratives include a series of ups and downs, each worse than the last, followed by a trip to the hospital. Many of my subjects reported having the feeling that death would be better than the way that they were living. Mary, Joanne, and Brad referenced black outs as part of the impetus to finally stop drinking. There is often a moment where they realize they are making a choice between death and recovery. Theresa says, "I was gonna die, I mean, I knew I was gonna die" (2006). She did not, of course, but often that level of desperation is what finally pushes an alcoholic to finally change their ways.

Gender issues within support groups are a topic that I will not explore here, but I would like to mention an interesting parallel discovered in the course of this study. Lee Winniford's "Examining the Legendary Base for the Telephone Road Subculture's Personal Experience Narratives," is one article that has been written about AA from a folkloric perspective. The legend she begins her article with, in particular, is similar to Theresa's story. Set in the 1940s, a woman enters an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting that is, as was usual at the time, filled only with men. She asks to join them and they dismiss her over and over, as she is just a woman and cannot be a drunk. She then removes a fifth of vodka from her purse and explains that she will drink it, throw it up, and then drink it again if she does not get some help immediately. The men acquiesce (2001, 61). Theresa related a similar situation as having happened to her:

> When I lived in Richford, my father came up from New York City, from the Brooklyn, and he took me to an AA meeting, in St. Albans, … and I went to Enosburg Falls, to meetings on Tuesday night, and you know what the men in Enosburg told me, I was the only woman in the classroom. The men would look at me and go 'What are you doing here? I spill more than you ever drank.' This was 1972. 'I spilled more than you ever drank.' And

> that's what all the men kept saying to me and I thought, 'Maybe I don't belong here.' (Theresa 2006)

She summed up the experience by saying simply, "That's early AA in Vermont." She had stopped drinking once before, but these men had not respected it so she started again. These types of stories seem to be shared by some women in AA, both as happening to them and then as an important part of their turning-point narratives. The descent continues and is perhaps helped along by the then-male-dominated AA telling them that their problem was less because they were women. But beyond that experience and through the sharing of their stories they moved into the realm of recovery, perhaps even spurred on by the dismissal. In the 1970s, as in the 1940s, women were still having difficulties integrating into AA, but in my interviews it was not mentioned that today this is still an issue.

Both Mary and Theresa refer to teaching by example rather than preaching. Story telling is the essence of teaching by example rather than preaching. The lessons being taught may be the same, but the audience might be much more likely to respond to a story than a lecture. The narratives shared at AA meetings are structured in such a way that new members learn from old members by listening to stories, not sermons. Part of the success of AA seems to lie in this basic tenet, that members share their personal experiences with other to encourage change. In each of these narratives the focus is on the journey from being a drunk to being sober. There appear to be landmarks along the way that many alcoholics face, but in the retelling of these events the stories unfold as a difficult journey from one place to another. The tasks are similar, but they are not the

focus. What everyone has to do is different in some way, but their destination is the same: sobriety.

As mentioned in the last chapter, Bengt Holbek deduced that fairy tales were told as a way of talking about subjects that otherwise would go unspoken. Emphasizing with italics, Holbek says:

> *The symbolic elements of fairy tales convey emotional impressions of beings, phenomena, and events in the real world, organized in the form of fictional narrative sequences which allow the narrator to speak of the problems, hopes, and ideals of the community.* (1989, 56)

In the same way that Aesop used animals to disguise his true subjects, Russian people were free to discuss touchy issues through the telling of tales. The structure of fairy tales then is somehow linked to the structure of storytelling in general, in particular tales that one might be hesitant to tell in mixed company. The stories my father shared with me are such narratives; in his opening statements the first time I interviewed him over the phone, he made it clear that these are stories he doesn't share with just anyone. Since I am his son, however, it was unnecessary for him to organize them into the form of fictional narratives, *but instead tell them without resorting to symbols.* The hiding of real world events is unnecessary in this context, as it is unnecessary in many contexts in the "real world," but the story still deals with "problems, hopes, and ideals." Thus, the application of Propp's thirty-one steps to my father's personal experience narrative should produce some interesting results.

As outlined in Chapter Three, Propp found that tales did not usually contain all of his functions but rather some of them. However, he believed that they always appeared

in the same order. Propp also found that *Märchen* usually started at one of two points: either with an absentation or a lack. Also, the characters for each tale were always one of seven personas i.e. the villain, the helper, the hero. If these three rules ring true for my father's narrative, then I argue that Propp's theories may be further utilized. Before I begin with a structural interpretation, I will state that in the case of personal experience narratives dealing with addiction, the "hero" is going to be the narrator of the tale, the person who tells the tale and whom the tale happens to.

This narrative begins with a most definite lack, after the initial setting of the scene. The main character, my father, lacks money to buy drugs. He sets out to alleviate this lack, and his adventure begins:

> This hot, I think it was a Saturday, hot Saturday in August, it was somewhere near Yankee Stadium actually, one of the parks around Yankee Stadium, I was kinda cruising around there and I came across a Gypsy Cab and I had my, I actually had like a little, I had my tools, I had a screwdriver and a hammer and a wrench and a hacksaw blade and a coupla different things that I used to steal these things, and, I came across this cab, this Gypsy Cab and it had a nice meter in it, and it was parked by the side of a ball field in the Bronx. Somewhere around Yankee Stadium. So anyway, it was either opened, either the door was opened, or I kinda broke one of the small windows or jimmied a window open or something but somehow I got in there. And I was crouched down on the- kinda lying down in this contorted position on the front seat, trying to get the meter off the cab, they had various bolts and screws and ways to attach these things they were hard to get off so it took a little while and it took a little energy and it was very hot in this cab. And there I was [*clears throat*] and all of a sudden, I got this sort of feeling, this bad feeling that something wasn't right. And I kinda peaked up from the seat and the cab was surrounded by, if I remember correctly it was mainly Puerto Rican guys, and they had a coupla baseball bats, and they, I guess they were, they were [*laughs*] they were playing baseball on the field and it was one of their cars, one of the baseball players was a Gypsy Cab driver. And they were pissed off and they were gonna - beat the shit out of me, and I just was stunned looking at them, and they were kind of amused, I guess, looking at this guy, trying to steal the Gypsy Cab meter who had just been busted by them. And it

