Layers of Myself: Going Beyond the Surface

We try to understand things just by looking and forming conclusions. But oftentimes, when we look closer, we notice the things we missed. We cannot always understand the objects around us from just appearance, so why do we try to understand people by just looking at their outward presentation? When we get to know someone, we start to realize that the reasons that they act a certain way may not be what we thought originally. We can see someone smiling and automatically assume that they are happy and content with their lives, but later find out that they were smiling to try to fight back tears or to hide shame. We assume that the surface of an object is all that there is, for example, the Earth. We take in our surroundings without giving them any other thought. The Earth is not just the surface that we see; there are four main layers that make up the planet, and each layer is important to the functionality of the planet. Therefore, I ask a few questions of myself: What are my layers? What factors, experiences, and processes contribute to the decisions I make and the actions I take? While exploring the four main layers of the Earth, I will try to understand the four main layers of myself.

The Earth is a complex structure and has many different elements that make up the planet as a whole. The most basic understanding of Earth’s composition includes the crust, the mantle, the outer core and the inner core (Marshak, 2011). We often work from the outside in. We try to explain phenomena from mere observation. We try to explain things by identifying a reason after the fact. But what would happen if we worked from the inside out? Using this perspective, I will start with the inner core of both the Earth and myself to see what drives my actions. While trying to understand the layers of myself, I will be using artifacts to tie in those experiences. My artifact
for the inner core is a photo, and my artifact for the outer core is a letter. For the mantle, the artifact I will be using is my blog. Lastly, my artifacts for the crust are a paper from one of my courses, a backpack and a binder.

**The Inner Core**

The Earth’s inner core is the innermost layer of the planet. It is an extremely hot, solid ball (Marshak, 2011). Because of the increase in pressure at the center of the planet, the melting temperature rises, so the inner core stays solid (Marshak, 2011). The inner core is suspended in the liquid outer core and, therefore, it can rotate separately from the Earth itself.

The inner core of the Earth relates to one of the most influential moments from the past four years--when I learned how I relate to people and how that has been affected by my relationships with my parents. I grew up with a mother who left my day-to-day life when I was seven years old. I lost a lot of trust and respect for parental figures. I did not have a supportive mother. My dad was in the picture, but he had a full-time job and worked long hours. The law in North Carolina following divorce states that alimony must be paid for half the time that the couple was married, so my dad was responsible for his household and for my mother’s household at the same time for ten years. While my dad was working, he hired nannies to take care of my sister and me when we got done with school until he was done with work. He was around, but not enough. The aftermath of the divorce left me confused about what parent-child relationships looked like.

According to attachment theory, people develop internal working models, which are “mental representations that consist of expectations about the self, significant others, and the relationship between the two” (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000, p. 156). We have working models for how acceptable we perceive ourselves to be, and we also have working models for others that
help us decide who works as an attachment figure (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). The interaction of these working models influences the way we relate to others and the way we think of ourselves, and those thoughts are influenced by our attachment figures, which are most often our parents (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Moreover, working models are not the only aspect of attachment theory that influences a person’s attachment style, stressful life events have been linked to the shift in attachment style from secure to insecure (Waters et al., 2000). Although I cannot say for sure what my attachment style was before my parents’ divorce, I can say that the divorce was stressful and it left me with many questions and doubts. One aspect of attachment theory that is often overlooked is the importance of the maintenance of the relationship (Waters & Cummings, 2000). If I had a secure attachment before the divorce, I would have needed my parents to treat me the same way they did before the marriage fell apart for my attachment to stay the same. I cannot say if there was a shift of emotions when they divorced, but after my mother left, I felt unlovable and unworthy because my mother was no longer around and available for me when I needed her. Brown (2012) argues that our culture instills the idea of not being enough. My mother’s actions led me to believe that I was not good enough for anyone and that I was truly worth nothing because my own mother was willing to walk out of my life. I knew love and support from my father, but I also knew feelings of abandonment from my mother, so I was left confused about what role parents were supposed to play in my life. I had conflicting internal working models for a mother’s behavior and for a father’s behavior, but ultimately, they should both be full of love for their child.

A person’s attachment system is in place to keep the individual safe by “maintaining proximity to caring and supportive others (known as attachment figures)” (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012, p.165). There are three aspects to an attachment relationship: 1) the attachment figure is
sought when the individual is in need or under stress, 2) the attachment figure is viewed as a safe haven, meaning that the person can provide support and protection when needed, and 3) the attachment figure acts as a secure base, which has many functions, one being that the person is allowed to explore painful memories (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). The activation of an attachment system happens when a person is “subjected to conscious or unconscious threats” (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012, p.166). And a person’s attachment style is the pattern of behavior in relationships which is influenced by the availability of an attachment figure in life (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012).

Over the past four years, I have been able to find these qualities within a relationship with my pastor, Nathan. Nathan is currently pursuing his Master’s degree in Christian Counseling at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The artifact that I chose to depict this relationship was a photo from our annual Christmas party hosted by Impact, which is the church on campus we attend. This photo depicts a fun event and a goofy moment shared between us, but it goes considerably further than that. Yes, the photo is fun, but it is the person in the photo who has had one of the biggest influences on my life while in college.

