

## **STORY FORMED IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE**

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**ABSTRACT.** Story formed identity seems to be an increasingly prominent way for conceptualizing the self. For the most part discussions about story formed identity appear to have existed as somewhat isolated voices within the respective disciplines of psychology and Christian theology. This essay is a product of bringing the two voices explicitly into dialogue with each other. The discussion in this paper is framed by an understanding of the dialogical self, and highlights the ways in which the conversation between disciplinary ideas is agreeable and where there is the potential for disagreement. The potential for disagreement seems to center on the theological assumption that the transformative experience of God's self-giving love may be a necessary condition for adaptive self-construction. Ideas about story formed identity are used to elaborate on the experience of narrative incoherence, and provide ways to resolve the tension between voices at the individual-experiential levels of analysis.

**Key words:** narrative identity, dialogical self, spirituality, theology

Conceptualizing the self has long occupied a central place in the discipline of psychology (Cushman, 1990; Hermans, 1996; White, 2004). One conceptualization that appears to have become more prominent in the psychology literature is that of story formed identity (e.g.: Angus & McLeod, 2004; Dimaggio, 2006; Dimaggio, Hermans, & Lysaker, 2010; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Hermans, 1996, 2004; McAdams, 2005, 2006; White, 2004, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Influenced by social constructionist and constructivist philosophies, ideas about story formed identity do not reside exclusively within the discipline of psychology as similar ideas have informed Christian theological understandings of the self (e.g.: Cataldo, 2008; Erickson, 1999; Gergen, 2002a, 2002b; Hauerwas, 1981, 1999; Volf, 1996). However, one could argue that the presence of the self as story formed identity in the theological literature stems from exchanges with the psychological literature that have already taken place. Nevertheless, the conceptualizations appear to have for the most part remained in their respective discipline specific literatures as isolated voices or monologues (see also, Gergen, 2002a, 2002b; van der Ven, 2002).

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The purpose of this essay is to bring the two voices into explicit dialogue with each other. A dialogical metaphor is used to frame the discussion at disciplinary and individual-experiential levels of analysis: “as different voices these characters exchange information about their respective *Mes* and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self” (Hermans, 1996, p. 29). By disciplinary level of analysis, I mean facilitating an exchange of ideas found in the respective literatures, with the understanding that the exchange occurs at the individual-experiential level of analysis. By individual-experiential level of analysis, I mean an inner dialogue between self-aspects constructed via experiences of self-other relating and self-God relating in religious and non-religious contexts.

In many ways the dialogue between psychological and theological ideas is agreeable and harmonious; and yet, the dialogue contains disagreement and tension particularly when theologically distinctive assertions enter into the exchange. Disagreement and tension however allows for a more complex conceptualization to emerge and is therefore embraced as necessary for advancing inter-disciplinary conceptual understanding. In addition, at the level of individual phenomenology, dialogue is thought to facilitate sense-making of lived experience and adaptive self-construction (Dimaggio et al., 2010). The essay is therefore simultaneously about conceptual sense-making of disciplinary ideas but also reflects intrapersonal-experiential sense-making at the level of individual self-construction. Individual level self-construction is informed by the internal dialogue between different aspects of the author’s own experience, making the essay a story about the author’s own story formed identity.

### **Situating the Dialogue: The Phenomenology of Self-God Relating**

While some persons may emphasize the differences between religion/religious and spirituality, the constructs overlap significantly, particularly in the everyday experience of many people (Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2006; Hill & Pargament, 2003). Shults and Sandage (2006) defined spirituality as “ways of relating to the sacred” (p. 161), with “sacred” referring to persons or objects of ultimate devotion, which includes relating to Deity. Relating to the sacred may occur in religious or non-religious contexts, and many people relate to the sacred both within and beyond religious contexts over time (Shults & Sandage, 2006). For many persons then spirituality and religion are best understood as interactive and overlapping. In addition, self-God relating is phenomenological, and therefore within the purview of psychological theorizing and research. This essay involves the application of the dialogical metaphor to individuals’ experience of God as other with whom they relate. It is an essay about the psychology of religion and spirituality, informed by ideas about story formed identity found in psychological and theological sources.

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

Empirical research has generally demonstrated consistent positive associations between religious experience/spirituality and psychological well-being (e.g., George et al., 2002; Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Plante & Sharma, 2001; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Seybold & Hill, 2001), although negative mental health outcomes have also demonstrated associations with spirituality (e.g., Cashwell, Glossof, & Hammond, 2010; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000; Koenig, 2009). Persons also relate to the sacred from an array of complex motivations including: as means of gaining control over impulses, or resolving emptiness (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008); seeking intimacy and emotional connection, or what some have called spiritual dwelling (Sandage, Link, & Jankowski, 2010; Wuthnow, 1998) or communal growth (Bauer & McAdams, 2004); personal meaning-making and purpose-finding, or what some have called spiritual seeking (Sandage et al., 2010; Wuthnow, 1998) or agentic growth (Bauer & McAdams, 2004); and anxiety-soothing and comfort seeking during times of duress (Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Along the lines of the latter, attachment theory has received considerable attention as an organizing theory for studying religious motivations, and does so by framing self-God relating in terms of safe haven and secure based functions and/or along the attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

Research on involving clients' spirituality directly in the therapeutic process has demonstrated effectiveness (e.g., Worthington & Sandage, 2001; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996), and this seems particularly pertinent given that increasing numbers of religious persons presenting for psychotherapy seem "uncertain how to connect their faith or spirituality to their lives," or seem to do so in maladaptive ways (Killmer, 2006, p. 56; see also, Cashwell et al., 2010; Cataldo, 2008). It may be that persons do not have language for making-sense of or talking about their religious experiences in meaningful ways (Cashwell et al., 2010; Cataldo, 2008; Erickson, 1999), let alone have some ideas about how to bring their religious experiences into beneficial relationship with other self-other relational experiences. Ideas about story formed identity, and in particular the metaphor of the dialogical self, are offered as possible aids or devices that might foster individual sense-making and adaptive self-construction.

