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# SAINTS AND POETS IN CONVERSATION:
## Metanarrative in Theater and in Life

By

DONALD P. JOHNSON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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**Abstract**

To converse meaningfully with her neighbors, the church must account for changes in expressions of faith, fragmentation of communities, and decreasing interest in dialogue concerning faith. The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons ("nones") interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production. The literature review focused on how narrative shapes meaning in life, defining characteristics of nones' identity, and if nones perceive and express the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's creation.

Four questions guided this study: (1) How do nones interpret *Saving Mr. Banks*? (2) How do nones compare and contrast *Saving Mr. Banks'* metanarrative with their personal narratives? (3) How are nones' daily lives affected by these narratives? (4) In what ways and to what extent do nones' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation? This study used qualitative research methods to gather and assess the resulting data and semi-structured interview protocol with six nones, examined their connection to and use of story to shape life meaning, and offered insights for deeper understanding of and conversation with nones.

Key findings of this study were that the film's themes gave moral coherence to the participants' lives; there were life-forming connections between the film's narratives and participants' lives; and many of the participants' stories affirmed meaning in life, the importance of relational healing, and hopefulness toward a future realm.

The church must, therefore, approach the unchurched with a more gracious and engaging posture; pursue the artistic expression wherever it is found; cultivate

community by listening to the stories that give meaning to life; kindle the moral imagination of children through storytelling; and approach gospel conversations anticipating resonance with the biblical explanation for the plight of this world and hope for the future.

À Jenny mon coeur, mon âme et ma femme

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**Acknowledgments**

Thanks to Beth Hart, Donald Guthrie, Mark Ryan, Lynn Lynch, Steve Garber, and Duane Otto for their help and guidance in completing this dissertation. I'm also grateful for the study participants who entrusted me with their stories. Praise be to God for the opportunity to complete these studies, and my hope is that this work brings glory to him.

## Chapter One

## Introduction

> Emily: *Do any human beings realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?*
> Stage Manager: *No.* Pause. *The saints and poets, maybe – they do some.*
>
> – Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*[1]

In the northwest suburbs of Chicago stands an Italian restaurant renowned for its generous portions and atmosphere brimming with all the trappings of an old-fashioned Italian family meal. One winter's evening, in the hustle and bustle of this well-appointed establishment, a young family sat at a rectangular wooden table – father, mother, and two small children. Of the four, three were transfixed on small electronic devices painting their stoic faces in luminous white light, a stark contrast against the boisterous but dimly lit mahogany paneled restaurant. The youngest, a kindergarten-aged girl, sat silently looking at her mother who appeared to still have a pulse, but little more.

While the family gathered in close physical proximity, in that moment there was a detachment of place and persons that was not even possible a decade earlier. The writings of the great American playwright Tennessee Williams are rife with disdain for the dehumanizing effects of industry and automation in his time. Yet, in post-industrial America, some argue such concerns have not diminished, but heightened, as new technologies literally re-wire the human brain, re-shape families, and re-define

[1] Thornton Wilder, *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), 100.

communities.[2] Thus, Williams' insights and critiques have enduring relevance to questions of humanity and their place in this world. In his *New York Times* tribute to Broadway actress Laurette Taylor, Williams wrote,

> In this unfathomable experience of ours there are sometimes hints of something that lies outside the flesh and its mortality. I suppose these intuitions come to many people in their *religious* vocations, but I have sensed them more clearly in the work of *artists* and most clearly of all in the art of Laurette Taylor. There was a radiance about her art which I can compare only to the greatest lines of poetry, and which gave me the same shock of revelation as if the air about us had been momentarily broken through by light from some clear space beyond.[3]

Whatever else may be said of Tennessee Williams, his writings display an extraordinary attentiveness to the dignity and worth of human life and experience. In his tribute, Williams recognized there is something more to life than "the flesh and its mortality." It comes from outside of us. Its radiance streamed through Laurette Taylor's stagecraft in a manner Williams deemed revelatory, as light entering in from another world.

As one who appreciated the "radiance" of great art, Williams struggled to reconcile such inspired revelations with the despair that arose from his belief that all

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[2] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 34-35, 208-212. Carr discusses how new technologies have the potential to literally re-wire the neural circuits of the brain. "The price we pay to assume technology's power is alienation"... Intellectual technologies "amplify and then make numb the most intimate, the most human, of our natural capacities – those for reason, perception, memory, emotion."

[3] Both William and Wilder note the close parallel between religious/saints and artists/poets. Tennessee Williams, "Creator of the 'Glass Menagerie' Pays Tribute to Laurette Taylor," nytimes.com, December 5, 1949, accessed January 1, 2013, nytimes.com/books/ 00/12/31/ specials/williams-taylor.html; emphasis added.

humankind was on a hopeless march into oblivion.[4] Over the course of his life, this unresolved tension swept his writings in a downward spiral. Noted Williams scholar Allean Hale explained that his stories evolved from the more hopeful, idealistic tone found in *Stairs to the Roof* to the tragic tone found in works like *The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire,* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.[5] Regardless of the tone and trajectory, in all of his works Williams' goal was to "somehow capture the constantly evanescent quality of existence."[6] Life was quickly fading, "one little instance of light" suspended in the darkness.[7]

In the biblical framework for understanding human dignity and worth, turning away from the creator and his moral order only deepens the darkness and alienation. Artists like Williams seem to long for meaning and purpose within the human experience. But for the atheist, agnostic, or deist, there remains a tragic disconnect between any noble aspirations that well-up within and creation's futility as they perceive it.

In his "Stone Lectures" delivered in 1898 at Princeton Seminary, Abraham Kuyper offered a more coherent thesis concerning the place of art in the created order. In

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[4] Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 23, 248-249. Early in his memoirs Williams wrote "I have never doubted the existence of God nor have I ever neglected to kneel in prayer when a situation in which I found myself ... seemed critical enough in my opinion to merit the Lord's attention and, I trust, his intervention." Still, in the final pages darkness prevails, "I am unable to believe that there is anything but permanent oblivion after death. It is a dreadful apostasy with which to live a human life…[F]inally we are left with either the simple faith of our childhood, unacceptable to a mature person, or to – what? What, indeed! The trivial distractions of daily and nightly existence with which we obscure the hushed but giant footsteps of our approaching end?"

[5] Tennessee Williams and Allean Hale, *Stairs to the Roof* (New York: New Directions, 2000), ix-xix.

[6] Williams, *Memoirs*, 84.

[7] Williams and Hale, *Stairs*, 23. Ben Murphy, the protagonist in *Stairs*, says, "What do you remember of the time before you were born? … It's on the dark side of the moon. And after you're dead – that's also on the dark side of the moon. But here in the middle is one little instant of light – a pin-point of brilliance – right here in the very center of infinite – endless – dark! What are you doing with it? What wonderful use are you making of this one instant?"

his lecture titled "Calvinism and Art" he said, "[I]f you confess the world once *was* beautiful, but by the curse has become *undone,* and by a final catastrophe is to pass to its final state of glory, excelling even the beauty of paradise, then art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster."[8] According to Kuyper, true art is inseparable from creation. There is no disconnect.