My relationship with Nathan has been crucial to my personal development. I did not really get to know him until the spring semester of my freshman year. Since then, my life has been forever changed. I had reached a point in my life where I needed to confront the pain of my childhood because it was starting to affect the way I interacted with people. My attachment system was activated, and I sought out someone close to me who could protect me as I started to explore the pain and heartache I had been carrying around for most of my life. I was able to sit down with him as much as I needed, allowing me to unpack the things that happened in my life. In meetings with Nathan, I have felt safe. I knew that anything I talked about was kept
confidential and he would never use any of it against me. Nathan has acted as a secure base in my life, allowing me to explore the painful memories (Waters & Cummings, 2000). My attachment to Nathan has become a secure attachment because of the way I have used the relationship to explore my past, and I am confident that he will be there when I have a question or concern (Waters & Cummings, 2000). In time, I began to trust him with everything in my life. If there is one person who knows the most about me, it would be him.

The impact of attachment relationships is often considered most during the first five years of life. While this is certainly a sensitive period with respect to attachment formation, research has demonstrated that those early relationships serve to impact an individual's sense of self and relationship to others throughout the lifespan (Waters & Cummings, 2000). The use of a secure base is also not limited to any specific time frame and the need for a secure base is a critical component to healthy social and emotional functioning at all stages of life (Waters & Cummings, 2000). One great aspect of adult attachment theory is that I did not miss my chance of earning security in adulthood because it is something that can be developed at any point in development (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012).

Through my relationship with Nathan, I have learned the importance of having a secure base. It is comforting to have someone I can go to for any issue, no matter how trivial. My connection to a “competent and caring adult” has allowed me to work on overcoming the adversities that I have faced (Masten, 2001, p.234). It does not matter that Nathan is outside of my family. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a prominent developmental psychologist, once said, “every child needs one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her” (Brendtro, 2006). For me, I know that Nathan is that person. I know that I can turn to him when I need someone to listen and when I need advice. Nathan listens without passing any judgments for anything, especially the
insane amount of tears I have shed over the years. He has allowed me to be completely honest, and to say terrible, awful things in the heat of my pain, anger or frustration. One important component of this relationship is that we had regular meetings, but it was always up to me to decide what we talked about. But Nathan is good at asking questions, so he was able to help direct the conversation to take it one step further than what I was presenting to him. He asked questions that have made me think about my feelings in a new way. He was able to make me dig deep and has helped me to find the hurt that I was unaware I was carrying.

Similar to the Earth’s inner core, nobody has ever seen their own inner core, so what we know about the composition of it is based on beliefs and interpretations (Marshak, 2011). Scientists have to research parts of the Earth to come up with an idea of what the innermost layer looks like, and Nathan has asked questions and interpreted my responses to help figure out what has been at the innermost layer of myself through our meetings. The meetings were consistent, which is important, but more importantly, Nathan served as a consistent secure base, so I knew that he was there and knew that I had a source to explore my pain. Throughout my time in college, I have had friends who have come and gone, but the one person who I have had consistently invested in my life is Nathan. When meeting with him, there were times when I knew right away what I needed to talk about, but then there were times when I thought I wanted to talk about one topic, but after his questioning, realized that I needed to talk about another topic. For the most part, I was in control of where the conversation went and was able to bring up my needs as they came about.

In the past couple of years, my mother has reached out to me more than I was used to and, quite frankly, more than I wanted. I never know what to expect from her, so sometimes her messages to me left me frozen, making me stop in my tracks and question a lot of the things I
had known to be true. In those times, I sought Nathan for advice. It was not until after meeting with him and having the honest, difficult conversations while being comforted and supported, that I felt at ease. I felt as if I could go back to the other aspects of my life and function normally. In attachment theory, the attachment system is activated when an individual needs to be close or comforted by the attachment figure, but this need does not go away until comforted, allowing the individual to calmly return to previous activities (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012).

I explored the pain of my relationship with my mother and dealt with many of the emotions that accompanied and after healing some wounds, I have reached a sense of peace. Even though I have this feeling of contentment, I still experience things that trigger a strong emotional response because of the connection to my mother and her actions. So I turn to Nathan when I feel myself wanting to react irrationally. If you personally know me, you know that anger is not my thing. I am not one to get mad and yell at someone. I will, however, go to someone when I have an issue, but it may not be right away. I have to take time and process the conflict to determine if it is something that needs to be addressed or if I am just overreacting. I can always tell when I am being irrational because my first instinct is to shut down and run away. According to Bandura’s (1991) discussion of self-regulation, when people analyze their thoughts, and actions, they can begin to notice patterns in their behavior and can work on moving forward to try to correct the behavior. Oftentimes, I turn to Nathan when I feel myself shutting down, and once it is determined that my reaction is irrational, he helps me to figure out why I felt that way, as well as what the proper response would actually be rather than running away. According to attachment theory, we learn successful self-regulation from our attachment figures (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Attachment figures help people to interpret the situation and they then find a way to comfort the individual and guide the appropriate response or a plausible solution to the
situation (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Attachment figures “help a person maintain emotional balance and resilience in the face of stress” (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012, p.167). Conversations with Nathan have helped me to respond properly to situations when my first instinct was to respond irrationally. I label my reactions as irrational because they do not meet the functional goal of reaching a state of emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is important because responding in a socially acceptable way to events keeps the peace and prevents any unnecessary conflict from arising. If I had acted on my irrational thoughts in some situations, I honestly think I could have ruined relationships. I also have developed a personal standard for myself when I get angry.