The empirical literature and the anecdotal practice literature contain multiple means of describing and assessing the phenomenology of persons' relationship to the sacred (see also, Hall & Edwards, 2002; Hill & Pargament, 2003). The findings of both positive and negative mental health outcomes, and the range of motivations for self-God relating, suggest that persons' relationship with the sacred can be characterized along dimensions of functional-dysfunctional, adaptive-maladaptive, or developmentally immature-mature. From the perspective of dialogical self theory, relationships with the sacred that are associated with negative mental health outcomes can be depicted as

experiences that range from fragmentation (Cataldo, 2008) to fusion between experiences of self-God relating and experiences of self-other relating. Extremes on the fragmentation-fusion continuum coincide with “clinical observations [that] suggest that both restricted multiplicity and its opposite, an excessive number of voices crowded together in the stream of consciousness, are linked with significant psychopathology” (Dimaggio et al., 2010, p. 381). Fragmentation refers to the lack of dialogue between self-aspects and connotes a distance or cutoff between self-aspects, and is captured by the phrase “restricted multiplicity.” Fusion is captured in the phrase “crowded together” and seems to connote the idea of too much closeness between self-aspects. Varying degrees of fragmentation to fusion seemingly account for the observed phenomenon of spiritual bypass (Cashwell et al., 2010), which involves interpreting experience exclusively in religious terms. Spiritual bypass can be described as a monologue in which religious self-aspects silence alternative non-religious voices, or in which self-God relating silences alternative self-other relational experiences, and may generally be regarded as a dysfunctional form of spirituality.

Elsewhere Hall and Edwards (1996, 2002) developed the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) to measure functional-dysfunctional, adaptive-maladaptive, or immature-mature, forms of relating to the sacred. The SAI assesses self-God relational experiences along five dimensions; two of which seem particularly noteworthy when considering the phenomena of fragmentation-fusion. Spiritual Instability (SI) refers to an emotionally- and relationally-dysregulated self-God relational experience. SI demonstrated theoretically consistent associations with measures of alienation, insecure attachment and egocentricity. The Spiritual Grandiosity (SG) subscale measures self-God relational experiences that are consistent with characteristics of narcissistic personality. Both SG and SI seem consistent with experiences of fragmentation and/or the fusion of self-aspects where lack of self-in-relation awareness and/or the absence of dialogic relating between self-aspects can correspond to various forms of dysfunction (Dimaggio et al., 2010).

It also seems worth noting that experiences of fragmentation between self-God self-aspects and other self-aspects, or experiences of crowding together between self-aspects, need not only link to significant psychopathology; the latter defined by conditions such as personality disorders and schizophrenia (Dimaggio et al., 2010). There appear to be varying degrees of fragmentation-fusion that correspond to varying degrees of functional-dysfunctional intra- and interpersonal relating. Narrative incoherence (McAdams, 2006), or an experience of “dual citizenship” (McAdams, 2005, p. 115), can be a developmentally normative experience with varying degrees of function-dysfunction. The incoherence may be characterized by the silencing of one part over another or perhaps by a crowding of competing voices which can be distressing and disconcerting to varying degrees, and yet not approach conditions of significant psychopathology. The author’s own experience is in line with a

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

developmentally normative experience of fragmentation; that is to say, I have experienced disconnection between self-aspects grounded in religious experiences and those self-aspects formed outside of religious contexts or self-God relating (see also, Dueck, 2002; Hasker, 1992). Most notably perhaps is the split I felt at times between my professional psychotherapy training that did not explicitly or consistently attend to clients' self-God relational experiences in the therapy room, and therefore did not attend to a significant part of my lived experience. In addition, I have experienced disconnect trying to reconcile training in positivist research methods with the hermeneutic methods learned in my theological training. The splits involved not knowing how to fit the contrasting experiences together or to make sense of one part of myself in coordination with the other part in any coherent manner. In fact, more often than not one part was kept silent in the presence of the other, depending upon the particular social context; or at least kept silent until I deemed it safe enough to give voice to the other self-aspect. Yet, even though the silenced part was voiced, it did not result in coherence as there was a sort of duplicity about it; that is, an experience of "not quite fully me."

It seems likely that some of religious persons' narrative incoherence stems from larger cultural "discourse[s] of public or private life" (Erickson, 1999, p. 122) and/or cultural narratives that "compartmentalize" persons' experiences (Killmer, 2006, p. 56). It also seems likely that some incoherence between self-aspects for many religious persons is due to the prevalence of a "rational control model of spirituality" (Maddox, 2001, p. 5), which portrays persons as disembodied minds, disembedded from their social context (Hauerwas, 1999; Jankowski, 2003; Maddox, 2001). Religious experience seems not only relegated to the private world of the individual, but also relegated to intra-personal splits between reason over and against emotion, mind over and against body, and an autonomous self that is independent of other (see also, Labouvie-Vief, 1994). A rational control model frames spirituality "almost exclusively in non-developmental and 'decisionistic' terms - principally, as discontinuous moments of obedience to God's commands" (Leffel, 2004, p. 130). A rational control model has also been identified in the psychotherapy literature, with similar assertions about the need for "'higher' intellectual processes [to] direct feelings and actions" (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988, p. 216). Last, a rational control model shares similarities with McAdams and Albaugh's (2008) depiction of the religious motivation for self-God relating that stems from a desire for impulse control, or keeping emotions in check and suppressing "sinful" passions. So, for example, an individual in distress may be expected to exercise the rational capacity to choose otherwise, and may be admonished to dutifully persist in the study of scripture or seek God in prayer so that conformity to God's thoughts and perspective may occur; thereby resolving the distress. It is not the use of reflexive capacities or the exercise of human agency that distinguishes a rational control model from alternative models of spirituality, nor is it any particular spiritual practice; rather it

is the rationalist ideals which guide the ends to which those means are directed that seems to account for the potential for incoherence.