> was a very bad moment, and I think they were gonna hurt me, and just then, through this crowd and it was a pretty big crowd, like all around the cab, just then, through the crowd, came two, plain-clothes police officers, detectives. And they pulled me outta the cab, jostled me around the place, roughed me up, searched me, put handcuffs on me, and arrested me. And in a weird sort of ironic way getting arrested was better than being beaten by baseball bats and I was actually happy to get arrested, they saved me. And they arrested me, and they took me to court, and in court I was guilty, I pled guilty and in court, they took me to jail actually I went to court the next day and in court, the judge said, 'You - are either going to Riker's Island' (which you definitely do not want to ever go to Riker's Island, Riker's Island is not a good place to be), he said 'You are either going to Riker's Island, or you can go into treatment for drug addiction.' And I went into treatment for drug addiction. And that was the beginning of a profound change in my life, and was the beginning of rehabilitation. From drug addiction. So ends that story. (Ed 2005)

My father is a skilled storyteller; he knows how to engage an audience and how to tailor his stories for those listening. In this telling, my father's intended audience included my professor and classmates who he did not know so he felt the need to explain things like Gypsy cabs and the precise location of the crime. He took the first four minutes of our interview to provide background before really getting into what actually happened. I have left the background exposition out of this paper. So, if we break down his story into its actions, starting at minute four of the recorded narrative, then we arrive at the following, modeled after Propp's own example [See Figure 2, next page].

The spheres of action fulfilled in this narrative are those of *hero* (my father), *donor* (the Puerto Ricans), *helper* (the police officers), and *father* (the judge). *Villain,* on first look, appears to be suspiciously absent…

(Structural notation: $\alpha a^{5}C\uparrow D^{8}E^{9}F^{6}G^{3}M\text{-}N$)

Figure 2: A Structural Analysis of my Father's Narrative

My father is a drug addict on the streets of the Bronx.	1. Initial Situation (α).
My father needs money to buy drugs.	2. Lack (a^5).
He decides to steal a taxi meter to eventually sell to get money to buy drugs.	3. Beginning counteraction (C).
He sets out, "cruising around."	4. Departure ($\uparrow$)
My father finds a taxi meter and attempts to steal it, but is caught by a group of Puerto Ricans from whom he is trying to steal.	5. The First Function of the Donor (D^8)
He prepares to die.	6. The Hero's reaction (E^9)
Suddenly, a pair of police officers appear,	7. Provision or Receipt of a Magical Agent (F^6)
and remove him from the situation.	8. Spatial transference, guidance (G^3)
He is brought before a judge who offers him a choice,	9. Difficult Task (M)
my father chooses treatment.	10. Solution (N)

(Propp 1971, 25-65).

In my father's narrative, it appears that step nineteen in Propp's morphology, *the liquidation of lack,* is never actually achieved. Judged as a folktale then, this story at first seems not to follow Propp's structuralism as I had first thought. The hero's original goal is thwarted, and his actions are removed from his hands and passed to a judge.

Initially I had assumed that the Puerto Ricans were filling the role of the villain in this narrative, but after applying Propp's formula it appears the Puerto Ricans are the donors (Propp's D^8, *A hostile creature attempts to destroy the hero*). This led me to rethink the entire structure of this story. If the villain is what is eventually vanquished in the end, then the villain in this story is *my father's addiction.* And that makes this a story about his battle with addiction, more specifically, *the* story about *winning* his battle with addiction. This suggests that in fact, the narrative is actually structured exactly like Propp indicated *Märchen* should be. I said earlier that what my father was lacking was drugs, but in a deeper sense this story is about everything his life lacked: quality of life and stability. In that sense, the lack is liquidated by taking the first step to recovery when the judge forces him in to counseling. Looked at this way, his narrative becomes much more than simply a close call with a beating.

The casting of the Puerto Ricans and the police as the helpers and the subsequent casting of addiction as the villain provide a new viewpoint on this narrative. Without this structural analysis, *the character of his addiction* would not be obvious. But as a turning-point story in my father's life, his addiction should be the villain he overcomes. The judge, in this case, fulfills the role of the father, who gives the hero an "ordeal of choice" (Propp 1971, 61).

If addiction is the villain, then we can extrapolate and apply Propp's initial steps to my father's life prior to the story he tells:

- *Absentation* – His father dies (as he mentions in his interview).
- *Interdiction* – "Just Say No."
- *Violation* – He does drugs.
- *Reconnaissance* – His drug usage increases.
- *Delivery through Complicity* – He becomes addicted.
- *Villainy* – Addiction takes over his life, putting him in position to start the narrative he tells and try to move out from under the influence of drugs, to alleviate his lack.

This is information that I know because I am my father's son; we did not discuss these things or these connections in our interviews. He did mention the death of his father, however, as a spark that sent him on his downward spiral of addiction. This extrapolation is included merely as an indication of the further parallels between Propp's structuralism and the analysis of modern day personal experience narratives of turning points.