Individuals develop personal standards from influences in their lives, which can include significant people, and base their own reactions on the reactions of others (Bandura, 1991). My personal standard for reacting when I am angry is to withhold from yelling because I was frequently exposed to a lot of that when my parents were divorcing and I saw how it only made the situation worse. Instead, I expect myself to take time and cool down, and to respond calmly, and if I feel that I cannot do that right away, I remove myself from the situation until I can. I am a strong believer in taking the time to make sure that the conversation can be productive because anger is ugly on everyone, it can cause us to say things that we do not mean and ultimately, it makes things worse than before. I expect myself to reach this goal when I get angry.

Another important component of my relationship with Nathan is the dynamic. The relationship is unlike any other relationship I have had with a pastor. He is my elder and a mentor, but he seems like a peer. Last year, we had someone who believed that Nathan was my dad, and our sense of humor is the same, so neither of us corrected him. We let him believe that he was my dad because it caught us both off guard because of the impossibility of that being
true. It felt like such a ridiculous statement that we wanted to see how long we could let him believe it. Nathan is not old enough to be my father, but in a sense, he has felt like one. Because Nathan has served as a secure base in my life, he has felt like family, he has stood by me. But he has also felt like an older brother. Most importantly, he has been a friend. There will be things that happen and he will say something that is protective of me out of either his brotherly or fatherly right, so he says. Nathan is the person to whom I go when I have good and bad news. He supports me and encourages me to be the best I can be. Nathan fulfills the important functions of an attachment figure.

Lastly, my relationship with Nathan is important because it is not just one-sided. Although he serves as an attachment figure, the relationship involves more than just me and my problems and how I should deal with them. Nathan shares aspects of his life and his struggles in graduate school with me and allows me to be part of his life. He and his wife welcome me into their home. They allow me to babysit their sons, putting our friendship on a different level by involving me with their family life. Putting the relationship on that level makes me feel cared for and comforted, going back to his role as an attachment figure.

My relationship with Nathan has been influential in changing the way that I relate to people. Because of my relationship with my mother, I felt betrayed and abandoned. There were times that I found myself being really clingy to the people in my life or completely shutting them out. It was never consistent. I would hold really high expectations for people to fulfill, and they would always fail, pushing me further away. It was unhealthy and it was not realistic. Before using Nathan as a secure base, I lacked security, meaning that I doubted myself and refused to trust people and their ability to meet my needs (Kilmann, Carranza, & Vendemia, 2006). I believe that my attachment style was preoccupied, meaning that in relationships with others, I
had become too dependent on those in my life and was constantly concerned about abandonment (Kilmann et al., 2006). I wanted to make sure that I would not be abandoned by another person in my life, so I put unattainable expectations on them. Preoccupied attachment comes from lacking the feeling of consistency and support from parents or attachment figures (Kilmann et al., 2006). Now, after exploring my past and confronting my heartache, I understand that what I was doing before was not the best way to go about relationships. I understand that people are people and that we cannot expect them to fulfill every need that we have. I have learned to put less pressure on the people in my life to be perfect. Although these expectations were never vocalized, I was still being unhealthy and awful to the important people in my life. In my head, I was feeling a lot of things towards those people. But they were only seeing me get clingy, then shove them away. It was never a balance, or if it was, it was only for a short period of time. After digging into my past with Nathan, I have earned security rather than having a preoccupied attachment. I understand relationships better than I did before.

Relationships are essential to human functioning. My relationship with Nathan has kept me grounded and solid, similar to the Earth’s inner core. As I was diving deeper into the pain of my past, the pressure was also increasing. There were times when I felt myself cracking under the pressure of dealing with my past and dealing with things that were bothering me in the moment. The Earth’s inner core is able to remain solid because the melting temperature rises with the increased pressure. This idea is similar to using Nathan as a secure base to keep me stable and to help combat any pressure that I encountered with exploring the past. The strength of my own inner core has helped me to survive intense amounts of pressure. I was able to change my mindset of how to approach relationships, so my actions have also changed. The Earth’s inner core rotates separately from the rest of the Earth. The part of me that keeps me going is the
shift in the mindset of how to approach relationships, which ultimately changes my actions. I seek a balance and mutual respect in my friendships. I have become a person who is less concerned with having the most friends, but more concerned with having the best friends. The people we choose to surround ourselves with is one of the most important decisions we can make.