In contrast, the notion of story formed identity embeds persons in social contexts and embodies their experiences, such that there is a complex systemic relationship between cognition, affect and behavior, mind and body, and self and other. In this essay, ideas about story formed identity are offered as a way to describe and make sense of the phenomena of persons' relation to the sacred. An exchange of ideas about story formed identity contained in the psychological and theological literature is presented as one means for potentially reconciling self-other and self-God self-aspects that may be fragmented from each other and/or crowded together. The essay consists of a description of the ways in which psychological and theological framings of the self as story formed identity exist in harmonious dialogue. A theological distinctive in the framing of the self as story formed identity is then introduced, with particular attention to the potential tension and disagreement the distinctive creates in the inner dialogue about disciplinary ideas. Last, spiritual transformation is described at the individual, phenomenological level of analysis as a form of dialogue that can result in adaptive self-construction. The latter defined in terms of narrative coherence and differentiated relating between self-aspects.

### **Disciplinary Voices in Unison: Self as Story Formed Identity**

Volf (1996), a Croatian, Protestant theologian, writing from his experience of dual citizenship, as “a citizen of a world at war” during the war in the former Yugoslavia and a person in relationship with Deity (p. 10), offered an inter-disciplinary description of story formed identity as: (1) a self-construction process characterized by differentiation, and (2) a framing of the self as self-in-relation to others, including Deity. Self-in-relation refers to the individual as separate, and yet reciprocally embedded within social contexts (see also, Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005). According to Volf (1996),

The human self is formed ... through a complex process of ‘taking in’ and ‘keeping out.’ ... a result of a distinction from the other and the internalization of the relationship to the other; it arises out of the complex history of ‘differentiation’ in which both the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another. (p. 66)

The process of distinguishing oneself from the other and internalizing self-other relational experiences is thought to facilitate the construction of a multiplicity of self-aspects that exist in complex inner constellations of relationships (Hermans, 1996, 2004). Self-construction, in the form of story formed identity, from a psychological and theological perspective, can be understood as a dialectical and dialogical process: (1) a dialectic “between the experiencing and the narrative-making selves” (Greenberg & Angus, 2004, p. 345) and between intentionally constructed and “imposed identities”

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

(Volf, 1996, p. 161; see also, Grotevant, 1992); and (2) dialogical in that there is an ongoing internal conversation between aspects of one's self (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992) and a never-ending conversation between voiced self-aspects or I positions, and between internal I positions and other persons with whom the individual is interacting (Hermans et al., 1992).

### **The Dialectic of Self-construction**

The individual is an active, meaning making agent continuously engaged in the process of organizing lived experience in the form of a narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2004, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Geertz (2000) framed persons as "impassioned meaning makers in search of plausible stories" (p. 196). The word "impassioned" in Geertz's (2000) statement draws attention to the influence of emotion in the self-construction process (Greenberg & Angus, 2006; Mahoney, 1991). The view of emotions from the perspective of story formed identity stands in contrast to that described in a rational control model of human functioning. According to Greenberg and Angus (2004), "the self is viewed as a multi-process, multilevel organization emerging from the dialectical interaction between ongoing, moment-by-moment experience and higher-level reflexive processes that attempt to interpret, order, and explain elementary experiential process" (p. 332). Emotions provide persons with powerful and adaptive responses that are unavailable or less available to more conscious and rational processing of the self in moment-by-moment experience. Emotions are valuable ways of knowing that need not necessarily be kept in check or suppressed by conceptual knowing processes. In fact, tacit emotional experience can be reflected upon, listened to, and interpreted, and this process is frequently necessary for adaptive self-construction (Mahoney, 1991). Story formed identity is a result of the dialectic process of consciously making meaning of implicit emotional experiencing.

The dialectic nature of self-construction is also highlighted by the notion of imposed identities. Volf's (1996) claim that self-construction involves imposed identities can perhaps best be explained by Foucault's (1973, 1979) ideas of modern power and normalizing judgment. Self-construction tends to involve more intentional, explicit formation but can also involve implicit, less acknowledged meaning making (Greenberg & Angus, 2004). Imposed identities are often implicit. This is in large part due to the subtle, yet pervasive nature of modern power. According to White (2004) modern power "recruits people's active participation in the fashioning of their own lives, their relationships, and their identities, according to the constructed norms of society – we are both a consequence of this power and a vehicle for it" (p. 154). It is a form of power that initially comes from outside of the individual, from the social context the person is embedded within, but then begins to work from the inside out, such that people "participate in the judgment of their own and each other's lives" (White, 2004, p. 169).

Imposed identities often have deleterious consequences for the individual. For example, a husband and wife in their mid-thirties who have yet to have children due to medical reasons can suddenly find themselves experiencing emotional distress, with each individual asking “what’s wrong with me?” They may experience themselves as “deficient” because they are “out of step” with cultural and/or religious ideals about childbearing, parenthood, and “God’s blessing.” These negative understandings of self were imposed from the particular social context, and often in the form of well-intentioned persons who offered a myriad of suggestions for how to get pregnant and/or how God will eventually answer their prayer if they just persist in “seeking God.” Yet, the self-construal taking place is also coming from within each individual as they each give voice to self-aspects that have in part been constructed by internalizing the messages from the relational context. This imposed yet self-construed narrative can stand in opposition to other preferred, previous and current, intentionally constructed self-narratives, resulting in an experience of fragmentation between self-aspects or the experience of a crowding of voices. For example, a self-aspect might give voice to the couple’s experience of intimacy and marital satisfaction, and this joins with voices about alternative definitions of family and alternative means to become parents, or ways to find fulfillment apart from parenting; but the voices about not receiving God’s blessing or not seeking after God enough drown out these other non-religious voices, and a sort of spiritual bypass occurs.