Propp's structuralism may not apply to all personal experience narratives. Stories about a funny event or a frightening moment might not fit within the frame of Propp's morphology, for example. However, I believe that narratives involving a turning point in one's life, such as overcoming domestic violence or addiction, wherein the thing or person being conquered or escaped from takes on the role of the villain, lend themselves to this kind of interpretation. This raises the question: is this type of personal experience narrative structured this way because of folktales? Or do folktales reflect our underlying need to tell that kind of story? Or is it simpler still? Are the two types of story just different sides of the same coin? Applying Propp's structuralism or perhaps a modified version of it to other personal experience narratives could help to answer that question. Additionally, future structuralist studies could help to classify personal experience stories

so that they are easier to compare and contrast. With the realization that the *addiction* in an alcoholic or drug addict's story is the villain, a whole new understanding and classification of this variety of personal experience narrative emerges. Several of the people I interviewed explicitly identify alcohol as their enemy. For example, Bill characterizes it this way:

> But the alcohol was in control. I was at a point where I just could not build the day around anything unless the drug was there and it was the only drug that I used, I never got into anything else. Alcohol seemed to be all I needed and was my greatest enemy at the end (2006).

Theresa speaks in a similar manner:

> I just couldn't go on that way, because I knew something was coming around the corner, the evil, the evil of what, I guess it was the evil, the devil was coming right after me, I guess you'd call it a devil maybe or alcohol! Alcohol, call the alcohol the devil (2006).

Both Bill and Theresa refer to alcohol as their major adversary, anthropomorphizing it as "my greatest enemy" or "the devil." This resonates with my decision to cast addiction as the villain in these types of narrative.

By viewing a personal experience narrative through the lens of folktale structuralism, new insights develop that might not be available otherwise. With this knowledge, we can look at other narratives like this one and make some similar observations. My father's second narrative, which I will explore next, concerns his battle with alcohol. There is an element in that story that mirrors Propp's vision of folktale so closely that when I heard it I decided to write my thesis on it.

The following is my father's story about hitting bottom in terms of his addiction to alcohol. It is the story that he typically tells at AA meetings to show to other members that he is one of them and that he used to have a terrible problem but it is now under control. As outlined earlier, it occurs at a time in his life when a therapist told him to try a controlled-drinking experiment: to drink only two beers a day. My father was claiming he was not an alcoholic. His therapist said that if he wasn't, then drinking only two beers a day should not be a problem. My father recounts:

> I would have two beers in my house, I would go to the store and buy two beers and keep them in my house in the refrigerator and I would wait until eight o'clock at night because at eight o'clock at night my wife, at the time, would put my kids to bed. And that would be my time, no disturbances, nobody bothering me, I could sit in my rocking chair and I could … drink my two beers, and I'd be like in heaven, it was what I was waiting for, this moment, twenty minutes, fifteen minutes, whatever it took to drink two beers was the moment I had been waiting for and I would drink these two beers and as soon as I got done with the two beers I would begin waiting, almost consciously, for the next night at eight o'clock. And I did that every day. And finally it dawned on me that this was no way to live. I couldn't live with this excruciating sort of waiting for this two-beer experience and then repeating this waiting for this other two-beer experience. So I knew that I didn't want to be a controlled drinker, and I knew that I couldn't go back to the way I was drinking because it had caused me big problems. I was also depressed. Um. So basically at that point I knew. I knew. I had to stop drinking. Um, my reputation was at stake, my family was at stake. My mental health was threatened, and it just, it wasn't working. So I knew I had to stop drinking, I mean, I knew I couldn't control my drinking so my only option, rather than going back to drinking the way I was drinking, was to stop drinking. I couldn't do it, I just couldn't do it.
>
> So I had these meetings, this meeting list for Alcoholics Anonymous on my cupboard, behind my cupboard, when you would open the cabinet it would be scotch taped behind the cupboard door, and I had it there for about a month and I really didn't want to go to a meeting but as fate would have it, I lived in a building which was directly next to the church where the Sunday night meeting was. So what happened was, it kinda built, this whole, you know, emotional sort of wave built in sort of epic proportions. It was a Sunday, they were having the meeting at eight

> o'clock, my wife at the time was putting my babies to bed at eight o'clock, and eight o'clock was the time to drink my two beers. And that was what I was planning on doing. And I was sitting there, waiting for them to go to sleep and thinking, 'Okay I can drink these two beers' and I was looking out the window and I saw all the alcoholics, gathering outside the church to go in. And the clock was ticking closer to eight o'clock and the meeting was about to begin and the kids were going to sleep and the beers were in the refrigerator. So it was kinda like a moment of truth for me. I could either go to the meeting and get some help and not drink, or, I could drink my beers which is what I really wanted to do but that wasn't working either, so I was struggling with that dilemma. And all the alcoholics [at] the church filtered in and the all put their cigarettes out, filtered into the church, and the moment of truth had come and gone. And once again, I had failed. I had failed to do what was best for me. My kids were going to sleep and it was time for me to just drink the beers.
>
> So I was looking out the window and this guy came by, this straggler came by, and he was just kinda walking by my house headed for, it became obvious he was headed for the church. So I was looking out the window and I said, 'Hey, are you going to the meeting?' And I kinda half expected him to not answer, or just keep walking, and lo and behold, he said, 'Sure, come on!' And that was it. Fate provided the courage that I couldn't find in myself. And I got in tow and I let him take me to the meeting. And I never drank again. I never ever touched alcohol again. That was 23 years ago. And the guy's name, I found out a little bit later, was Late Larry, and his name was Late Larry because he was known for never being on time to meetings. He was late for every meeting he went to. And if it wasn't for Late Larry, that was his purpose in my life. If it wasn't for Late Larry, I wouldn't have gone to that meeting. And I don't know what the rest of my life would have been like. But that was the moment that changed my life. (Ed 2007)

The discussion of my father's first story showed that it is possible to apply Propp's structural analysis to narratives other than folktales and I will not do another full structural analysis of this narrative. Rather, I want to focus solely on the character of Late Larry. He is the character without whom my father would have never stopped drinking. He comes along at the exact right moment, and provides the impetus that my father needed. Just watching the men enter the AA meeting was not enough; he needed this extra push. If my father had not been ready for it, then even Late Larry would not

have been enough to get him into that meeting. However he was ready and Late Larry, although he could not have possibly known it, was in the right place at the right time.