**The Outer Core**

During my college career, I have tackled the emotional baggage that I have carried around with me since my childhood. My parents’ divorce came when I was seven years old, pulling our family apart as my mother relocated to Louisiana. Their divorce came about due to my mother’s response to her diagnosis of bipolar disorder and narcissistic behaviors, and she made no effort to salvage the marriage. Because of my mother’s condition, I do not think that she was capable of caring for me the way that I needed. When my mother moved back to Louisiana, she left my sister and me behind. I maintained contact with her for several years following the divorce, but things were rocky.

There were several times in the past when I decided to stop talking to my mother. There were incidents with her that left me confused and hurt. I did not know how to move forward and often times my mom wanted to pretend like nothing happened. One moment, in particular, happened my sophomore year in high school. My mother left me a voicemail in the middle of the night saying that her time was coming to an end and that I should stick to the people around me, and to find help. She was crying in the voicemail, telling me that this was the end, but in the background of her call, the melodic beeps of hospital machines were audible. She had called me from the hospital, where she was surrounded by skilled doctors and nurses, to tell me that she was dying.
Before this moment, I had never realized that my mother had ever been suicidal. My dad said that this was definitely not the first “stunt” she had ever pulled like this. In his angry, bitter words, “she did this kind of shit for attention all the time”. I had always been shielded from the nastiness that transpired through the divorce. I am thankful for that protection, but finding out things years after the fact is still difficult. I did not know how to process the situation. To make matters worse, my mom called me a week later and left me her normal voicemail, pretending like nothing had happened.

After seeing behaviors reflecting opposite ends of the spectrum within two weeks, I was left confused. There was no way that I could just keep going on like nothing had happened. That moment changed many things for me. I had always known that my mom was unhealthy and not willing to take care of herself, but she was to the point where she let her daughters see the severity of the situation. No child should ever hear that her mother was trying to kill herself. That leaves so many questions. But to make it worse, she ignored it, leaving even more questions. I decided to send her an email to tell her I was confused and that I did not want to talk to her for a while.

So I went months without talking to her. She called me several months later, and I have no idea what came over me, but I answered it. She never acknowledged the fact that we had not been speaking for months. She did not even bother to bring up the voicemail. I was hurt by her desire to ignore it all. But for some reason, I kept talking to her on a regular basis. I never spoke my mind about what I felt, but that is mostly because I was not aware of what I felt. I just remember crying when she left the two voicemails, and again when I answered the phone call and she ignored the past. I shoved my emotions to the side, unprocessed, creating a deeper wound than what was already there.
I talked to my mom for a while after that, but officially, our relationship was done by the time I graduated high school. I was not speaking to her and went my first couple years of college without speaking to her unless I was responding to a text about my address or something that I deemed essential. Last spring, I decided that I did not handle the situation properly. I shut her out of my life but did not explain why. Many people told me that she did not deserve an explanation because she has not been a good mother. They told me that I owed her nothing. But I owed it to myself to explain why we were not speaking. I reached a point where I realized that I could not move forward without acknowledging the pain and bitterness that I was holding onto.

I finally admitted the things that she made me feel. My next artifact is a letter that I sent to my mother. The letter I sent her is the most honest I have ever been with her or anyone for that matter. I gave her a list of things that I felt and explained why I felt that way. Those things included: disappointed at her inability to mother, angry that she did not care about the consequences of any of her actions, hurt that she left my sister and me and also hurt that she stripped my dad of his happiness, and finally her actions left me feeling insecure. I internalized many things when she left, the biggest one being that if my own mother did not love me, then who could? Parents are supposed to be loving and nurturing, and should not leave their child feeling any of those things.

The letter was hard for me to write, but I am glad I sent it. The conversations following the letter confirmed my decision to cut her out of my life. After sending the letter, my mother and I communicated over text for awhile and it got to the point that we were working on setting up an in-person conversation to talk about past events. But many promises on her end fell through, and we had differing expectations, so I decided to cancel the proposed meeting. I decided that I did not need to have a conversation with her to move forward. I had already
reached a sense of peace from developing a secure attachment by using Nathan as a secure base and from sending my mom a letter. A person’s adult attachment style is classified as secure-autonomous when they maintain narrative coherence, which is when “the presentation and evaluation of experiences is internally consistent, and responses are clear, relevant and reasonably succinct” regardless of positive or negative experiences (Main, 1996, p.240). My decision to move forward without a conversation is an example of narrative coherence because I was able to think about my needs clearly and realized that the conversation would not be productive. When I sent my mother the letter, I was confronting her for the first time in my life. “Often the result of daring greatly is not a victory march as much as it is a quiet sense of freedom with a little battle fatigue” (Brown, 2012, p. 43). I sent my mother the letter which took a lot out of me, but ultimately my sense of peace kind of crept its way in. I am not saying that I am completely and forever healed from her painful relationship, but I feel the most content with where I am. I know how to move forward.