As the example illustrates, there is often a dialectic tension between imposed and intentional self-construction in a person’s moment-by-moment experience. The dialectic between imposed and intentional identities is simply one expression of the tension that exists between the embedded individual and the social context; a tension that is thought to be necessary for developmental and therapeutic change to occur (Mahoney, 1991). However, the tension can also be experienced as overwhelming, particularly when relationships with others do not provide the safety and security necessary to construct a self in more coherent and preferred ways.

### **Dialogic Self-construction**

Given the dialectic process inherent in self-construction as story formed identity, it is common or typical to experience a disruption to one’s coherent sense of self as part of the dialectic process (McAdams, 2006). Story formed identity is thus a discontinuous coherence (McAdams, 2006). One’s identity is continuously challenged by the ongoing narration of lived experience and persistently critiqued by traditional and modern power and all sorts of competing understandings of self and other that circulate within the social context. The multiple and competing sources result in the individual having to internally negotiate and organize multiple voices. According to Hermans et al. (1992), this construction process results in

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I* positions in an imaginal landscape ... the *I* has the possibility to move, as in space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The *I* has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. (p. 28)

Each aspect of the self can give voice to a different self-narrative (Hermans, 2004). Drawing attention to unacknowledged or little attended to self-aspects can result in changes to one's moment-by-moment experience. White (2004) suggested that there is a dominant self-narrative and alternative, internalized experiences of self and other that exist in subordination to this ongoing dominant narrative. These unacknowledged or little attended to alternative story lines offer rich opportunities for change in one's ongoing story formed identity.

From a dialogical perspective the self is "social – not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 29). Volf (1996) echoes the notion of the other occupying the self in the process of self-construction, and does so by grounding his perspective in a communal understanding of the Christian theological doctrine of the Trinity, or Triune God comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "In the Trinity ... distinct persons are internally constituted by the indwelling of other persons in them. The personal identity of each is unthinkable without the presence of others in each; such presence of others is part and parcel of the identity of each" (Volf, 1996, p. 187).

A Trinitarian theology of self-construction involves the notion of "the presence of the other in the self" (Volf, 1996, p. 180). Intentionally receiving the other is a potentiality and a developmental ideal when it comes to interpersonal relating and self-construction. More often than not however the internalization of self-other relating as part of the self is experienced as a "threat to the organization of the self" (Volf, 1996, p. 91). This threat is often responded to by strategies designed to maintain an internal coherence. Intra-psychically, here-and-now experience of self-other relating may not be allowed to enter into dialogue with other self-aspects, and therefore not allowed to transform the ongoing dominant self-narrative. Strategies that prevent dialogue are often an attempt to maintain an identity of a rigidly self-contained individual with a "sharp self-nonself boundar[y]" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 30), both internally between aspects of one's self and interpersonally. In order to not feel threatened by self-other relating, the person must reorganize the inner constellation of self-aspects in response to the other by opening up space in his or her self to allow the other in. However opening space for the other in here-and-now relating can be difficult and demanding, as can opening space for dialogic relating between self-aspects.

### **Introducing a Theological Distinctive into the Dialogue**

One distinctively theological contribution to dialectical and dialogical self-construction is the idea that opening space might require that the individual's imaginative capacities be transformed through an experience of loving embrace by Deity (Volf, 1996). Volf posited that in order to genuinely receive the other as a part of one's self there is a need for a "de-centered center" (p. 71) within the self. The center of one's self is not "objective and immovable" (Volf, 1996, p. 69) nor is it a "'timeless' essence hidden deep within" (p. 70). Nevertheless, "the self is never without a center; it is always engaged in the production of its own center" (Volf, 1996, p. 69). The center can be thought to be whatever position or perspective from which a self-aspect is given voice (Hermans, 1996, 2004). There are therefore many centers, and according to Cataldo (2008), God may look different from each of the centers, and so there is a sort of "functional polytheism" (p. 50) at the individual-experiential level of analysis. For example, the internalization of self-God relating as loving embrace by Deity may exist alongside another self-aspect that gives voice to an experience of God as punitive and demanding. At the disciplinary, abstract level of theological proposition, the Triune God can be described as a community of oneness with Father, Son, and Spirit in loving dialogic relation (Volf, 1996). There is a sense then in which God can be understood as "stable and unified" (Cataldo, 2008, p. 52), reflective of the historic view of Christianity as monotheistic, and a sense in which God can be viewed as a differentiated multiplicity (Balswick et al., 2005). For Cataldo (2008) adaptive self-construction involves inner dialogue between "a sense of self as multiple and a sense of self as unified and continuous" and dialogue about God as both "multiplicity and unity" (p. 50).

It may also be possible to talk of center in terms of a meta-position within the imaginal landscape (Dimaggio, 2006). A meta-position from which the I can move in and out of and within while giving voice to self-aspects. White (2006) framed the movement of the I in terms of remembering. As a person retrieves memories of lived experiences he or she can stand in a position to reflect on and rework his or her dominant narrative. White (2006) drawing on the work of James (1892) and Meares (2000), referenced the notion of stream of consciousness as the place where one can move to gain a meta-position for remembering, reflecting, and re-authoring. As White (2006) stated, "in states of reverie or meditation, when we have stepped back from tasks of living and from our immediate social and relational contexts, we often experience immersion in this stream of consciousness" (p. 71). When doing so "memories light up, are often powerfully visualized, and are taken into the personal storylines of our lives" (White, 2006, p. 84). Decentering is thus a reorganizing of the dialogical relations among self-aspects; and given that self-construction is never ending, multiple decentering experiences seem necessary for adaptive self-construction.

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

Volf's (1996) Christian theological contention is that in order for a person to experience open, non-threatening receiving of the other, and move to a decentered meta-position from which to facilitate dialogue between self-aspects, he or she may need to enter into loving relationship with Deity; and this seems particularly so when the other person does not reciprocate, and/or when someone has been wronged by the other and experienced injustice. Self-God relating is thought to potentially transform and internally re-orient the individual such that he or she is enabled to receive the other into him or herself and facilitate adaptive dialogue between self-aspects. It is a claim that the experience of God's self-giving love can be empowering and freeing. The person is freed from having to maintain a self as a rigidly bounded and self-contained individual and freed to enter into authentic, open dialogic relationship with the other and between his or her internal aspects of self. In many ways, it may be an entirely internal embrace of the other as the other may not choose to reciprocate, voluntarily give of self nor receive the individual.