Late Larry becomes my father's helper. And just like the helper in the folktale, Late Larry makes my father-as-hero more understandable to his expected audience of other alcoholics. If he had, for no other reason but his own will, decided to go that meeting, then the story would be much less effective as a means of helping other alcoholics. But with the timely intervention of his helper, Late Larry, he illustrates that he needed help. He could not and would not have done this alone. The scene directly preceding Late Larry's appearance proves that. My father just watches the men standing around outside and going inside; he cannot follow. It took the extra push of an outsider, the always-late Larry, to motivate him.

Before turning to a fuller discussion of the helper in these narratives, it is important to reiterate that their structure is informed by several factors. The overarching feature is their creation within the framework of AA. Each new member of AA is informed by the stories they hear when first coming to meetings, and undoubtedly structures his or her own story similarly. Although individuals differ and other factors may come into play such gender and/or the amount of time that has elapsed between the events and the retelling of those events, the patterns raise questions. Are the stories structured the same way because people mold their stories around the stories they hear? Or is the structure basic and fundamental to the events they describe? I believe that it is a combination of both, that the stories are the same because the events they describe are

essentially the same *and* that tellers frame their stories around the stories they have heard from others. The stops on the road everyone takes are different, but the road is the same.

Traumatic experiences, like those that alcoholics go through, tend to bring them together with other alcoholics. There is a strong sense of insider/outsider in AA, indicated by the importance of the sharing of one's own story of hitting bottom. As my father indicated earlier, having possession of a believable story is your access card, your key to enter into the world. People within the group can be distrustful of outsiders until they have proven that they are the same; that they have gone through the experiences that the rest of the room has gone through. There is a closeness that comes from that. Watson & Smith write of everyday autobiography:

> In everyday occasions autobiographical narrators move out of isolation and loneliness into a social context in which their stories resonate with the stories of others in a group. And even if the story remains unspeakable in the large community, narrators can find ways to convey the unspeakable to a community of secret knowers. The narrative can be coded, signaling certain meanings while masking others before those not sharing the secret knowledge. Phrases or intonations or certain rhetorical gestures become veiled signals to other participants in the unspeakable.
>
> *Thus the everyday uses of autobiography can produce changes in the subject, for narratives are generatively excessive as well as reconstitutive.* (1996, 15)

This closeness generated from the sharing of the same or similar experiences mirrors the functionality of folktales. The folktale was told to others to show that the experiences of life were the same for everyone. Stith Thompson reminds us that, "The limitations of human life and the similarity of its basic situations necessarily produce tales everywhere which are much alike in all important structural respects" (1946, 7). To be human is to be born, eat, fight, fall in love, and die. Folktales were told to help people

get through an experience, to remind them that they were not the first person to go through this. The personal experience narrative of a recovering alcoholic serves the same purpose. The functional similarity is also related directly to helpers; they help others avoid similar experiences and to understand they are not alone. Others know what they are going through. Bill illustrates this clearly with the following words:

> And I've found that people, in the program, understood me even though they'd never met me. The same as I can now understand someone coming into the program for the first time. Even though I've never met them before. And that was enormously helpful to me, coming out of that place I had been, the depression and all that other stuff. I would listen to people tell a story and it was, Jeez, you know, that's me! I think that way! Oh my God, I did those things! (Bill 2007)

Let me return, briefly, to the AA concept of *sponsoring*. Essentially, people are set up to have a helper when they join. Much like a new graduate student who is given an advisor to help them pick what classes to take and what to write their thesis on, alcoholics new to AA are urged to connect with someone they respect who will help them learn the ropes of their new life. AA sets up a helper in their life, so even if a new member happens not to have a distinct helper assisting them before they get to AA, they are connected with one soon after joining. They are encouraged to start relying on other people. The Big Book says, "For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead" (2001, 15). Alcoholics Anonymous sets up new members with a helper and at the same time encourages them to eventually become a helper themselves.

Chapter Seven of the Big Book is "entirely devoted to *Step Twelve*." The first paragraph reads:

> Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail. This is our *twelfth suggestion*: Carry this message to other alcoholics! You can help when no one else can. You can secure their confidence when others fail. (2001, 89)

As practicing members of Alcoholics Anonymous, recovering alcoholics start out in the role of the hero in their own narratives, being helped by the helper in the form of an individual, God, and/or the entire entity of a support group. In the process of their journey and their healing, the recovering alcoholic makes a transformation from hero to helper of others, as part of the larger group of AA, and in some cases, as with Jim, largely as an individual. A similar thought expressed by all of my subjects was the importance of using their narrative to help newcomers understand that what they were going through. When asked how telling her story made her feel, Theresa responded, "It just makes me feel, it feels like its flowing out of me – if I could just help one person with my story, to think before he or she picks up that drink, I'm a winner" (2006).

Jim best illustrates this mode of living. In the early days of his recovery he was a conduit, the informal bridge for many people. Now in a professional role as a counselor and an unofficial role as a visible local figure, he helps people to make the transformation from alcoholic to recovering alcoholic. At the start of his own recovery he went to a meeting every day. As a helper himself he is very good at getting people to realize the depths of their problems through counseling. He is very effective at making them look at their drinking honestly.

> I've helped a lot of people … It's just the way I am, they know I'm very serious, that I'm really committed to them. And I know just a lot of ways to get people to look at their drinkin'… So guys would get honest … That's how people think and you gotta get them to look at their honesty,

> and that's tough. I have a lot of examples about 'Easy does it' and 'Doing things one day at a time.' All our slogans in some ways relate to people. I have a lot of people … I go to a meeting and everybody remembers me, 'Oh Jim helped me this' or 'Jim told me that.' … But that's what it's all about. (Jim, 2007)

After relating two separate instances of people he worked with to get into a meeting, he humbly admitted, "Some people think I perform miracles, but I don't" (2007). Miracles or no, when Jim and the other members of AA help new members through their recoveries, saving them from the death that lies at the end of a bottle, they are performing something very much like a miracle.