My relationship with my mom is the most difficult relationship that I have ever had. It has been excruciating at times. But it is the relationship that motivates me the most. I hang on to the fear that I will one day end up like my mother. I am motivated to become everything she could not become. Mainly, I can never let myself stop caring—about my well-being, about those around me, and about my future. The moment I stop caring is the moment that things go downhill. I have seen people who live normal lives even after the diagnosis of bipolar disorder, but the difference between those people and my mother is motivation. There are two primary types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is when a person performs an action for their own gratification with that activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation is when a person performs the action because of the reward they will receive (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
Both forms of motivation lead to results. For my mother, if she got help for herself because she found joy in that action, that would be intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation would be her seeking help because the people around her may treat her better when they see that she is getting help. Both of these types of motivation would result in her seeking help and working on improving her well-being. But without this motivation, she is stuck where she is. Motivation is important to overcome any obstacle, whether it be one of mental health or a physical obstacle.

By processing this relationship and reframing how I look at it, I believe I have gone through a process of resilience. Resilience can be defined as “successful adaptation despite risk and adversity” (Masten, 1994). Resilience is often described in the popular press as a personality trait that someone can possess. But research has defined resilience as a process, rather than a trait (Masten, 2001). Resilience is not running away and avoiding problems, but it is finding a way to cope with them, and to hopefully strive in the face of that adversity.

According to Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013), there are five components to resilience as a process: awareness, intention, action, reflection, and maintenance. Awareness involves reframing how the person looks at the mistreatment (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). Originally I thought that my mother left and was manipulative because she did not love me. With time, however, I was able to reframe that idea, believing that she could not help herself because she could not live properly with a bipolar diagnosis. She let the diagnosis destroy her, which affected how she treated the people in her life. My ability to reframe how I think about my mother’s actions is similar to narrative coherence that comes with secure adult attachment; I am able to separate myself from the relationship and think clearly about her actions (Main, 1996).

Next is intention, which is set to achieve goals that are meant to make a difference (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). For me, my intention that I set was to never stop caring. Through
this goal, I can achieve things that help my well-being, but also help those around me. By sharing things from my past, and offering my help, I can hopefully make a difference around me. Action is the next well thought-out step which involves organization and location of resources and utilization of those resources (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). Actions can look different for everyone, depending on the problem at hand. My action step was to seek help from Nathan. My relationship with Nathan was crucial to the beginning stages of this resilience process. I knew I needed help tackling the pain of my past and I sought help when needed. Reflection is part of the process that is happening at all stages, reflecting on and appreciating the small things that built up to successes. Reflection also includes thinking about stressors as motivators and also as events from which to draw contentment (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). For me, each time I encounter a side of my mom that I have never seen, I am motivated to become the opposite of that. When I wrote the letter to her, I counted that as a success and felt a sense of peace. I used that process of writing her a letter to become content with where I was and how I felt about our relationship.

The final component of resilience is maintenance. Maintenance involves “protecting, psychological sense of community, flexibility, and adaptation to change over time, constant effort, and an appreciation for incremental growth” (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013, p. 346). For me, I feel that I have maintained all of these things. I know I have a community around me that supports me. I am flexible when new challenges arise from my mother, and I incorporate the lessons I learn from those instances into my life and allow the change to happen. I am constantly trying to overcome any obstacles related to her, and I appreciate my growth when I have a new success.
This level of my being is most similar to the outer core of the Earth. The outer core is a layer of magma, which is molten, liquid rock. The outer core is a liquid layer surrounding the inner core (Marshak, 2011). Together, with the inner core of the Earth, the Earth’s magnetic field is created, which protects the planet from the strength and power of the Sun (Marshak, 2011). Within myself, the inner core and the outer core work together to change how I approach the people in my life. I value having people who are supportive and meaningful, and I value caring about the people in my life. My relationships and my identity within my relationships reflects the magnetic field created within my being. The relationships I have in my life protect me from the hardships of the world around me.

The Mantle

The Earth’s mantle is the next layer of the planet. This layer is primarily a thick, rocky, molten layer (Marshak, 2011). Within the mantle, convection currents drive the movement of the plates that make up the Earth’s surface (Marshak, 2011). The mantle is out of our sight, but it can break through in the form of volcanoes when plates separate from each other.

This layer of myself is important to the development of who I am because through the process of being vulnerable, I have let volcanoes erupt by allowing myself to be seen. The willingness, or lack thereof, to be vulnerable is the number one thing that holds us back from being seen by those in our lives. But when we allow vulnerability to take over, parts of our being surface.

During my college career, I have learned the importance of being vulnerable. Researcher and thought provoker, Dr. Brené Brown has put forth her own conceptualization of vulnerability. She defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (Brown, 2012, p. 34).
With this definition in mind, I believe that I have become a person who embraces vulnerability. The artifact that represents this shift in my character is the blog that I started writing.

Vulnerability manifests differently for everyone. For me it was letting people read about my life, a notion that at first made me uncomfortable. Last January, I decided to start writing a blog that I would share with the people in my life. I have always been so good at hiding and suppressing my feelings. I tend to shut people out because it is easier than letting them in. But, by forcing myself to write a blog, I allowed myself to be vulnerable. I wanted to share my life with those around me, but it was hard and the timing was never right. I have always been the person who will answer questions and be completely honest, but I have never been the person who just willingly puts things out there. It does not feel natural for me to just bring certain things up, so I avoided doing so for a long time.