Decentering depicts a particular self-God relational experience, and Hauerwas (1981) draws attention to the way in which story mediates the decentering experience. Decentering experiences thus occur in the context of drawing on the Christian story as source material for self-construal. According to Hauerwas (1981), persons

depend on narratives to guide [them] ... And this is particularly important to Christians, because they also claim that their lives are formed by the story of a prince ... defenseless against those who would rule the world with violence. He [God the Son - Jesus] had a power, however, which the world knew not. For he insisted that we could form our lives together by trusting in truth and love to banish the fears that create enmity and discord. (pp. 34-35)

Hauerwas (1981) suggested that the story of God's self-giving love can form "the kind of [individual] and community where" (p. 35) genuine receiving of the other can occur. Self-construction involving self-God relating, mediated by the story of God's love and the relational context in which this story is told, can potentially consist of a decentering experience that allows space for dialogue and internally (re)organizes self-aspects.

Self-construction involving a decentered center formed through story and community is illustrated in the work of Erickson (1999) who examined the spiritual writings of three women who were part of the early formation of the Wesleyan/Methodist faith tradition. John Wesley (1872/1958) organized his identity around the experience of having his "heart strangely warmed" (p. 103). It was this particular experience and the resulting narration of it over time that gave the Wesleyan tradition the identity of a "heart religion" (Maddox, 2001, p. 3). According to Maddox (2001), Wesley's "heart religion" rested on the experience of God's love and a "change of affections" (p.17). Maddox (2001) argued that Wesley, particularly later in his life, primarily thought of a change of affections as an intentional process of self-

transformation. Erickson (1999) summarized the intentionality of three founding women of the Wesleyan tradition, and commented that “they assiduously practiced ... as part of a community ... the personal and private act of keeping a spiritual journal [which] became a community vehicle for [change]” (p. 104). Erickson (1999) described a decentering experience as she explained how her own self-construction was transformed by encountering God’s embracing love through these women’s stories.

The experiences of faith chronicled in these writings touched me ... As I read these life writings, I heard echoes of these voices from the past in the agonies of a friend dying from cancer as she, like they, longed to live and die in full awareness of God’s presence ... it came alive to me. (Erickson, 1999, p. 90)

Erickson’s experience can be described as a movement of the I to a meta-position (Dimaggio, 2006; Dimaggio et al., 2010) from which to reflect and contemplate, and as she did, memories lit up (White, 2006), and she accessed implicit emotional experiencing (Greenberg & Angus, 2004) and facilitated dialogue between voices which led to more personally meaningful self-construction. Decentering seemed to enliven alternative voices such that each voice was able to contribute to an increased sense-making of her own lived experience.

### **Initiative in Story Formed Identity**

Woven throughout the discussion on the dialectical and dialogical construction of the self, and found in both the psychological and theological literatures, is the theme of initiative in the process of constructing an adaptive and preferred story formed identity. A preferred story formed identity (Freedman & Combs, 1996) stands in stark contrast to a problem-saturated story of self (White & Epston, 1990). Imposed and implicit constructions of self tend to be related to problem-saturated stories and often correspond to experiences of narrative incoherence (McAdams, 2006), disunity of self (Hauerwas, 1981), or fragmented-fused self-aspects, which may coincide with any number of difficulties in living and negative affective experiences. Even imposed identities that are functional and fulfilling or at least non-distressing for a time will at some point conflict with lived experience. It is at this point that new initiatives seem necessary to form an identity that is experienced as satisfying and meaningful. The social context, particularly in Western cultures, tends to impose identities characterized by themes of injustice, inequality and the exclusion of the other (Volf, 1996); independence and individualism (Weingarten, 1997); deficiency and pathology (Gergen, 1990); disembedded and disembodied minds (Hauerwas, 1999); and materialism and consumerism (Cushman, 1990). Intention, and very often counter-cultural intention at that, seems necessary for constructing a preferred, personally meaningful story formed identity.

One initiative that seems necessary in constructing and maintaining a preferred self is that of actively seeking out others to constitute oneself in the kinds of ways that

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

provide for coherence. Freedman and Combs (1996) articulated the role of community in supporting preferred identity constructions in this way, “communities ... serve as participant audiences that can hold each other accountable for the kind of selves and relationships each is bringing forth in its members” (p. 274).

In addition to seeking particular community memberships, preferred identity construction also seems to involve the intentional selection of source material. Hauerwas (1981) framed the importance of source material selection for constructing preferred identities as such, “the necessary existence of the other for my own self is but a reminder that ...we become who we are through the embodiment of the story in the communities in which we are [immersed]” (pp. 148-149). Not any story will do (Hauerwas, 1981). A useful story “forces me to live in a manner that gives me the skill to take responsibility for my character” (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 149); that is to say, encourages a person to take initiative in his or her self-construction process.

Last, intentional practices, akin to the notion of spiritual disciplines within many religious traditions, seem necessary for constructing preferred kinds of identities. Hauerwas (1981) suggested that there were “appropriate exercises and disciplines of self-examination” (p. 149) for constructing preferred identities. Freedman and Combs (1996) suggested various “accountability practices” and “reflecting practices” to assist in constructing and living out preferred identities (pp. 278, 284). Whether it involves opening space for the other, contemplating one’s own story in light of the other, voicing conflicted or divergent aspects of self, performing or narrating new self-constructions in front of witnesses, some form of intentional action seems necessary to constitute one’s identity in preferred ways. A significant theme that seems to cut across these practices is that of self-reflection. As Dimaggio et al. (2010) noted, a person’s capacity for self-reflection seems tied to “psychological health and social adaption” (p. 383). Self-reflection enables persons to identify multiple self-aspects, to engage in perspective-taking between self-aspects and facilitate dialogue between differing I positions (Dimaggio et al.). Self-reflection also fosters “the creation of superordinate points of view ..., which allows for a sense of coherence and which coordinates the different aspects of the self and makes it possible to solve conflicts and find new more effective solutions” (Dimaggio et al., 2010, p. 383). Spiritual genograms (Frame, 2001), spiritual autobiographies (Vaughn & Swanson, 2006), and spiritual journals (Erickson, 1999) are just a few techniques that might facilitate self-reflection and foster inner dialogue between self-aspects.