In the Big Book, Carl Jung is quoted as saying in response to an alcoholic's query if there was any hope for change,

> Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. (2001, 27)

The helper in each other these stories is the being that assists the recovering alcoholic in achieving this new set of conception and motives. Once in AA, the "huge emotional displacements" are facilitated by a group of people and many times a specific individual (the sponsor) who already holds this new set of conceptions and motives. This recalls the previously mentioned concept of liminality present in the helper of the folktale. The liminality of the helper and the role that he plays in transporting the hero from one realm to another is present in the hitting-bottom stories of my subjects. Just as the helper often straddles the world between the natural and the supernatural in the

folktale and often assists the hero in transportation between the two worlds, so too does the recovering alcoholic straddle the world between the non-drinker and the drunkard, always recovering but never recovered, knowledgeable of the pleasures of being sober and the horrors of being controlled by the drink. The long-time member of AA helps to transport the suffering alcoholic in their perilous journey from under the influence of "the devil" that is alcohol to a safe realm free from the power of addiction.

THE HELPERS

The helper helps. Whether it is the hero of a folktale or the alcoholic in recovery, the star of the story achieves their goal with the help of another. As I mentioned earlier, the helper, according to Propp, does one or several of the following things for the hero: transportation, assistance, rescue, transformation, testing, and provision. With this in mind, I look now at the helpers in the narratives collected from my subjects and explore their similarities to the helper of Propp's morphology. In addition, I will continue to explore AA's role as helper and the methods ingrained within AA's creeds that not only encourage the helping of others, but also necessitate them.

In the following pages I explore the nature of the helpers in these stories and how they compare to helpers in the tales, asking who are helpers and what do they do for the heroes. Again keeping in mind *transportation, assistance, rescue, transformation, testing,* and *provision*, the actions Propp assigned to the helper, I indicate the helper or helpers in each personal experience narrative and the way they fill that role. Holbek says of the hero's reaction to the donor: "The protagonist must show kindness, gratitude, helpfulness,

generosity, courage, faithfulness in service, truthfulness, willingness to follow good advice and to care for the dead, the infirm, and animals" (1989, 51). Just as in the folktale, when telling their turning point narratives recovering alcoholics exemplify their own admirable internal qualities through their reaction to their various helpers. Keep in mind that the following examples taken from stories that these men and women tell at meetings to "qualify" to other alcoholics and to show the distance that they have come.

Dad

In my father's first narrative the police take on the role of the helper. They rescue him from the angry group of Puerto Ricans, assist him, and transport him to jail, where he faces a judge who puts him on the path to recovery. Had the police not shown up when they had, my father might have suffered a terrible fate. The pair of police officers rescued him from harm and delivered him to a place where he was allowed to choose his next step.

In my father's second narrative Late Larry is the clear helper. Jim plays a helper role too, testing my father by giving him the Two-Beer-A-Night test, which my father realizes he cannot pass. Like Jack of *Greensleeves*, he has been given a task that he feels he cannot possibly accomplish and is about to give up hope when Late Larry appears as if by magic and holds out his hand in assistance. Had Late Larry not been late, or had my father turned from the window before his helper ambled into sight, my father would not have stopped drinking on that night. Recall Lüthi's claim that the helper, though not

omniscient, always appears at the right moment with the right information, exactly when needed most.

Bill

Bill cites God as the presence that finally stepped in and helped him stop drinking, but the male nurse who attended him in his last hospital stay and his two friends who visited both fulfill a more physically active role of helper. They are integral in the transformation that Bill undergoes while in the hospital, where he finally realizes he can do something about his illness. From his narrative he indicates that he felt different upon entering the hospital, but it is possible that without the influence of the three men who spoke with him he might have left the hospital and drank again. They aided his transformation through their discussions with him, encouraging his mental shift that enabled him to give up drinking.

Theresa

Theresa also cites God as a source of help in her story. Her physical helper, however, appears in the form of her friend Gary. At a crucial low-point in her experience, Gary entered her kitchen at the exact moment she was admitting to herself that she had a problem and it could not continue. Who knows how many times she stood there and said "I can't do this anymore" and then just continued to do it? It was the timely interruption of Gary that stopped the destructive cycle. She also mentions her friend Helen, "the lady who helped me more than anything." Helen transported Theresa to her first meeting. The

lady with the fur coat at that first meeting told a story that provided Theresa with the knowledge that she was not alone in her problem.

These three figures, each encountered in different physical locations and providing different services for Theresa – assistance, transportation, and provision – mirror the oft-repeating motif of threes seen in folktale. In each situation Theresa had to be willing to accept what was being offered as well, or the help would have gone unused.

Mary

Mary's helper is the woman she met at her first meeting -Stella - a woman who had "gone up and down the coast of Maine, sleeping in different motels with different people all the time, anybody that would buy her liquor…" When Mary met her, Stella had been sober for eight years. Meeting Stella, a woman who seemed to have her wits about her, and who by her own admission had been in a much worse state than Mary ever had, allowed Mary to open up and take the steps towards recovery that she had been unwilling to take.

Stella provided a new understanding to Mary. Without this meeting, Mary may never have been able to admit to another person that she had a problem. *Rescue,* one of the actions of the helper, is present in some sense in all of these stories. In Mary's narrative, Stella rescues her from her until-then inability to share the more unseemly details from her past, allowing her to progress through the rest of the twelve steps. Her second husband also provided an important push, making her choose between alcohol and him.