My first blog post included my life story. It covered all of the painful details of growing up in my household. It also covered the development of my relationship with God. When I originally started writing the blog, I thought I would share updates on my progress and growth in my relationship with God. Research has shown that religious figures can serve as attachment figures (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2009). God can fulfill all three components of an attachment relationship because: 1) He is close by because He is considered omnipresent, 2) He is a safe haven because people turn to Him in times of distress and receive comfort, and 3) He can be a secure base for people to explore the world (Granqvist et al., 2009). My relationship with God did not really start to strengthen until I was in college, so I do not think that I consider God an attachment figure to the extent that I do Nathan, but my view could change in the future. As my relationship with God grows stronger, I could later shift my idea of God as an attachment figure. So in my blog, I thought that I would share my growth. I thought that I would share
moments when I felt led by God, or moments when I learned something new and how to apply that to my life.

I thought that I would be transparent in my blog, but I was not expecting to share everything. Yes, I wanted to share the hard things in my life, but I thought that it would still be all-around positive. I thought that I would gloss over the hard stuff and show the positive, exciting aspects of my life. I thought that I could be vulnerable, but still hide. But I was wrong and my blog took a turn. I shared times when I felt like I was inadequate. I shared times when I was mad and when I was hurt. I did not expect to share those times. I expected to just kind of brush the surface of vulnerability and talk about the positive things that I learned. But there is no power behind words like that if the hurt and pain are not first exposed.

My words would not have been meaningful if I refused to share the moments that made me human. I shared when I felt led to share, but I never forced myself to share because there’s nothing worse than blogs that sound forced. It does not sound like it wants to be out there, and you can only say the same thing a certain number of times before it gets old.

Oftentimes when I talk about the idea of being vulnerable, people associate it with weakness. They pass a judgment and view me as weak. “Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness” (Brown, 2012, p. 33). I honestly do not care if people associate my desire and willingness to be vulnerable with weakness. For me, I know that it is a moment of strength and courage. Brown states that it is the “birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity” (Brown, 2012, p. 34). With this idea in mind, it is hard to see vulnerability as weakness. It is the most important and freeing thing that a person can do.
Through embracing vulnerability, my relationships have grown stronger—I know who my true friends are and I find joy in knowing that. Because I started writing a blog and sharing the things in my life, it is easier for me to move forward and continue to do so. Each time I have embraced vulnerability, whether it be writing a blog post or doing something outside of my comfort zone, I have let myself be seen, and each time I let myself be seen, I created a volcano through which parts of my being surface.

Vulnerability is not just a one-time thing. We have instances every day in which we can choose vulnerability, but if we say no to vulnerability, we keep hiding. The need for human connection is vital, and it cannot really be achieved unless we let the people around us see us for who we are, holding nothing back. Through embracing vulnerability, our true identities come out, we are no longer hiding behind any masks or images of perfection that we created for ourselves. We are being authentic, flawed, but human.

**The Crust**

The Earth’s crust is the surface layer—the one that we see. We see the mountains and the rivers and the oceans. But we do not see the plates that lie just beneath the surface, controlling the structure of the crust. There are only a handful of plates that come together at boundaries which are responsible for the presence of volcanoes, mountains, and trenches, and the movement of plates is responsible for earthquakes (Marshak, 2011).

While the Earth is believed to have seven or eight major plates, I can only see three plates of my being (Marshak, 2011). These plates relate to the decisions I make and plan to make. There are three major decisions I have made during my college career that help to define who I am: my decisions to pursue a career as a high school counselor, go to Mexico, and pursue an internship with Firm Foundations.
A book that I encountered during one of my courses, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* by Martin Berger (2011), discussed the importance of being an active participant rather than an observer. In one of the chapters, Berger discussed the white photojournalists who could be considered an active participant or a mere observer. He argued that the active participants were those who were chasing the next story and capturing the photos in the middle of the action (Berger, 2011). And the observers were the ones who waited for someone else to find the event and captured a picture of the event after it had already been discovered, rather than seeking out the next monumental photo (Berger, 2011).

The idea of being an active participant can apply to anyone in life. A question that I often ask myself is “what am I doing for myself?” When I ask this, I want to make sure that I am not just going through the motions of life. I want to choose to do things that give me life when I participate in them. These three major decisions I have made are all things that I do for myself. They are all forms of serving others, but that is something that brings me joy and keeps me motivated.

When I first came to school at UNCC, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, including what major I wanted to choose. I came in undecided, but with an open-mind. At the end of my freshman year, I decided to declare a major of Psychology after taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I knew I enjoyed the field of Psychology and took time to explore career opportunities. In the spring of my sophomore year, I wrote a paper for a topics in psychology class about creativity. In this paper, we were supposed to try to understand our trajectory. This paper is my next artifact because it was influential to the future of my career. In this paper, I confidently stated that I wanted to become a high school counselor. This was a career that I had been thinking about for a while and finally made the decision that it was my top career interest.
My passion to become a high school counselor came from my experiences in my own high school. My counselors were not helpful and often left me more confused than before I posed a question about college and career plans. I experienced firsthand the need for competent people in this profession.