### **Responses to Dialogic Tension**

As outlined above, the dialogue between psychological and theological voices appears largely harmonious. Ideas about dialectical and dialogical self-construction and the role of initiative in adaptive self-construction can be found in the existing literature of both disciplines. However, the theological distinctive about the potential necessity of

experiencing God's love for adaptive story formed identity raises the possibility for disagreement and tension. Pointing out a seemingly non-shared idea about story formed identity at the disciplinary level of analysis does not in and of itself constitute dialogic tension. Rather, the tension occurs at the individual-experiential level of analysis: (1) as one negotiates the theological distinctive into his or her inner dialogue between self-aspects, and/or (2) as one opens space to dialogue between self-aspects through a decentering experience of God's self-giving love. First, regardless of the context in which one might encounter the theological distinctive, for example, reading an essay or conversing with a client in therapy, making sense of the distinctive can seemingly result in varying degrees of dialogic tension particularly if the phenomenology of the distinctive departs significantly from one's own experience. Second, a decentering experience of self-God relating seems to involve negotiating two related phenomena, and it is these phenomena which seem to hold potential for disrupting dialogue and creating fragmentation and/or fusion between self-aspects. The phenomena can be described as temptations to make an experience prescriptively normative and to privilege one self-aspect over and against another. It is the potential for these temptations to foster tension in a decentering experience of self-God relating that is examined in detail in what follows.

According to Hauerwas (1981), "By learning their part in this story, Christians claim to have a narrative that can provide a basis for a self appropriate to the unresolved, and often tragic, conflicts of this existence" (p. 149). Thus it would seem that the experience of God's self-giving love coincides with a temptation to make the experience prescriptively normative for other persons, which can potentially lead to disagreement in interpersonal and intra-personal relating. Negotiating the temptation as part of decentering seems to involve recognizing that the story of God's self-giving love is inherently invitational. The story contains an invitation for persons to enter into communion with God and experience God's self-giving love, and not as a meta-narrative or "story of stories" (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 149) that is imposed on persons. Rather, the invitation is to draw upon the story as additional source material in the process of adaptive self-construction and potentially encounter God's loving embrace in doing so.

Freedman and Combs (1996) made clear that immersion in any community's particular story will privilege particular themes for living in relation to the other that will then be lived out in very concrete kinds of ways; that is to say, a particular social ethic. For them and many others conceptualizing the self as story formed identity, not "all stories [are] equal" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 266) and they are intentional about seeking out communities and source material to support their preferred identity; for example, living out and privileging an ethic of social justice and reflexive practices (e.g., Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2004; White & Epston, 1990). Participation in the community of the Triune God and one's local congregational community can

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

privilege a similar social ethic but also one that among other things sees the necessity of experiencing God's self-giving love for adaptive self-construction. Phenomenologically, there seems to be a temptation to place the story of God's self-giving love in a somewhat privileged position relative to other source material for constructing and/or supporting preferred identities.

### **Spiritual Transformation**

Negotiating self-God relating with other self-aspects could result in a number of responses to the tension that results as one decenters and seeks to re-organize relationships between self-aspects. These intrapersonal responses seem to range along the functional-dysfunctional, adaptive-maladaptive, and mature-immature continuums. First, adaptive negotiation of self-in-relation to God may be understood in terms of what some have called spiritual transformation (Cohen, Gruber, & Keltner, 2010; James, 1902/1958; Sandage, Link, & Jankowski, 2010). William James (1902/1958) described spiritual transformation as unifying the "divided self" (p. 144), which resulted in "firmness, stability, and equilibrium" (p. 147). James also noted that such experiences may involve negative emotions, despite the positive outcomes associated with the experience. Negotiating self-aspects in relation to God may be distressing and involve anxiety, confusion, and/or guilt, and yet, there is potential for positive change and development. Cataldo (2008) described how, in the context of therapeutic work with religious clients, unifying fragmented self-aspects may be one form of spiritual transformation. Dialogue about self-as-unity and self-as-multiplicity and dialogue about God-as-unity and God-as-multiplicity may facilitate therapeutic change. Experiences of fusion may similarly be resolved through dialogical exchanges between therapist and client and through the facilitation of inner dialogue between a client's self-aspects.

Empirical research has generally supported an association between spiritual transformation and positive adaptation and development. Cohen et al. (2010) found that spiritual transformation corresponded to positive changes in participants' understanding of self, and involved both positive and negative emotions. Sandage et al. (2010) found that a recent spiritual transformation moderated the curvilinear relationship between spiritual seeking and spiritual dwelling. Sandage et al. concluded that spiritual transformation may result in an increased capacity to experience doubt, confusion, and anxiety, while remaining intimately connected to Deity; that is to say, a differentiated form of relating (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) may result from spiritual transformation. Albright (2006) noted that spiritual transformation can correspond to gains in cognitive complexity which enables persons to hold seeming contradictions together and tolerate associated anxiety and tension. Similar capacities for cognitive complexity have been observed in the adult cognitive development literature (e.g., Benack & Basseches, 1984; Kramer, Kahlbaugh, & Goldston, 1992; Labouvie-Vief, 1994). While spiritually

transformative experiences may foster positive development, research suggests that other processes also account for positive adult development. For example, the experience of successfully coping and resolving the inevitable contradictions and tensions of life, such as loss of a loved one, can facilitate positive development. While resolving loss can and does involve self-God relating for many persons, spirituality need not be a part of one's coping and meaning-making in order for positive development to occur.