Kuyper and Calvin both held that the metanarrative of the holy scriptures – creation, fall, redemption, and new creation – gives meaning to and is woven through the fabric of the universe.[9] Because of this reality, they asserted that all artists have the potential to bear testimony to their creator. Kuyper's lecture continued, "[I]f God is and remains Sovereign, then He imparts these artistic gifts to whom He will, first even to Cain's, and not Abel's posterity; not as if art were Cainitic, but in order that he who has sinned away the highest gifts, should at least, as Calvin so beautifully says, in the lesser gifts of the art have some testimony of the Divine bounty."[10] It is this testimony of the "Divine bounty" that is often expressed in the narratives of the poets, playwrights, and lyricists.

Narratives are not limited to professing Christians or to professionals who craft stories for stage, screen, or some other form of publication. The same truths brought to light by screenwriters, sculptors, and painters are often expressed with less polish but

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[8] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures in Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000), 155; emphasis author's.

[9] Terminology "creation, fall, redemption, and new creation" adapted from Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 39-47.

[10] Kuyper, 155-156. Kuyper refers to the regenerate as "Abel's posterity" and the unregenerate as "Cain's posterity."

more poignancy by common people and their common stories. The best stories resonate deeply with life as we know it – offering the "truest truths of the universe ... in a language the whole world understands."[11]

Mayra Schechtman, professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois-Chicago, wrote about the interplay of life, literature, meaning, and what she called "narrative self-constitution." She explains,

> We enter into ongoing stories, stories we must interpret and continue, and these functions are in constant interaction with each other. Life is different from literature because we write it as we live it and engage in criticism as we go along rather than after the fact, and because this forces us to take on different roles and perspectives. The creative act in narrative self-constitution is thus neither to produce a tidy and meaningful story out of whole cloth nor to take accidents and contingencies and arbitrarily interpret them as meaningful. It is rather to carve out a meaningful life trajectory by appreciating the contingencies, considering how to respond to them meaningfully, and directing life so much as possible in the direction of that meaning.[12]

Stories shape people's lives, and people shape their stories. Schechtman explains that interpreting, responding, and assessing meaning in the midst of this dynamic interplay is fundamental to the human experience.

American poet William Carlos Williams spoke to the significance of story in everyday human experience when he observed, "Their story, yours, mine – it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and to learn from them."[13] Both Williams and Schechtman offer keen observations for those who pursue meaningful conversations with co-workers, neighbors and friends. The

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[11] Steven Garber, "Singing Songs the Whole World Can Hear," washingtoninst.org, May 5, 2012, accessed May 25, 2013, washingtoninst.org/1911/singing-songs-that-the-whole-world-can-hear/.

[12] Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 414.

[13] Quoted in Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 30.

stories people carry with them are essential to "carving out" and directing the trajectory of a meaningful life.

The Christian faith is by nature and design word-centered. The teaching of Christ anticipates the faithful proclamation of the gospel throughout the world and across the ages.[14] However, a message cannot be received if it is not understood. It must be communicated in a manner that takes into account the language of the hearers and how stories are crafted, understood, and embraced in a given culture. For example, the apostle Paul did not simply recite the gospel in a cold, disconnected way – he shared his life and his stories with his hearers and they with him.[15]

Mayra Schectman and Carlos Williams's words, and the apostle Paul's example, illumine the path for empathetic conversations about the ultimate questions in life: people must first sit down; they must look their neighbor, family member, or friend in the eye; and they must listen to, interact with, respect, and learn from the stories this person offers. Doing so would not mean one holds the truths of the gospel tenuously or adopts every category of those outside the church. Rather, the first and greatest commandment is to love God. The second is to "love your neighbor as yourself."[16] The Bible asserts that those who love God listen to him and shape their hearts and lives by his word.[17] Those who love their neighbor listen to them, conferring the dignity and worth due fellow

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[14] Matt. 24:14.

[15] Acts 17:16-34, Acts 20:17-38, and 1 Thess. 2:7-8 offer vivid examples of both the substance and manner of Paul's teaching.

[16] Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18, 34; Mark 12:30-31.

[17] John 14:23; 1 John 5:2.

creatures made in the image of God.[18] Those who listen to both God and neighbor are more able to assert the enduring truth of the gospel faithfully and in a manner fitting to the posture and circumstance of their hearer.

However, recent surveys suggest dialogue concerning matters of deeply held beliefs might be increasingly difficult to achieve. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public life found that from 2007 to 2014 those who indicated no religious affiliation (hereafter, called "nones") increased from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent of the US adult population.[19] Other studies found that nones are less inclined than Americans overall to think about meaning and purpose in life: 53 percent versus 67 percent. Furthermore, the vast majority of those who identify their religion as "nothing in particular," 88 percent, are not actively seeking a church or other religious group to join.[20] This does not mean that this segment of the US adult population are declared atheist or agnostic, as only 7.0 percent of the US population identifies as such.[21] Instead, for many, faith is an increasingly private and/or unimportant matter, as 15.8 percent of the US population identifies their religious status as "nothing in particular."[22]

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[18] Gen. 1:27; Matt. 5:43-47; Matt. 20:25-28.

[19] Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones,'" pewresearch.org, May 13, 2015, accessed June 15, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones. Religiously unaffiliated ("nones") include "nothing in particular," atheist, or agnostic.

[20] Pew Research Religion & Public Life, "'Nones' on the Rise," pewforum.org, October 9, 2012, accessed May 14, 2014, pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#_ftn23.

[21] Pew Research Religion & Public Life, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious Nones."

[22] Ibid.

In addition to a decreasing interest in matters of meaning and purpose, other surveys show that communities are increasingly fragmented and disconnected. Since the 1970s, socializing trends show a "lower frequency of contact with neighbors," evidencing shrinkage in social networks.[23] Anyone committed to fostering community dialogue of any sort must account for recent trends in American social life that create obstacles to understanding and empathy.

**Statement of Problem and Purpose**

In the brokenness of this fallen world, the original beauty, truth, and goodness of God's creation is obscured, even shattered, but it is by no means lost, and is sometimes articulated most profoundly by poets, playwrights, and lyricists. The stories individuals carry with them – whether crafted by established authors or carved out by common people in the ordinary moments of life – offer a starting point for connecting to one another with understanding and empathy. However, in an increasingly fragmented and disconnected world, one often finds that people hold indifferent or even strident attitudes toward those whose views differ significantly from their own. Scripture calls the church to reject such apathy and strife. Instead, the church is to seek meaningful conversation with those who apprehend and articulate the intrinsic worth of human life and experience but articulate it outside the lexicon of the Christian faith.

In his book, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, German theologian Hans Walter Wolff argued that a "hearing heart" – a heart that attends carefully to the revealed word of God and extends that same attentiveness to its neighbors – is fundamental to what it is

[23] Peter V. Marsden, *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 255.

to be human.[24] Yet, in her eagerness to impart the rich treasure of the gospel, the church too often neglects the loving labor of listening to those in close physical and relational proximity but who are outside the covenant community, implicitly denying the dignity and worth God bestows upon all humankind. This study sought to listen to and learn from the unique perspectives and experiences of nones within researcher's local community. The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the suburbs of Chicago interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production.