Andy

As in my father's story, the police play a role transporting Andy from a car to jail. They put him in a position to meet his helper, the man who rescued him from the drunk-tank. Andy was at his lowest, and this man, whose name Andy doesn't recall, saw something worthwhile in him. The man vouched for him when he felt worthless and convinced the police to let him go. The spark this man lit was what sent Andy to AA to try and get his life in order. There he discovered the following:

> One interesting thing about being with a group of alcoholics is that your uniqueness and your illness and your problems are no longer that. Everybody else in the room's got 'em, everybody else has experienced the same thing and so no longer am I just, you know, nobody knows the pain I've seen. Nobody's been in the trouble I've been. All of a sudden you're faced with the reality that this has happened to a lot of people and it's gonna happen to a lot of people and it's not incurable. It's not so dynamically personal that other people haven't done it. They say if it's got a name, somebody did it. That realization also is important to me, that I wasn't just a great big idiot that made all these mistakes wasted the best years of my life, destroyed my marriage, lost everything, dah dah. Well there are people in there that done a lot worse than I did and they've been sittin' there for 10 years, so that adds a new hope. And that's one of the important things about AA is you look at other people and they say I've been sober longer than I've been drunk, and you're like Holy cow. So it is possible. You're not helpless and hopeless. (Andy 2007)

Andy was trapped, not only physically in a drunk-tank but also in his destructive patterns. He might have kept drinking and stopping and starting again, if not for the faith that this nameless gentleman showed in him. Addiction traps the addicted and the helper rescues the addicted from it, but in this case Andy's helper also rescued him from a physical prison and sent him on his way with the confidence he needed to break away from addiction for good. Joining AA reminded him that his problem was not hopeless and he was not helpless.

Jim

Jim's wife told him she was going to leave unless he got his drinking under control. That incentive, combined with another man called Jim who took him to a meeting set him on the path to recovery. His wife provided him with a reason to quit and the other Jim transported him to his first AA meeting. Once Jim attended a meeting he found many helpers in the form of new friends and his desire to drink was curbed. The provision (of incentive) and assistance of members of AA combined to rescue Jim from his drinking. Joining a group of people like him made him realize:

> See you don't get better right off. It's a very slow, I refer to it as plateaus, you know, you really have to do that first step, you really have to look at your life, how unmanageable it was. And I found that it was all of us. Your life is unmanageable whether you drink or not. (Jim 2007)

Just knowing that life is hard for everyone made it easier for Jim to deal with his own. The knowledge that he was not alone helped him cope with the difficulties of life.

Joanne

Joanne's ex-husband, who was her husband at the time of the black-out that prompted her joining AA, had decided to leave her before she told him of her problem and her desire to get better. He did not tell her of his plans, nor did he leave her, but instead stayed with her for the first ninety days of her sobriety. When her grandmother suddenly died he stayed for even longer. He could have left her at any point during her recovery but for her sake he stayed. He provided some stability in a time that Joanne needed it. Had he left her then, she might never have had the strength to continue her sobriety. Alcoholics Anonymous then played a role in her recovery, too:

> The biggest thing that AA did was it made me just like everybody else, because I thought I was superior, I thought that my case was different, you know, I, the rules didn't apply to me. They might have applied to you but I had special dispensation for so many things, and had always schemed my way around life. I got away with these things so I just thought it was, you know, that's the way it was. And when I got to AA and I found out that, as my sponsor told me, I was just another garden variety drunk, and there was nothing special about me, and nothing new that I had done that anybody else hadn't done, and I was kind of appalled. I was like 'Really? Surely I must be unique in some kind of way in this alcoholism.' And nope nope, you're just drunk just like everybody else, so just sit down and shut up and you have nothing to say, cause we know how to get sober and you don't. … [My sponsor] let me know that there was nothing to be ashamed of in my life because anything that had a name, if something had a name somebody had done it before you. So you're not the worst person in the world, cause somebody else has already done that. (Joanne 2007)

Support groups like AA provide their members with the comfort of numbers and the reassurance that they are not alone.

Brad

Brad reached out to his friend Joe when he had nowhere else to turn, and Joe transported him to his first meeting. Brad's reaching out was at a very low point for him. Had Joe been unreceptive or unresponsive, Brad might have never recovered. Joe was aware of the problem Brad had and was ready to help when approached. He was the right person at the right time, knowing, as Lüthi said of the helper, whatever needed to be known at that given stage in the plot of Brad's narrative. Here Brad describes the moment he decided to go to the man who would be his helper:

> You know, this man had been trying to help me, probably for three or four years and as much as I loved him, I rejected that help. Because the drink was stronger. But it just came to that point when I couldn't stand myself. I couldn't stand myself. And the only thing I knew, I had to ask somebody for help. Or just go on being a drunk. And I didn't want that. I didn't want

> that anymore. And sometimes you know that has to happen. That someone has to come right down to that fine line. To where, you know, you're going to ask for help or you're going to die. And I reached that line. I reached that point in life where it was one or the other. It was either ask for help or die. So I decided to live. But it comes down to a real real fine point, you know and that's ah, and I knew, I knew. What brought me to my knees was the fact, that I didn't wanna die, I didn't wanna drink. And I couldn't do it alone. (Brad 2007)

He couldn't do it alone. That sentence sums up both the teachings of AA and the basic theme of my thesis. Brad needed help, he was ready for it, he went looking for it, and he got it. The point when he reached his threshold coincided with a helper being available in his vicinity. These two events, together, are the beginning of the healing process for a recovering alcoholic.

Lana

Lana cites God as well as the first friend that confronted her as those responsible for her recovery. Another friend ended up in coma due to drinking, and in assisting that friend back to health, she found herself healing too, as Jack had to assist the three old brothers to advance his quest in *Greensleeves.* Holbek reminds us that the protagonist must sometimes care for the infirm to gain the help needed to succeed. In Lana's case, by caring for her sick friend she found in herself the desire to change.