Spiritual transformation as a result of loving relationship with Deity has been discussed in detail within the literature that uses attachment theory to study persons' relating to the sacred (e.g., Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). For example, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) suggested that there is a complex relationship between early caregiver-child and adult attachment and an individual's attachment to Deity. The complexity of this relationship, particularly over time, seems tied to changes that occur in what can be framed as an individual's inner constellation of self-aspects, or internal working model. More specifically Kirkpatrick and Shaver asserted that, "learning to experience a secure attachment relationship with God may have enabled some people to subsequently develop more secure and stable relationships with other people, including love partners" (p. 273). When the aforementioned research findings and theoretical ideas from divergent literatures are taken together, and reframed in terms of dialectical and dialogical self-construction, negotiating self-God relational experiences with other self-aspects can potentially open space and result in a decentering experience. This re-organization of self-aspects may then have positive developmental and relational outcomes.

### **Narrative Incoherence**

The temptation to privilege one position over and against another, along with the temptation to use one particular self-God relational experience as a normative lens with which to interact with other self-aspects, can also result in increased narrative incoherence; and do so, to varying degrees along the continuum of fragmentation-fusion. One possible outcome of making normative or privileging a particular self-God relational experience could be fragmentation in which one part negates the other self-aspect and prevents dialogue. For example, during the experience of a recent loss, a self-aspect that experiences God as cold and distant might get activated and coincide with a voice that calls for "rational acceptance of God's will." This voice may negate or silence another self-aspect that experiences God as loving comforter, grieving alongside and aching with the person during the loss. In yet another instance, the negative emotions associated with dialogue between self-God relating and other self-aspects may be too unsettling and distressing. The person therefore works to maintain a rigidly defined, "sharp self-nonsel self boundary" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 30) as a means

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

of managing the distress. The person may then employ numerous strategies to manage the distress that negotiating between self-aspects can generate; such as, discounting the voice of the other, distancing from or ignoring the perspective of the other self-aspect, and denying or minimizing the effects of one self-aspect on the other. In these instances, fragmentation seems to account for the phenomenon of spiritual bypass, in which self-God self-aspects are privileged and monopolize inner dialogue.

Fusion of self-aspects may also occur in an attempt to negotiate self-God relating into the inner constellation of self-aspects. Fusion can be depicted as “the crowding together of a multiplicity of voices, struggling to get heard, drowning each other out, [and] competing with each other” (Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004, p. 268). A person for example may be immobilized and unable to make a decision as he or she tries to discern what God would have him or her do in a particular situation. The search for the one “right” voice out of the multiple, divergent, and competing voices about what to do can result in frustration and/or disappointment. Thus, fusion could also account for the phenomenon of spiritual bypass, as religious meaning-making drowns out other voices even while multiple religious voices crowd together and compete for dominance. For example, someone may encounter a religious voice that suggests that “perhaps there are multiple ‘right’ choices that could be made in this situation and that God would be fine with whatever decision you make” and this voice competes with another self-aspect that asserts that “God must have one ‘right’ option that is most desired by God.” In such an instance, competing self-God self-aspects crowd out other self-aspects.

Last, it may be that negotiating between self-aspects does not involve extremes of negation or “an unintelligible whir” (Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004, p. 268) rather it could involve two self-aspects simply co-existing with each other, with little to no exchange. It is not a privileging of one position over and against another, nor is it an over-spiritualized sense-making that drowns out the other voice. It is merely a lack of dialogue between self-aspects that prevents a decentering reorganization of self-aspects. In co-existence, the other self-aspect may be acknowledged but the seemingly irreconcilable incompatibility between the two positions prevents an exchange of ideas. In some ways, co-existence may be deemed a transitional space between more fragmented or fused relations among self-aspects and dialogic relating. For example, it may be that a person receives God’s self-giving love and yet parallel to this self-aspect is another self-aspect that struggles with feeling loved and accepted. Or, it may be that the self-aspect of God’s loving embrace exists parallel to another self-aspect that struggles to forgive someone, even while space has been opened for forgiving another person. There is awareness of the alternative I position, and perhaps even perspective-taking but movement to a meta-position from which to more fully reflect and facilitate dialogue does not occur. Whether spiritually transformative, fragmenting, or over-crowding of self-aspects, negotiating an experience of self-God relating into one’s self

seems highly idiosyncratic; unique to each person's existing constellation of self-aspects and embedded life situation.

### **Differentiated Self-aspects as Adaptive Self-construction**

An outcome of a spiritually transformative decentering experience may be described as differentiated intra-psychic functioning. Facilitating dialogue between self-aspects positioned along the fragmentation-fusion continuum can result in a wide array of adaptive self-constructions. Recent conceptualizations of intrapersonal differentiation that extend Bowen's initial ideas (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) have drawn particular attention to the capacity to self-soothe and regulate affect in the midst of distress (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Skowron & Dendy, 2004; Skowron, Holmes, & Sabatelli, 2003). Differentiated intra-psychic relating is a developmental ideal and can be defined as non-reactive, intentional negotiation between multiple self-aspects. Differentiated intra-psychic functioning seems to involve the capacity to distanciate (Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, & Reimer, 2008; see also, Ricoeur, 1981). Distanciation can refer to the self-reflexive capacity to distance oneself from different internal positions, thereby allowing self-aspects and current here-and-now experiences to inform and influence each other in adaptive ways.

Both differentiation and distanciation are spatial metaphors about the intra-psychic processes involved in self-construction. The dialogical notion of opening space is similarly a spatial metaphor and similarly describes a metacognitive-positioning within the "imaginal landscape" of the mind (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 28). Differentiated intra-psychic functioning involves a keen awareness of self-in-relation that then allows for juxtaposing self-aspects and the facilitation of dialogue between self-aspects. Dialogue between self-aspects will necessitate making space for each self-aspect through distanciation and regulating difficult emotions. Differentiated intra-psychic functioning is distinct from merely having the two parts coexist without dialogue, and distinct from experiences of fragmentation and/or fusion. In contrast, differentiated intra-psychic functioning enables one to access multiple self-aspects effortlessly as relational contexts may necessitate.