## Research Questions

The research questions framing this study are as follows:

1. How do religiously unaffiliated persons interpret [production]?
2. How do religiously unaffiliated persons compare and contrast [production]'s metanarrative with their personal narratives?
3. How are religiously unaffiliated persons' daily lives affected by these narratives [production and/or personal]?
    a. How do they relate to their family?
    b. How do they relate to their occupation?
    c. How do they relate to their faith?
4. In what ways and to what extent do religiously unaffiliated persons' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation as summarized in Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God's People*?

## Significance of the Study

The Pew Research Center study cited earlier showed the percentage of the US adult population who described themselves as Christians fell from roughly 178 million

[24] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), 47, 74-76.

(78 percent) in 2007 to approximately 173 million (71 percent) in 2014.[25] Over the same period of time, people who described themselves as having no religious affiliation increased from 37 million (16.1 percent) to 56 million (22.8 percent) of the US adult population.[26] In such a fragmented and shifting culture, it is increasingly important for the church – called to propagate the gospel in each succeeding generation – to be in conversation with her neighbors, listening carefully to the narratives that shape the human heart.

This study is, therefore, significant for those who seek to articulate the abiding truth of the gospel in language that is understood by those whose life and worldview is shaped predominately outside traditional church settings. This study will help Christians discern and account for certain cultural similarities and differences in order to communicate the gospel in a manner fitting to the posture, circumstance, and language of their hearers.

## Definition of Terms

Common Grace – the favor or kindness of God that is common to "*all* humankind in general and every member therein."[27] By common grace, rain falls upon the reprobate and the redeemed; sin is in any measure restrained; and truth, beauty, and goodness are in any measure apprehended, expressed, and/or prevail.

Faith – religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices concerning the divine and/or spiritual realm and their relationship to this world, humanity, and the human condition.

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[25] Pew Research Center, "American's Changing Religious Landscape," pewforum.org, May 12, 2015, accessed August 24, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 434-435.

While a portion of "religiously unaffiliated" describes itself as atheist, a strong majority (70 percent) of this segment of the adult population retain some religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices.

Forgive – 1a : to give up resentment of or claim to requital for; b : to grant relief from payment of. 2 a : to cease to feel resentment against (an offender) : pardon.[28]

Heal – 1 a : to make sound or whole; b : to restore to health. 2 a : to cause (an undesirable condition) to be overcome : mend.[29]

Interpret ... [production] – Answers the questions: "What is being said? What is the narrative of [production]?" And, "What does it mean? What truth(s) about humanity and the human experience is(are) being asserted by [production/ writer]?"

Metanarrative – a term developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard to mean "a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values." [30] Examples include Marxism, religious doctrines, belief in progress, and universal reason.[31] The researcher recognizes that many who embrace a postmodern understanding of reality reject the universal application of truth(s) and/or value(s).

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[28] Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "To Forgive," merriamwebster.com, accessed August 25, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forgive.

[29] Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "To Heal," merriamwebster.com, accessed August 25, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heal.

[30] New World Encyclopedia, "Metanarrative," newworldnecyclopedia.org, accessed April 2, 2016, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Metanarrative.

[31] Ibid.

Neighbor – In the Old Testament, neighbor typically referred to those within the covenant community – a fellow Israelite. In the New Testament, neighbor was broadened to incorporate those in close physical and relational proximity, but outside the church or covenant community. In this study the "neighbor" refers to the latter.

Personal Identity – Philosophy of the condition or fact of being one person; remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of the personality.[32]

Postmodern – "Largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually."[33]

Redeem – 1a : to buy back : repurchase. 2 : to free from what distresses or harms: as a : to free from captivity by payment of ransom; b : to extricate from or help to overcome something detrimental; c : to release from blame or debt.[34]

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[32] Oxford Dictionary, "Personal Identity," accessed March, 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/personal-identity?q=.personal+ identity. Accessed 03-2016.

[33] Richard P. Whaite, "Postmodern," counterbalance.org, accessed March 20, 2014, http://counterbalance.org/gengloss. French phiosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote, "Simplifying to the extreme, I defind *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarraatives" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

[34] Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "To Redeem," merriamwebster.com, accessed August 25, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redeem.

Religiously Unaffiliated ("Nones") – a statistical category utilized by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2014) made up of those who indicate a religious affiliation of "nothing in particular" (15.8 percent); agnostic (4.0 percent); or atheist (3.1 percent). This second-largest category of the U.S. population (22.8 percent) is exceeded only by Evangelical Protestant Churches (25.4 percent); Nones now exceed Catholic (20.8 percent); and Mainline Protestant Churches (14.7 percent).[35]

Self – "A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action."[36]

Special (or Salvific) Grace – the unmerited kindness or favor of God evident in the lives of those who are given new hearts, and so enabled to place their faith in Christ alone for salvation.

This chapter has introduced certain challenges faced by the church as she seeks to engage in meaningful conversation with those whose worldview is shaped predominately outside traditional church settings. In the following section the researcher will review relevant literature that addresses how human beings come to understand and affirm their unique place in this world and how that understanding influences their convictions about the dignity and worth of humankind.

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Oxford Dictionary, "Self," oxforddictionaries.com, accessed August 24, 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/self.

## Chapter Two

## Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the suburbs of Chicago interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production. To that end, researcher selected the following research questions to frame this study:

1. How do religiously unaffiliated persons interpret [production]?
2. How do religiously unaffiliated persons compare and contrast [production]'s metanarrative with their personal narratives?
3. How are religiously unaffiliated persons' daily lives affected by these narratives [production and/or personal]?
    a. How do they relate to their family?
    b. How do they relate to their occupation?
    c. How do they relate to their faith?
4. In what ways and to what extent do religiously unaffiliated persons' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation as summarized in Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God's People*?

Three relevant areas of literature were reviewed to provide a foundation for the qualitative research. The first topic of literature focused on the place of narrative in personal identity. This topic looked specifically at how narrative shapes—that is, how it creates, affirms, challenges, adds to, and/or informs—meaning in people's lives. The second topic of literature examined the segment of the American population who describe themselves as unaffiliated with any religious tradition. This topic helped to better understand defining characteristics of this segment and what cultural influences shape

this niche. Finally, the third topic of literature examined the theology of common grace. In this area of study, the researcher examined past and present theological writers and the pertinent biblical texts as they speak to the extent to which truth, goodness, and beauty are perceived, affirmed, and/or expressed by the unregenerate.[37]

## Place of Narrative in Personal Identity

Academic journals and publications are replete with writings on narrative and its expressive and formative role in human experience. Narrative bridges multiple academic disciplines including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, theology, literature, and history. Each discipline offers insights that serve to strengthen our understanding and multiply the avenues available for meaningful discourse about the human experience. In recent decades, this broader discussion took on a new dimension in what American psychologist Jerome Bruner describes as a paradigm shift when, "psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality."[38] This shift brought to the forefront the prospect of an inherent link between narrative and the innate constitution of a human being. Jonathan Gottschall, Adjunct Professor of English at Washington & Jefferson College, summarizes the place of story in human experience, saying, "A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas ... Story is the

[37] The unregenerate are those who have not been brought to new life by the Holy Spirit. Synonyms include "non-Christian" and "unbeliever." In most instances, researcher opted for "unregenerate" for its clarity of theological meaning. The term "Christian/non-Christian" is often wielded about broadly in our culture and "believer/non-believer" is easily misapplied to indicate a general belief in God instead of faith in Christ alone for salvation.