One other reason that I decided that this career was important to me was my relationship with my mother. We had a hard time, and I learned many lessons from this relationship. I know that I have not had all of the same experiences that my future students have and will have. But my own experiences can relate to many scenarios. I understand many emotions and have overcome many let-downs. In my eyes, it is not fair for me to hold onto my experiences without sharing what I have learned to help the people around me. I know that counseling is more than just listening and relating, but as a high schooler, all I wanted was someone who could relate to what I felt. I wanted someone to listen, understand and guide me in my future. As a high school counselor, I think I could provide that support for the students.

My desire to become a high school counselor also comes from my love of serving others. This love is something that I learned while in Mexico. My next artifact is a backpack. This backpack is a memento that I purchased for my first real mission trip. I went to Mexico for the first time during the spring break of my freshman year and again during the spring breaks of my junior and senior years. On this first trip, I was the only freshman that went, with a group of five staff members and 13 other students. We traveled to the cities of Tijuana and Tecate, which are located just south of the border in San Diego, California. The goal of this trip was to build a house. We were responsible for building it properly, and leaving the supplies for the owners to finish the inside. The company that we work through, Amor Ministries, adopted the philosophy of allowing the new homeowners to take ownership of their house by adding the final touches.
We build the frames, the roof, and stucco the outside for them, but they are left with the task of completing the final stages of the wall construction. Amor believes that leaving the owners something to do on their house is more effective than completing everything and giving them such a large gift. The people are appreciative enough for the fact that we are willing to come build for them and many times they want to help, but do not have the time. Receiving an entire, completed house would be too overwhelming and would bring guilt and shame to the new homeowners since they know they would not have contributed to the building of the house, so we leave them something to finish.

On my first trip, I was out of my comfort zone. We were camping in tents and showering from solar bags that were set on top of a shelf in an open room. I was also surrounded by a lot of people who I did not know very well. But things could not have gone smoother for us that week. We all got along so well and worked like a well-oiled machine to build the house for the family; we actually finished early.

The second time I went on this trip, we were informed that the conditions that we were living with during the week were better than those experienced every day by many of the local people. That statement blew my mind. Part of the fun of this trip is the change in resources and the adventure of camping. But the thought that the small amount of resources that we had was more than what some people had on a regular basis changed my perspective completely. I am not used to poverty. I am used to comfort. I am used to knowing that I will be eating dinner and have a place to sleep each night. I had never really thought about the fact that these are real, stressful concerns for people in the world. When we heard that fact, I fell even more in love with the trip and the work we were able to do for the families.
I loved the idea of essentially “giving up” my spring break to help those who needed a fresh start. Part of the trip cost is the cost of materials for the house. It is one thing to come in and build a house for someone, but another when you can confidently say that you helped with every aspect. It would be a completely different trip if the supplies were provided by the families or by Amor and all we had to do was come in and build. Paying for the materials made us more connected to the families and to the work we were doing for them.

My first time going on the trip, I discovered my love of serving others. I learned that I am a person who loves people through serving rather than any form of communication. I am a firm believer in the statement that actions speak louder than words. I would much rather do something for someone to make them feel loved than say something to make them feel that way. I was able to show love to the team I was working with, but also to the families we were serving. I also discovered that a way that I heal from my own pain and heartache is through acts of service. It helps me to help others.

On my second trip, any doubts that I had about the process of selecting families were completely destroyed. I did not understand how Amor could decide who was worthy of a new house and who was not. It was not as simple as that. There are many people in the area where we were working who had nothing, and who were running out of space to house their families. I always thought that the hardest part would be choosing between who was worthy of a new house and who was not. We learned about the selection process when two of the local church pastors came and spoke to us one night.

The pastors shared that the families are chosen based on who comes to the church. For the most part, the families we serve are those in which the father figure has had a hard time providing for the family because of his involvement with drugs or alcohol, but have come to the
church looking for a fresh start. These are men who have acknowledged their selfishness and
their sins, but want to change and want to provide for their families and make them the top
priority. This hit home with me because my dad struggled with alcohol for a large part of my
childhood. It made me question what would have happened to me if he did not get help and
transform his life. The explanation of the selection process made me feel more connected to
those who we were serving because that could have been me to some degree.

Serving in Mexico has been one of the highlights of my college career. The time I spent
there allowed me to reflect on my life and learn things about myself that I was not entirely sure
were there. I knew that I cared for the people around me, but I did not realize the joy that I found
in the action of serving and sacrificing part of my time to make a difference in someone’s life. I
learned how to translate the joy I found in Mexico into my day to day life. I learned the
importance of being grateful for everything I have and ultimately choosing joy, whether that is
being able to serve someone or doing something else I love.