Dialogue about the ideas of story formed identity from the theological and psychological literature may result in a number of possible differentiated intra-personal negotiations. More specifically, negotiating between parts of the self around the notion that self-God relating may be a necessary part of adaptive self-construction may result in new, more complex alternative understandings. One possible outcome of the negotiation might be the understanding that imaginative capacities that allow for dialogue and differentiated relating between self-aspects need not only be enlivened by the felt experience of God's love. It might be that self-giving love from one human being to another may be enough to open space and facilitate a decentering experience. Experiences of being loved outside of the context of self-God relating may also be

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

transformative, and still spiritual. Spirituality as relating to the sacred, and a definition of sacred that includes experiences of ultimate devotion beyond self-God relating, opens the possibility for alternative decentering experiences. Furthermore, ideas about story formed identity embed persons in relational contexts, and as such highlight the importance of particular community memberships for adaptive self-construction (Freedman & Combs, 1996). A self-in-relation perspective, informed by dialogue between psychological and theological ideas, allows for adaptive self-construction to occur via self-giving love in the context of human relationships. Research, for example, has demonstrated that secure attachment experiences in interpersonal relationships correspond to positive developmental outcomes (Balswick et al., 2005; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992).

Another outcome might involve the understanding that dialogue is inherently invitational, and it is perhaps this differentiated positioning that allows for the example just noted above. Arriving at an understanding of dialogue-as-invitation may stem from self-God relating and engagement with the Christian story that depicts God's love as invitational. Decentering invites the alternative position to give voice to its experience, and this invitation may be enough to resolve the narrative incoherence. Interpersonally, an invitational stance respects and values the other's autonomy and self-determination. An invitational stance frees the individual to dialogue rather than impose or negate another's experience and story. In a similar way intra-personally, the conflicted voices may develop an invitational stance with each other. An invitational stance opens dialogue without privileging either position or making one perspective prescriptively normative. Dialogue may then result in a differentiated constellation of self-aspects, with each self-aspect dependent on the other and mutually defining the other; an interdependence among self-aspects. Ironically, privileging invitation allows for non-privileged relating between alternative self-aspects.

Researchers in the area of adult cognitive development have described this complex state of internal functioning as commitment-within-relativism (Perry, 1970) or dialectical thinking (Benack & Basseches, 1989; Kramer et al., 1992). The phrase commitment-within-relativism seems to be an apt description for privileging an invitational meta-positioning in order to prevent privileging of one part of the self over against another self-aspect. It also seems to connote the capacity to achieve some kind of resolution or coherence, while maintaining an overall stance of openness to ongoing negotiation of self-aspects as future situations might necessitate. It might also be described as an awareness and acceptance of development as discontinuous coherence. As Freedman and Combs (1996) suggested, privileging particular themes for living is unavoidable. There is therefore an inevitable contradiction between knowing that an invitational meta-positioning seems necessary for dialogic relating between self-aspects and yet, knowing that an invitational meta-positioning itself is a privileged positioning. The contradiction provides further illustration of self-construction as a dialectic process,

and highlights the role of initiative in adaptive self-construction. For example, dialogue from a meta-position of commitment-within-relativism might involve answering inter-related questions about one's initiative such as: what community membership(s) will support my preferred identity and help me adapt to my ever-evolving social context? What reflexive practices might increase my awareness of inner self-aspects? And what self-other relating might facilitate a decentering experience, that is to say, a movement to a meta-positioning from which to invite dialogue between self-aspects?

### **Conclusion**

The essay described the author's dialogue between ideas contained in the psychological literature and the literature on Christian theology, and their respective understandings of self-construction as story formed identity. From the perspective of story formed identity self-construction is a dialectical and dialogical process, which involves distancing and affect regulation as one decenters and opens space for fragmented and/or fused self-aspects to mutually inform the other. A theological understanding of self-construction brought tension into the dialogue with the suggestion that the experience of God's self-giving love may be necessary for re-organizing persons' inner constellation of self-aspects in optimally functional and adaptive ways. This theological premise was tempered through dialogue with ideas in the psychological literature that included acknowledging that the sacred can be encountered more broadly in self-other relating and that self-giving love is inherently invitational. The latter seems particularly necessary for dialogical relating between self-aspects and preventing temptations of privilege and prescriptive normative-ness.

The essay illustrated a "re-authoring conversation" (White, 2006, p. 57), in the sense that the essay was about the internal dialogue between different self-aspects within the author, or a story about my own story formed identity. Ongoing resolution of the author's experience of narrative incoherence has involved: (1) decentering experiences, facilitated by self-God and self-other relating and intentional reflective practices, (2) maintaining an invitational meta-position, informed by source material about God's love, story formed identity, and differentiated intra-psycho functioning, and (3) regulating negative emotions as self-aspects along the fragmented-fused continuum dialogue with each other. Resolution is by no means complete, as self-construction is a discontinuous coherence. Self-other relating in particular social contexts can still call forth self-aspects that seek privileged positions and prescriptive normative-ness, which can generate momentary degrees of fragmentation or fusion; and so, multiple decentering experiences remain necessary.

Last, the essay illustrates what others have already noted about the dialogue between psychological and Christian theological understandings of self-construction; and that is, that in many ways it is still "in its infancy" (Gergen, 2002a, p. 11) and one that has been "writ[ten] off altogether" by some (van der Ven, 2002, p. 292). And yet,

## STORY FORMED IDENTITY

dialogue opens the possibility for “renewal and innovation” (Hermans, 1996, p. 43). “New vistas are opened – both conceptual and practical,” for “do we not approach the ecstasy of dialogue when our conjunction brings forth realities never imagined in isolation” (Gergen, 2002b, p. 273)?

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