[38] Bruner dates this paradigm shift to the 1981 publication of a collection of essays in *Critical Inquiry* captioned, *On Narrative*. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 5.

counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold together."[39]

Mindful of these hypotheses, researcher discerned that the intersection of narrative, personal identity, and purpose in living offered an intriguing and potentially fertile point of departure for exploring how human beings attribute dignity and worth to human life and experience. Accordingly, this literature review began with its focus on the relationship between narrative and three aspects that contribute to understanding how narrative shapes meaning in a person's life: a sense of self, moral evaluations, and community.

### *Narrative and Self*

In the opening chapter of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, summarizes narrative, saying, "[W]henever we look in this world, we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives this understanding; it gives us what could be called the shape of time."[40] For Abbott, narrative is more than a bare, chronological dictation of events. It must include some measure of depth and subjectivity. Abbott explains that if the description of a certain event lacks "narrativity," it lacks "the sense of someone telling a story."[41] Gregory Currie, Philosophy Professor at the University of York, addresses this distinctive when he writes, "The agent who merely conceives a series of events, however connected, has not yet made a narrative; that

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[39] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Story Telling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012), 138.

[40] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

[41] Ibid., 22.

requires a coherent representational vehicle – words, sounds, images – capable of making the events and their relations, or some of them, intelligible to an audience."[42] British Philosopher Peter Goldie also notes that narrative or story "can be told or narrated, or just thought through in narrative thinking."[43] The common thread between the "story told" and "narrative thinking" is that the telling/thinking gives "narrative structure – coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluation and emotional import – to what is related."[44]

While these explanations offer a measure of clarity concerning what is meant by the words narrative and narrativity, Gale Strawson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin, goes further, connecting narrative, narrativity, and personal identity. He writes that narrative is "a conventional story told in words." The term narrative "at the very least" coveys "a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied – lives, parts of lives, pieces of writing."[45] Strawson then describes the distinctive claims of those who hold what he calls the "psychological Narrativity thesis," saying, "[F]or a life to be a narrative in the required sense it must be lived Narratively. The person whose life it is must see or feel it as a narrative, construe it as a narrative, live it as a narrative. One could put this roughly by saying that lower-case or 'objective' narrativity requires upper-case or

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[42] Gregory Currie, "Framing Narrative" in *Narrative and Understanding Persons,* ed. Daniel Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17-18.

[43] Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII (December 4, 2004): 439, emphasis author's.

'subjective' Narrativity."[46] Narrativity describes a life that is felt, construed, and lived as narrative. One's personal identity is understood through this foundational lens.

Schechtman describes the relationship of narrative and self, saying, "[T]here is broad (but by no means universal) assent to the view that the self is narrative in form."[47] Bruner elaborates, writing that self being "narrative in form" means we "organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of a narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on."[48]

While all narrative views of self draw some connection between narrative and self, Schechtman discerns two basic categories that "give an overall feel for the range of claims that are made about the relationship between narrative and self."[49] Schechtman places Bruner in the first basic category she calls the "hermeneutical narrative view," which typically includes two elemental claims, "One is that our *sense of self* must be narrative, the other that the *lives* of selves are narrative in structure ... Selves, on this view, are beings who *lead* their lives rather than merely having a history, and leading the life of a self is taken inherently to involve understanding one's life as a narrative and enacting the narrative one sees as one's life."[50] Those who hold this view see the narrative understanding of self as a unifying principle for the whole of life. Schechtman continues, "A person's self-conception is a narrative self-conception, then, insofar as the

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Marya Schechtman, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 394.

[48] Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 4.

[49] Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 395; emphasis author's.

[50] Ibid.

incidents and experiences that make up his life are not viewed in isolation, but interpreted as part of the ongoing story that gives them significance."[51]

David Lumsden, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Waikato (New Zealand), offers a more restricted variation of this view. Lumsden argues against "complete narrative unity" by suggesting narratives "be applied only to threads within a person's life."[52] He concludes, "We should attend to narrative strands within the self, without assuming that those narrative strands need compose a master narrative or whole life narrative."[53]

Schechtman's second basic category affirms an essential but limited role of narrative in the human experience. This view "links selfhood to the capacity to think in narrative terms and offer narrative explanations." In contrast to the hermeneutical view, "They do not focus on the *story* of a life, identifying the self with a character in that story, but rather on the fact that selves employ the kind of logic found in stories when they describe, explain, and choose their own behavior." She goes on to write this latter view is "found frequently in developmental and evolutionary psychology."[54]

In his recent book, *The Storytelling Animal,* Dr. Gottschall's insights illustrate narrative as it is incorporated in an evolutionary worldview. Gottschall uses "Neverland" from J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* to describe the place of story in the human experience, saying, "[*The Storytelling Animal*] is about the primate *Homo fictus* (fiction man), the

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[51] Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 97.

[52] David Lumsden, "Whole Life Narrative and Self," *Philosophy, Pyschiatry, & Psychology* 20, No. 1 (March 2013): 1.

[53] Ibid., 9.

[54] Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 398-399; emphasis author's.

great ape with the storytelling mind. You might not realize it, but you are a creature of an imaginative realm called Neverland. Neverland is your home, and before you die, you will spend decades there."[55] Gottschall explores why, in the course of human evolution, this seemingly unnecessary appendage of story has been retained as such a fundamental element of humankind. Gottschall's purpose is to address "not just story's existence – which is strange enough – but story's centrality. Story's role in human life extends far beyond conventional novels or films. Story, and a variety of storylike activities, dominates human life."[56]

However, as suggested above, narrative views are widely held, "but by no means universal."[57] Strawson offers one of the more vocal challenges to the narrative view of self. In "Against Narrativity," Strawson divides stances on the place and benefit of narrative in the human experience into two categories – the "psychological Narrativity thesis" and the "ethical Narrativity thesis."[58] He describes the former as "a straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis about the way ordinary human beings actually experience their lives"[59] and the latter as a thesis that "states that experiencing or conceiving one's life as narrative is a good thing; a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood."[60]

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[55] Gottschall, *The Story Telling Animal,* xiv.

[56] Ibid., 8.

[57] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 429.

[58] Ibid., 428.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

While Strawson concurs with Schechtman that the dominant view in academia today holds that both of these theses are true, Strawson believes this pervasive acceptance is "regrettable."[61] He argues, "It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative."[62] He concludes that such views of narrative "hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts."[63]

At the other end of the spectrum, Charles Taylor, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University, holds that narrative is essential to personhood. As such, he, like Bruner, is included in Schechtman's hermeneutical narrative view. In his classic work, *Sources of Self,* Taylor says that people make sense of themselves and grasp their lives in narrative, "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going ... But narrative must play a bigger role than merely structuring my present. What I am has to be understood as what I have become."[64] Taylor insists that a coherent sense of self requires a narrative understanding of one's life as essential to human identity and purpose.