My final artifact is a binder. This binder contains paperwork from my internship with
Firm Foundations. Firm Foundations is a non-profit organization that implements a mentoring
program for middle school and high school girls. During the first couple of months of my
internship, I was simply in charge of the Twitter account and sharing inspirational quotes. That
was simple enough, but it was not fulfilling. I later asked if I could join the iMatter Girls
mentoring sessions, and I am so grateful to be part of that group.

The mentoring sessions allow me to get a very, very small taste of what lies in my future.
I get to be supportive and listen to girls who just need someone to be there for them. I am not
assigned to specific girls, rather there is a group of women who help facilitate the sessions and
contribute to the discussion. I like this organization better than one-on-one mentoring because we can share the same message with all of the girls at once.

One of the first sessions I participated in was about family relationships. We spent our previous sessions outlining what healthy relationships and unhealthy relationships looked like. So our discussion of family relationships was more in depth. We talked about the importance of communication between the girls and their families, mainly with their parents or guardians. We talked about what the role of the parent was supposed to be and what they were supposed to do in return.

In this mentoring session, I was able to be vulnerable and talk about the rocky relationship with my mother. I shared the letter I sent her with the girls and received nothing but support from them. The purpose of me sharing that letter was to provide an example of confrontational, but not harmful communication. I was able to share the details of my rocky relationship and provide support and encouragement to any girls facing similar issues. But I was also able to be an example for the girls.

It is important for me to be a mentor because that is something that has been so influential in my life. It is extremely helpful to have someone outside of family or a friend circle who supports you. I wish I had been part of something like the iMatter mentoring sessions when I was in high school. Yes, I had family and friends who supported me, but an outside perspective and supporter should always be welcomed.

**Conclusion**

The Earth is dynamic, and constantly changing. New things are happening every day, especially on the surface that we see. Rivers, valleys, mountains are formed. Rivers dry up, plates converge and diverge. The Earth is constantly changing, but one thing that remains is the
need to keep the overall structure. I am constantly changing, but one constant is the fact that I have basic needs that need to be fulfilled. A basic need is an “energizing state that, if satisfied, conduces toward health and well-being but, if not satisfied, contributes to pathology and ill-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74). In their discussion, Ryan and Deci (2000) outline three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Competence is the sense of efficacy or ability to succeed or to complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). After using Nathan as a secure base, I have noted my shift from unhealthy to healthier relationships. I have noted my change, and therefore, feel competent and confident when it comes to approaching relationships and choosing friends based on their ability to be supportive. I also feel competent in my ability to make decisions about my future, specifically my decision to become a high school counselor. It is a decision that has been manifesting for a while and with every step forward, I feel more confident in that choice.

Autonomy is the belief that behavior is self-determined, or that I am in control of my own actions and decisions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since I have been in college, I have been in control of my decisions. I was able to choose my own major, and choose my activities. Most importantly, I was able to choose when to get help for my own well-being. Growing up, I was forced to go to a counselor because my parents wanted me to go, but that approach never worked for me because I was not ready to be there. When I was ready, I was able to make that decision for myself and sought help from Nathan. I have learned to take care of myself and my well-being when needed and not forcing it too soon because that is someone else’s desire.

Lastly, relatedness is the “need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I think that this is the area in which I have evidenced the most growth, with each experience and layer of myself teaching me something different about relationships.
Although each experience is different, each is vital to my development. In the inner core, the development of a secure attachment has allowed me to learn about proper relationships. I have come to understand what healthy relationships look like and how to maintain them. In the outer core, I learned the importance of setting the intention to never stop caring. My desire to care extends past my own well-being, but to those around me. I have learned that it is essential for me to be caring and to be present in my relationships. In the mantle, I have learned to embrace vulnerability. I have learned the value of forming deeper connections by being vulnerable, which ultimately makes relationships stronger. Moments when I grow closer to people are a result of being vulnerable. In the crust, I have three main plates or decisions that I have made: identifying a career path to be a high school counselor, going on trips to Mexico, and being part of Firm Foundations. All three of those decisions allow me to be caring. They allow me to fulfill the role I have defined for myself in a relationship. I am able to fully love those around me the best I can, through my love language of serving. I have learned the importance of relationships to not only my well-being, but to the world around us. Relationships help us. They guide us and motivate us.

Each of my experiences works together to make me who I am. The development of a secure attachment has allowed me to see the world differently. I now see people as reliable entities rather than flaky and unsupportive. But I may not have been able to earn security if it had not been for my relationship with my mother. Her actions and what I took away from them eventually forced me to seek help. They forced me to open up about my life with someone, which was very uncharacteristic of me before I started college. After using Nathan as a secure base, and realizing that people could actually be trusted, I began to embrace vulnerability. I began to share aspects of my life with those around me, and because of that, my relationships are healthier than they have ever been. By embracing vulnerability and taking risks, I find new
things that I love. And those things that I love become my decisions that are shaping my future.
The process of trying to understand myself has been a long, rewarding journey, but it is certainly
not over yet.
References