In these stories, who are their helpers? They are, specifically, the police, Late Larry, Jim, God, a male nurse, two visiting friends, Gary, Helen, the lady in the fur coat, Stella, the man at the drunk tank, a wife, a husband, Joe, and a sick friend. They fall into several categories. God is mentioned by several of my subjects, and since He is God He

shall be a category unto Himself. The police are also in a category by themselves, that of public servants, although they function they fulfill – transportation – is shared by several of the other helpers. Spouses and friends are another category, and the final and largest category is members of AA. In Alcoholics Anonymous, members eventually become a helper themselves. The role of hero and helper do not merge, but rather members of AA fulfill the role of helper in the narratives of new members.

It is important in all these cases that the hero of the personal experience narrative be willing to *accept* the help he or she is given. Just as a folktale hero must prove himself by reacting correctly to the advances of the helper, so too must the hero of the personal experience narrative. The preceding section also highlights the major importance that AA plays in the recovering of an alcoholic, primarily through the lesson that *you are just like everyone else.* AA instills in its members the supreme importance of helping, teaching that helping others is healing not only for others, but also for you – that telling your story serves a dual purpose. My father explains:

> You know, you might have memories of robbing somebody, you know, you might have memories of being down and out, like my moment in the abandoned building. They're not memories that you wanna share or that have any intrinsic worth or value or purpose. In fact they're usually shrouded in shame. And negative emotions. But when you go to an AA meeting, and you have the courage to reveal some of those truths about yourself, the people in the meeting accept you. They know, they understand, they know you have the same disease as they have and there may be newcomers in the meeting, when they see your present self, you know, that you're in recovery for twenty three years, and that you have a wife and you have a home and you have a car and you have a job and you have children and you're respectable and you're healthy, they see that and they hear about these experiences you had in the past, they trust you and you become a role model to them. So the experience of recovery changes experience of the past that had very little worth into experiences that are extremely valuable. And it's kinda like a magic, nowhere else, I don't

> know anywhere else where that can happen, sort of a magic transition in the meaning of your past, **the meaning of your past actually changes because of the context in which you express it in the present**. It's like an alchemist. Making gold out of lead. It's like that. … It also, besides being good for the people who are the recipients of your story, it's wonderful for you, it's so healing for you, because you can use some of those experiences that you were once so ashamed of to help others. And you also unload it and get it out. It's therapeutic. (Ed 2007)

These stories are told primarily to other alcoholics in meetings. The audience is listening to these stories to learn about the teller, and the teller is telling to give the listeners hope. The helper serves the exact same purpose, showing the teller to be flawed and needing help – and telling the story from a place where they are in a much better situation. The stories say, this successful happy person was just as bad as you once, and with *the help of someone else*, they got better. The message is: So can you

The turning-point stories I collected are structured in a way that makes sense; they are structured the way life generally progresses. Most listeners understand this order, which is perhaps why we like it. This is the same reason we like folktales. These stories are structured *like life is structured,* and pleasing stories reflect the structures we are already familiar with from just being alive. These turning-point personal experience narratives are structured in a way that helps people make sense of the world. They give people a structure that allows them to cope and understand and interpret their own life, just like folktales give people a medium through which to cope with the world and deal with sensitive issues. Through urging people to story their life like a folktale, AA forces people to get that healing benefit also present in a folktale telling.

Each narrative I collected involves the coming together of several factors: an individual at their lowest moment and someone around to help them at the same time.

This is the moment that can make all the difference. In every story I collected, at a pivotal point in the teller's life, a character or characters intervened. Without intervention from an outside force, the teller's story would have taken a very different course. The narrators of the stories I collected are the "blessed" that Lüthi mentioned; the heroes of these modern day folktales (1976, 142-143).

Chapter Five:
Conclusion and Beyond

In the study of folklore, some types of narrative have more in common then their myriad genres and sub-genres might suggest. Both folktales and personal experience narratives have their bases in real life and therefore exhibit structural and functional similarities. Since these two genres share a structural foundation, using methods developed for one genre to study another can be potentially illuminating. It forces scholars to analyze texts in a way that they might not otherwise. By studying a certain text through the lens developed for a different type of text, connections and concepts that may have remained obscure become clear.

The helper is an important tale-role that has been thus far underappreciated in folktale scholarship. An analysis of the position the helper plays in the *Märchen* shows that without the helper, the hero would fail at his goals. The helper's presence in the folktale not only enables the hero to succeed but also endears the hero to the audience. A narrator shows the meritorious qualities of the hero through his reactions to the helper, and more than that, by relying on the helper the hero is shown as fallible and thus similar to the listening audience.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, members are encouraged to share their stories. The stories they tell about hitting bottom frequently follow a structure similar to folktale, and frequently contain a character that functions as the hero's helper. The helper and the underlying structure of personal experience narratives about turning points are what makes the telling of these kinds of narratives as helpful as they are – listeners discover

that change is best achieved by seeking and being open to help. This method of recovery is more helpful than simply speaking one-on-one because the knowledge that a group of people has gone through what you are experiencing is more comforting than learning that just one person shares your experience and feelings. It is more helpful than speaking to others who have not experienced what you have for the same reason. Support groups today play a very important role in recovery from addiction and other negative life events. Surrounding yourself with a group of people who know *exactly what you are going through* provides comfort and eases the potentially bumpy road to recovery.

I maintain that in many cases Alcoholics Anonymous (and by extension, other recovering or recovered addicts) can fill the tale-role of the helper. The addict on the road to recovery starts in a world of addiction. The goal is a world free from addiction. Alcoholics Anonymous, being a group of people who have lived in both worlds, is a liminal organization that guides or transports the addict from one world to another, eventually (in successful cases) freeing the hero (the addict) from the villain (addiction). These stories and the helpers in them remind us that human beings depend on others to get through tough times. In the folktale and in the turning-point personal experience narrative, the hero would fail without the help of the helper.