However, not everyone across the spectrum of narrative views assigns the same weightiness to meaning and purpose asserted by Taylor. On this matter, Schechtman

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[61] Ibid., 429

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Charles Taylor, *Sources of Self: Identity and the Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 47.

contrasts hermeneutical theorists such as Taylor and Scottish philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre with other narrative theorists who do not make the meaning of life such a weighty matter. She says that in most of the other views, "'meaning' has a more mundane sense of intelligibility... Even in [views] where the required narrative spans an entire life and the meaning of individual events comes from the whole of one's life, there is no claim that the life itself, taken as a whole, has some future meaning."[65] Schechtman writes that defenders of the hermeneutical narrative view reject this meaning-intelligibility distinction, holding that "the more mundane notion of intelligibility rests upon the stronger one."[66] If there is no ultimate purpose, then even more mundane purposes are an illusion.

Goldie offers another unique perspective on narrative and personhood as he draws a parallel between the "messiness" of both life and narrative, saying,

> To the complaint that narrative thinking is messy and imprecise, blurring all kinds of nice distinctions – between internal and external perspectives, between what is remembered and how one remembers, between narrative's content and its framework, between the desire for emotional closure and the desire for narrative closure – the right reply is that this is just what it should be given that life itself is messy.[67]

Goldie strikes a middle ground between Taylor and Strawson as he holds narrative thinking to be important, not dangerous and damaging, but still less robust and precise than narrativists like Taylor assert.

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[65] Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self,* ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 402.

[66] Ibid., 402-403.

[67] Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 173.

From Bruner to Schechtman to Gottschall to Taylor, thinkers from across the academic spectrum assert the fundamental role of narrative in the formation and expression of meaning in the human experience. The following section examines the relationship between narrative and moral evaluations. If individuals assess their choices in life with a view toward meaning and purpose, it is fitting to examine these evaluations. To that end, two areas will be explored: first, the relationship between narrative, meaning or purpose, and moral evaluations, and second, the nature of the standard(s) applied in moral evaluations.

*Narrative and Moral Evaluations*

**Narrative, Meaning, and Moral Evaluations**

Craig Dykstra, Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School and former Senior Vice President for Religion at Lily Endowment, explains how people's moral evaluations naturally lend themselves to narrative expression and understanding, "In any case, communication of one's moral vision ... cannot be achieved by simply specifying what one sees the relevant facts to be in a clearly definable conflict of claims and by justifying how one chooses sides. It will instead involve the use of a nuanced moral vocabulary ... (and) include metaphors and stories full of subtle symbols..."[68] People's moral vision cannot be stripped down to a sterile list of facts, claims, and counterclaims. Moral vision's depth and complexity requires more robust expression, like that found in metaphors and stories.

Philosophers, such as Taylor and MacIntyre, discuss the dynamic interplay of stories and moral vision. Taylor explains that throughout life "we are always changing

[68] Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1981), 21-22.

and *becoming."*[69] He continues, "That is why an absolute question always frames our relative ones. Since we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and since we cannot be indifferent to our place relative to this good, and since this place is something that must always change and become, the issue of the direction of our lives must arise for us."[70] People's lives move, and that movement invariably navigates through the vast array of moral evaluations that determine "what we have become" and "where we are going." Taylor understands how orientation to the good is integral to the human experience.

This outlook is similar to that found in MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, where he asks, "In what does the unity of an individual life consist?"[71] He answers,

> To ask, "What is good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask, "What is good for man?" is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasise that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.[72]

The human experience gains its unity by contemplating and answering moral questions concerning what is good for the individual and for humankind. In a similar manner, Marshall W. Gregory, Professor of English at Butler University, affirms the ethically formative and unifying nature of narratives, saying,

> For all of us, a lifetime of engagements with the ethical visions of stories becomes a major component in the construction of our ethical vision of life ... We gather the stories *in* our life into a pattern that ultimately becomes the story *of* our life. Learning to understand, compare, and evaluate stories' ethical visions becomes a

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[69] Taylor, *Sources of Self,* 47; emphasis author's.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 3rd ed (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 203.

[72] Ibid.

> way to understand ourselves; not only who we are and what we want, but who we ought to be and what we should want.[73]

For Taylor, MacIntyre, and Gregory, the human experience achieves unity of purpose and direction through a narrative relationship to "the good."

Once again, Strawson offers a strong counterclaim. He argues against asserting or implying that those who do not concern themselves with narrative in tandem with the larger questions of meaning and life purpose are somehow deficient. He, personally, is "completely uninterested" in questions like, "What have I made of my life?" Instead, Strawson says,

> I'm living it, and this sort of (narrative) thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life is how I am now. The way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such.[74]

According to Strawson, to live primarily in the moment, without a unifying theme for life, does not mean individuals are in any way irresponsible or morally adrift.

For some narrative theorists, individuals navigate life through a series of moral choices; these choices or evaluations give shape to one's sense of self and personal identity. The following examines the nature of the standards people apply when making such choices, keeping two questions in mind: Are these standards limited in their use, applied to basic questions of justice and human dignity, or are they more expansive, touching on almost every important human encounter? Are these standards personally defined or is there some objective ultimate measure?

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[73] Marshall Gregory, *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2009), 166.

[74] Strawson, "Against Narrative," 438.

**Standards Applied in Moral Evaluations**

Charles Taylor asserts that it is important for people to have an unquestioned, moral "framework" that "helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fullness or emptiness..."[75] Taylor's use of such terms as "fullness or emptiness" of life demonstrates the expansive nature of this view. People respond to encounters and experiences in life through what Taylor calls "strong evaluations."[76] That is, people make "discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."[77] Mark Talbot, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College, argues that these evaluations go well beyond "minimal morality." Instead, full moral agency requires, "[A] wider evaluative framework that supplies us with ideals that focus our lives and make them seem worth living."[78]

According to Taylor, frameworks allow people to orient themselves in moral space, "[A] space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary."[79] Taylor argues such an orientation is fundamental to the human experience, for people to have a sense of identity. Even utilitarians, who seemingly detach from

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[75] Taylor, *Source of Self,* 16.

[76] Ibid., 523 where Taylor notes, "A good test for whether an evaluation is 'strong' in my sense is whether it can be the basis for attitudes of admiration and contempt."

[77] Ibid., 4.

[78] Mark Talbot, "Starting from Scripture," in *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology*, eds. Robert C. Roberts and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 104.

[79] Taylor, *Sources of Self,* 28-29.

traditional moral frameworks, operate within a higher assessment of the good that transcends their personal moral assessments. Such a person "has a strong commitment to a certain ideal of rationality and benevolence. He admires those who live up to this ideal, condemns those who fail or who are too confused even to accept it, feels wrong when he himself falls below it."[80]

Taylor brings narrative, moral evaluation, and personal identity all together in what he describes as "an inescapable feature of human life," saying, "[T]his sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. But this is to state another basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a narrative...our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer."[81] Taylor argues that to "make minimal sense of our lives ... to have an identity" requires viewing one's life as a narrative with "an orientation to the good."[82]

Eastern Orthodox theologian and ethicist Vigen Guroian draws upon the heritage of Western thinking and storytelling to assert a comparable view of morality in human development. In *Tending the Heart of Virtue,* he writes that telling fairy tales and fantasy stories to children awakens their moral imagination, "When moral imagination is wakeful, virtues come to life, filled with personal and existential as well as social significance."[83] This understanding needs to inform children's instruction, "We need desperately to adopt forms of moral pedagogy that are faithful to the ancient and true

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[80] Ibid., 31.

[81] Ibid., 47.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

vocation of the teacher – to make persons into mature and whole human beings, able to stand face to face with the truth about themselves and others, while desiring to correct their faults and to emulate goodness and truth wherever it is found."[84] Moral instruction occupies a vital place in the formative years of youth.

As with Taylor, Guroian roots morality in transcendent standards, explaining,

> [T]he best sources in the Western tradition ... maintain that human morality is substantial, universal, and relational in character, founded and rooted in a permanent Good, in a higher moral law, or in the being of God. From this standpoint, values and decisions whose claims of legitimacy extend no further than individual volition are as effervescent as the foam that floats on top of the waves. They cannot be reliable guides to moral living.[85]

Morality is not relegated to individual volition, as volition is fleeting and thus an unreliable guide. Guroian applies this important principle to the vital realm of childhood education. Children must not invent their own values, he warns. Do they make up their own multiplication tables? Do they make up a personal alphabet? No, Guroian argues, "[W]hat might be the outcome of an education that did permit children to invent their own alphabets and math? No doubt the result would be confusion or chaos. Should we be surprised at the outcome of our recent efforts to help children clarify their own values, in fact, to invent their own personal moralities?"[86] Moral instruction parallels the teaching in other fundamental subjects like math and the English alphabet. To leave such essential instruction to the whims of individual volition is a foolish notion. Just as teachers would not let children contrive their own math tables or alphabet, parents must not let children

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid, 31-32.

[86] Ibid., 34.

invent their own personal moralities. The abandonment of stable standards in any of these realms will have destructive and chaotic results.

In the views of narrative personhood discussed so far, moral evaluation occupies a central place and thus requires a well-defined and expansive understanding of the good and ultimate moral standard(s). Other narrative views, while requiring an evaluative standard, do not advance such a definitive moral or ethical framework.

For example, Goldie outlines the benefit of a narrative sense of self, saying, "it locates us in our relations to our memories and places that we share with others, and this, with our capacity for self-reflectiveness generally, is particularly valuable for us humans."[87] While this assertion is not founded upon any transcendent moral standard, Goldie asserts that narrative has an important role both in placing people in community and in facilitating self-reflection.

In *The Self We Live By*, sociology professors James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium examine the moral climate in a postmodern world and consider if there is still a place for ultimate standards to guide people. They contend, "In a postmodern world, self's story forges ahead, but also follows in its own wake." They explain that life is informed by a variety of discourses, some "center on familiar themes of personal responsibility" and the good life, others on opportunities squandered, loss, and despair. These narratives, woven together with circumstances of fate and uncertainty, will lead some to wonder what becomes of "traditional moral matters and grand narrative."[88] Holstein and Gubrium conclude, "The grand narrative of the self is now replete with the small tales of myriad

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[87] Goldie, *The Mess Inside,* 126-127.

[88] James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 215.

distinct storytelling occasions, which leap out of diverse and variegated discourses and texts."[89] Still, for Holstein and Gubrium, "the self survives." It is located,

> At the doorstep of the particular, in the varied self stories that populate the identity landscape ... Selves ... are constituted and received in the complex machinery of telling, local ways of knowing and hearing, and the scenic presence of their performances. We accent the moral significance of the local, which is as varied and diverse as the circumstance of contemporary life.[90]

In this view, moral evaluations are informed by "institutional discourses" in the context of "everyday life," and they are as complex as the world in which people live. It is in the midst of this rich interplay that selves are constituted and find moral significance. There is no grand narrative, but a grand, expansive life experience full of moral engagements shared with others, "where there is direction, yet the paths are unclear, where the signposts are a bit confusing and the crossing itself is precarious and in need of continuous definition."[91]

*Narrative and Community*

From birth, individuals are situated in a social context that nurtures a disposition toward the norms of a particular community. As individuals age, their social horizon expands to include multiple, overlapping, and often competing communities and moral frameworks. In the following section, the researcher considers how people's sense of self and personal identity is shaped by their immediate community and by their larger, prevailing culture. The immediate encompasses family, friends, co-workers, neighbors,

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[89] Ibid., 219-220.

[90] Ibid., 231.

[91] Ibid., 232.

and others in the local community; the larger, prevailing culture includes religious and educational practices and institutions, government, mass media, and the arts.

**Immediate Community**

People's immediate community plays a role in creating, affirming, challenging, adding to, and/or informing their personal narrative and a corresponding sense of self and purpose.

MacIntyre argues that a person is "never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual." People's social context may include being a son or daughter, a citizen, and/or a member of a guild or profession. MacIntyre elaborates, "Hence, what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles ... These constitute ... my moral starting point."[92] He continues, "[T]he story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity."[93] In contrast, William Ernest Henley's "Invictus," reads, "I am master of my fate: I am captain of my soul." However, captains learn their trade from another, their ships sail from a given port, and they find their bearing in relation to that point of departure and the north star. MacIntyre is saying that community shapes selfhood – who people are, what they value, the moral trajectory of their life.

This relationship between people and their community begins at birth, continues into maturity, and through the course of their lives. Taylor writes, "There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language. We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing

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[92] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 204-205.

[93] Ibid.

conversation by those who bring us up."[94] Schechtman adds, "The typical mature person is sentient, reflectively self-consciousness, a self-narrator ... and a rational moral agent – a 'person' in all of the senses we use the term."[95] A characteristic life also includes "complex and sophisticated interactions with other persons which involve, among other elements, adherence to moral, cultural, or personal norms ... Personal lives usually involve friendships and family, tribal, or community ties."[96]

As he addresses moral education in the church, Craig Dykstra writes about this same relational dynamic found in the complex and formative interactions between teacher, learner, and community, saying, "The analytical, critical, reflective dialogue between a learner and a teacher ... is absolutely central and necessary for growth in Christian moral life ... But teaching does not go on in a vacuum. It grows in the rich soil of community that teaches us to be receptive, attentive servants in this world."[97] The interplay between teacher and student offers one example of a context where narrative exchanges in the context of community shape people's lives. Similar exchanges occur across time in multiple, overlapping relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and other community members. These relationships give the opportunity for, and even require that people think and/or speak in narrative terms. Taylor writes,

> Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with the certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity ...

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[94] Taylor, *Source of the Self,* 35.

[95] Schechtman, *Staying Alive,* 112.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Dykstra, *Vision and Character,* 137.

> I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding – and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call webs of interlocution.[98]

For Taylor even the most independent adult cannot understand and/or express themselves apart from conversation partners in a larger community.

Marshall Gregory examines these relationships through this question, "Can you recall *any* conversation longer than 15 minutes in which you or your interlocutors didn't say something like, 'Let me tell you what happened to me the other day'? ... [S]uch telling and consuming of stories, is one of our most important forms of individual expression and social cohesion...."[99] For the typical person, life gives rise to a web of relationships and conversations that provide an essential and fertile context for human development. This begins in infancy and continues through the course of people's lives, helping them to establish and live into who they are and who they are becoming.

People's immediate community shapes, that is, it creates, affirms, challenges, adds to, and/or informs meaning in their lives. People's prevailing culture does the same.