A study like this reveals much, but leaves a lot uncovered. There is of course always more work to be done. Propp's helper is an important tale-role and it deserves more study. As of yet there have been no book-length studies of the under-explored helper, but the discipline of folktale studies would undoubtedly benefit from one. An in-depth cross-cultural study of the helper would, when paired with the hefty scholarship on

the hero, provide new outlooks on the structure and meaning of *Märchen*. Additionally, exploring the cultural relativity of this concept – how helpers in other cultural settings are different from one another – would likely yield some interesting results. Applying analytic tools developed for one genre to another has been useful in this study. Illuminating discoveries might also be made by using legend scholarship to study myth, or personal experience narrative scholarship to study folk tale.

Stories like the ones I collected are told many times in many settings, and they shift focus and are reshaped over time. Recording several versions of someone telling their story and noting how they are different in each circumstance would be helpful in determining the effects that audience and time elapsed since the event have on a story. More specifically, the structure of AA narratives calls for more study. As Warhol & Michie point out in their excellent article on recovery narratives:

> A powerful master narrative shapes the life story of each recovering alcoholic, an autobiography-in-common that comes to constitute a collective identity for sober persons... Put in its simplest terms, the master narrative is that the recovering person admitted to addiction, gained a faith that a "higher power" could provide relief if the addict were to take certain actions, and reaped the spiritual and material benefits of taking those actions within the A.A. program. (1996, 328)

They imply that AA discourages different versions of the master narrative, and thus perhaps the structure shared by so many narratives within the organization is imposed rather than a reflection of similar experiences. Gathering the stories of people who have recovered without the assistance of Alcoholics Anonymous and comparing their structures to those who are members of AA could explore this question.

I have attempted to discover the reason that some people recover and some never manage to, but exactly why remains unclear. The situation illustrated by the following quote must happen frequently, and for every turning-point narrative told by a recovering alcoholic there is probably another's story that will never be told.

> There is a young fella who is drinking exactly the way I did. And feels exactly as I felt. He hates himself, he wants desperately to stop drinking. He has come to me and said he identifies with me that he knows there is help – and I said to him 'Do you want help?' And he looked me right square in the eye and he said 'I can't bring myself to ask ya.' So I said, 'Well you know whenever you are ready, you ask somebody, not necessarily me, but you ask somebody that you can identify with to help you.' And he just looked at me and he said, 'Okay.' Now, he'll disappear for a few months and he'll come back and he always comes up to me and says 'I'm back,' and I'll say 'I know you are, I know you are. And I'm glad.' And he'll have, you know, you can see little tears glistening in his eyes, and he'll say 'I can't say it, I can't say it.' And he'll just walk away. And I remember being at that point, where I could not say 'Please help me.' So hopefully, the day will come when he will say it. It's a sad sad thing. But this is why I tell my story. So somebody, like this young fella, can come up and say 'I identify with you. Please help me.' (Brad 2007)

Further study of the narratives of alcoholics who never succeed in their quest to break free from addiction could provide an answer to this troubling question.

* * *

The focus in our society on the importance of the hero, on doing it yourself, on getting through it alone, and on toughing it out creates a hardship for many, I believe. If we could learn to focus on who our helpers are, and on who we are helpers *to*, then life might be a little easier. These stories illustrate how there can be overlap between the two roles; that one does not need to give up the role of hero in their own story to be helper to another. We are all constantly evolving in our roles and although we are always the heroes of our own narratives, we are the helpers in the narratives of many others.

My life has been changed by this work. I am closer to my father and I have a new appreciation for the sacrifices and difficult choices he made for his family. I know more about myself than before, and am more aware than ever of my potential for alcoholism. And I *definitely* have a profound and deeper respect for the helper; the helper resonates with me because I want to help others and because I am very aware of how much others help me. I do not ask for help easily so when I do, I really need it. And I really appreciate help anytime it is offered.

I am enamored by the concept of creation. I said at the beginning of this work that *I love stories.* I love them because they are the best way for us to tell others about ourselves and show what we believe in. They serve so many purposes: entertainment, education, warnings, therapy. The healing power of story is something that our society appears to be latching onto these days. Personal experience narratives are everywhere: on TV and on the Internet on sites like Myspace and Facebook and countless blogs. An understanding of why and how people say what they do could help navigate this newly autobiographically-heavy world. I turn once more to Smith & Watson:

> Through assembling autobiographical memories one more time, personal narrators can turn an interpretation of and judgment about the past, however inflected by previous knowledge, into a countermemory. That is, they can remake their understanding of the "truth" of the past and reframe the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past.
>
> In this way, autobiographical narrators become agents in and of the story, momentarily and not uncontradictorily agents of their own ordering imperative. Seizing the occasion and telling the story turn speakers into subjects of narrative who can exercise some control over the meaning of their "lives." This assertion of agency is particularly compelling for those whose personal histories include stories that have been culturally unspeakable, for instance, histories of

child abuse and spouse battering,
interracial marriage,
homosexuality,
alcoholism,
mental illness, and
disability.

> These have been among the unrecited narratives of American culture/s. The very conditions of their unrecitability sustain the citations and recitations of privileged cultural narratives and privileged cultural identities. In citing new, formerly unspeakable stories, narrators become cultural witnesses insisting on memory as agency in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning. These witnesses also participate in the cultural work of reframing the meanings of the speakable, of voicing the speakable differently. (1996, 15)

By speaking of our pasts we structure our presents and our futures. By being aware of that, we can use that knowledge to shape our lives and the lives of others the way we want them to be. Let me end with a direct quote from my interview with Joanne. These are the words that she ended our time with, and words that I think describe this juncture:

> AND THEY ALL LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

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