**Prevailing Culture**

Because of the complexity and varied use of the term culture, in this study the researcher defined culture as, "The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior transmitted through intellectual and aesthetic training in the fine arts,

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[98] Taylor, *Source of Self,* 36.

[99] Gregory, *Shaped by Stories,* 47; emphasis author's.

humanities, and broad aspects of science."[100] Narrative and prevailing culture intertwine to form an important link to personhood and identity.

Jerome Brunner writes about the significant role narrative has in the formation of a culture, saying, "What creates a culture, surely, must be a 'local' capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure that permits continuity into the present – in short, to construct history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity, if not legitimacy."[101] For Bruner, storytelling is the creative wellspring of culture.

In a similar manner, Schechtman describes culture[102] as a backdrop to personhood, "The set of practices and institutions that provides the backdrop within which the kinds of activities that make up the form of life of personhood become possible."[103] Examples she offers include religious traditions, codified systems of governance, economies, educational institutions, and developed practices concerning arts, entertainment, and leisure.[104] In this view, there is a sense that culture is the soil, water, and sunshine that nourishes, shapes, and sustains personhood; apart from culture, personhood withers on the vine.

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[100] Researcher based this definition on the following entries found in Merriam-Wester's Dictionary. "Culture," accessed March, 8, 2015, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture. "Culture": 4 a: enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training b: acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills; 5 a: the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

[101] Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 19-20.

[102] Schechtman uses "culture," "social-infrastructure," and "person-space" more or less interchangeably.

[103] Schechtman, *Staying Alive,* 113.

[104] Ibid., 115.

Thus, storytelling is the wellspring of culture, the means for instruction in the "languages of moral and spiritual discernment."[105] Culture is the backdrop to the kind of activities that make personhood possible. Robert Coles, Professor of Psychiatry and Medical Humanities Emeritus at Harvard University, brings these concepts home when he writes, "I can still remember my father's words as he tried to tell me, with patient conviction, that novels contain 'reservoirs of wisdom,' out of which he and our mother were drinking ... 'Your mother and I feel rescued by these books. We read them gratefully. You'll also be grateful one day to the authors'."[106] Coles' parents treasured great works of literature; to them they were "reservoirs of wisdom," an oasis rescuing them from perishing in a desert wasteland.

For both Schechtman and Coles culture is the sustenance of humanity. At the close of *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan, Gottschall offers a strikingly similar chord. As he ponders why humans are so captivated by storytelling, a place he calls their "evolutionary niche," Gottschall writes,

> We are attracted to Neverland because, on the whole, it is good for us. It nourishes our imagination; it reinforces moral behavior; it gives us safe worlds to practice inside. Story is the glue of human social life – defining groups and holding them together. We live in Neverland because we can't *not* live in Neverland. Neverland is our nature. We are the storytelling animal.[107]

For Gottschall, storytelling is innate to human experience – the way people have evolved. Craig Dykstra addresses and affirms the powerful role imagination plays in shaping human character, saying, "It makes its impact at the fundamental level of our

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[105] Taylor, *Source of Self,* 36.

[106] Coles, *The Call of Stories*, xii.

[107] Gottschall, *Story Telling Animal,* 177; emphasis author's.

consciousness and character by shaping and reshaping the ways in which we see the world and understand ourselves. The imagination is foundational to all our seeing, believing, feeling, and acting; and any shift of its contours is also a transformation of ourselves as moral beings."[108] Storytelling provides a powerful and imaginative means of forming the way people understand their world, while offering a safe and structured place to practice.

Culture's formative influence upon people's identity and sense of purpose is found in its ability to take the chaos of people's lives and bring pattern, order, and meaning. Marshall Gregory writes that this is what makes story such a compelling form of learning. People rely upon story "to pattern the chaotic 'stuff' of raw experience into intelligible and meaningful shapes." He then explains that stories assist people by "allowing us to negotiate *vicariously* ... across a wider scope of possibilities than would ever be possible on the basis of firsthand experience alone."[109] Similarly, Guroian highlights this vicarious aspect of story by explaining, "Fairy tales and fantasy stories transport the reader into *other worlds* that are fresh with wonder, surprise, and danger ... The safety and assurance of these imaginative adventures is that risks can be taken without having to endure all the consequences of failure; the joy is in discovering how these risky adventures might eventuate in satisfactory and happy outcomes."[110] The result is that "the moral imagination is ... stimulated and sharpened."[111]

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[108] Dykstra, *Vision and Character,* 87.

[109] Gregory, *Shaped by Stories*, 62; emphasis author's.

[110] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue,* 26; emphasis author's.

[111] Ibid.

Through "powerful images of good and evil"[112] these classic stories show children how to love through the examples of their characters, and "This will spur her imagination to translate these experiences and images into the constitutive elements of self-identity and into metaphors she will use to interpret her own world. She will grow increasingly capable of moving about in that world with moral intent."[113] Fairy tales and fantasy stories spur the imagination that shapes self-identity with moral intent. Stories, then, are not an "escape" from reality. Rather, as Dykstra writes, if people's imaginations are "informed by adequate and truthful images," they will "bring us in closer touch with reality."[114]

Culture's formative influence is further found in its compelling plot. When a given culture embraces certain stories, they communicate themes that resonate with the human experience, adhere to people's memories, and are woven into the fabric of their lives. Gottschall contends, if there is not a "knotty problem,"[115] then there is not story. Generally stated, the pattern of this "universal grammar" is hero confronts trouble and struggles to overcome; put differently, story equals characters plus predicament plus attempted extraction.[116] Gottschall explains, "No matter how far we travel back into literary history, and no matter how deep we plunge into the jungles and badlands of world folklore, we always find the same astonishing thing: *their stories are just like ours.* There

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[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Dykstra, *Vision and Character,* 86-87.

[115] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal,* 49.

[116] Ibid., 53.

is a universal grammar in world fiction, a deep pattern of heroes confronting trouble and struggling to overcome."[117]

This plot pattern reverberates through the ages. The pattern of story runs deeper than a simple storyline, "[M]any scholars of world literature have noted" a consistency of "themes" that "focus on the great predicaments of human conditions."[118] They include sex and love, fear of death and the challenges of life, and the desire to wield power and escape subjugation.[119] For Gottschall, this continuity of themes reveals something about the evolutionary processes and how story benefits humanity. He writes, "Why do stories cluster around a few big themes, and why do they hew so closely to problem structure? Why are stories *this* way instead of all the other ways they could be? I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped *for* story, so that it could be shaped *by* story."[120] Story is quite literally in human genes; their minds have been shaped for this purpose.

But one need not be a religious adherent to evolutionary psychology to discern this truth. Guroian shows that fourth graders have something to teach here, "The repeated attempts and failures of Pinocchio and the challenges he faces over and over to be reunited with the object of his happiness – Geppetto, his father and maker, made immediate sense to the fourth graders and held their attention."[121] Fourth graders understand and appreciate the value of story.

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[117] Ibid., 55; emphasis author's.

[118] Ibid., 55-56.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.; emphasis author's.

[121] Guroian, *Tending to the Heart of Virtue,* 12.

In her widely read *Writing Fiction,* American author Janet Burroway reflects on the important emotive aspect that literary themes gives to fourth graders and all human beings. She explains,

> Literature offers feelings for which we don't have to pay. It allows us to love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks those feelings ordinarily involve. Fiction must contain ideas, which give significance to the characters and events ... [T]he idea must be experienced through or with the characters; they must be *felt* or the fiction will fail us.[122]

In rich, truthful fiction, felt experience is everything. According to Burroway, this is where "the vitality of understanding lies."[123] Readers, even fourth grade readers, translate words into images that bring visceral understanding while keeping a safe distance between them and the risks of real life experience. Like Gottschall, Gardner, and Guroian, Burroway understands story to be a means for working through human problems, as readers vicariously refine and strengthen their ability to cope in this world.

Jerram Barrs, Professor of Christian Studies & Contemporary Culture at Covenant Theological Seminary, offers an explicitly Christian understanding of the "big themes" of artistic expression. He writes that Christians long to make known "the beauty of life as it once was in Paradise, the tragedy of its present marring, and the home of our final redemption. All great art will echo these three elements of Eden: (1) Eden in its original glory, (2) Eden that is lost to us and (3) the promise that Eden will be restored."[124] These elements offered by Barrs mirror Gottschall's universal grammar: story equals character (Adam and Eve) plus predicament (Eden lost) plus attempted extraction (Eden restored).

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[122] Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft,* 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 60; emphasis author's.

[123] Ibid., 61.

[124] Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 26.

Later in the same work Barrs concludes, "[A]ll great art contains elements of the true story: the story of the good condition, the fallen world, and the longing for redemption."[125]

However, no matter how striking this constancy of themes may be, there are those who warn against binding great literature too closely with the banality of real-life narrative. Peter Lamarque, Professor of Philosophy at the University of York, warns that fiction and fictional characters do not closely mirror real lives. Lamarque argues that embracing them at a pedestrian level "ignores all essentially literary qualities and reduces literature to character and plot at the same level of banality as found in stories we tell of ourselves."[126] Lamarque sees the potential for great harm, "To the extent that literary features are brought to bear on real-life narratives they have a distorting and pernicious effect on the self-understanding that such narratives are supposed to yield."[127] He explains that "modeling real-life narratives on literary ones" poses a "serious danger"[128] and states plainly that there is an artistic structure to literature that is not true of human existence. He says, "When real-life narratives take on the appearance or artistic structures ... they can easily foster the illusion of seeing lives themselves as works of art."[129]

Lamarque then reveals his presupposition, "Explanations for non-fictional events must stay in the realm of causes and reasons. Nothing in the real world happens because

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[125] Ibid., 67.

[126] Peter Lamarque, "On the Distance between Literary Narratives and Real-Life Narrative" in *Narrative and Understanding Persons,* ed. Daniel Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118.

[127] Ibid., 119.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

some structured design determines that it must happen."[130] Literary characters "move in a world of artifice and structure and their actions and very identity are subject to principles that, again, have no application to the world and the rest of us inhabit."[131] Thus, Lamarque concludes, it is dangerous for people to envision their own life narrative as a "mini-work" of literature. Doing so "fictionalizes real life," distorts "accuracy and truth-telling," and is not a model that captures "the essence of real-life narrative."[132] Lamarque, instead, contends that real-life narrative has no underlying purpose, design, or order.

Guroian speaks directly to the moral and cultural relativism implicit in Lamarque's argument. He holds that there is a "common human condition" and "perennial literature that lends expression to the experience of that condition."[133] His depth of insight merits an extended excerpt from *Tending the Heart of Virtue*,

> I can only appeal to that certain "stuff" of human existence that the human imagination takes hold of and makes moral sense of in fairy tales. I mean such things as: the joy in the birth of a first child and the crippling sorrow of illness and deformity; childhood fears of getting lost matched by childhood desires to escape paternal authority; the love that binds siblings together and the rivalry that tears them apart; the naming we do that gives identity and the naming we do that confuses identity; the curses of dread malefactors and the blessings of welcome benefactors; the agony of unrequited love and the joy of love that is reciprocated.
>
> I could go on. But the skeptics and critics will not be satisfied. The skeptics say there is nothing of commonality in such things, just individual lives and the particular conditions in which these lives flourish or fail. I am not convinced. Nothing of what these people say is proven, and as I grow older and become more traveled and my memory fills with so many different lives and human faces, the wisdom of fairy tales, the wisdom of a common human condition underlying and

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[130] Ibid., 131.

[131] Ibid., 132.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue,* 38.

> running through all of the diversity and difference, seems far more reasonable than moral and cultural relativism.[134]

Multiple academic disciplines and perspectives assert that the enduring story structure and themes embraced by humankind through the ages is part of who humans are and who they are becoming. Narrative truth adheres to people's memory and is woven into the fabric of the unfolding story of their lives.

Finally, culture's formative influence is found in its unifying purpose. Many insightful authors, artists, and scholars argue that great literature and great art tear down walls that often divide people. Late is his life, Russian author Leo Tolstoy considered the question, "What is art?" in a book taking that question as its title. Tolstoy argues people are mistaken to think the aim of art is "beauty, i.e., pleasure." Just as the purpose of eating is not pleasure but nutrition, the purpose of art is not found in pleasure or in any other "region quite foreign to art."[135] He explains, "If we say that the aim of any activity is merely our pleasure, and define it solely by that pleasure, our definition will evidently be a false one."[136] Tolstoy goes on to write that art is "based on the fact that, a man receiving from his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it ... Art begins with one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications."[137] From this, Tolstoy concludes,

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[134] Ibid., 38-39.

[135] Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 35.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid., 38.

> Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.[138]

This capacity to receive thought conceived by others sets us apart from "the wild beasts."[139] Art brings humankind together for the well-being of the individual person and humanity.

More recently, author John Gardner wrote about art's potential in 20th century western democracies, saying,

> In a democratic society, where every individual opinion counts, and where nothing, finally, is left to some king or group of party elitists, art's incomparable ability to instruct, to make alternatives intellectually and emotionally clear, to spotlight falsehood, insincerity, foolishness – art's incomparable ability, that is, to make us understand – ought to be a force bringing people together, breaking down barriers of prejudice and ignorance, and holding up ideals worth pursuing.[140]

Gardner sees art as uniquely positioned to unite people by overcoming prejudice and ignorance and by elevating "ideals worth pursuing."[141]

Robert Coles offers a powerful illustration of art's unifying effect from a high school in Atlanta during the tense days of the Civil Rights Movement. Coles explains that when his wife taught at an Atlanta area high school she used "Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a*

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid., 39-40.

[140] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1978), 42.

[141] Ibid.

*Riddle* to great effect."[142] The students were able to "shrug off" lectures and documentary films on prejudice, but the response to Tillie Olsen was quite different,

> Olsen didn't come to them with her finger wagging or with a list of formulations they could readily ignore. Her stories worked their way into the everyday reality of their young lives: watching their mothers iron, and thinking of a story; watching a certain heavy-drinking friend, relative, neighbor, and thinking of a story; watching children in church, and themselves in school, and thinking of a story.[143]

Stories help people identify with others and issues not otherwise possible in the customary routines and relationships of their immediate community and circumstance. Reading Tillie Olsen enabled these high school students to confront prejudice that festered deep within their hearts by detaching from the moment and attaching to the characters of her stories. The students could then see, perceive, and understand the powerful and devious undercurrents that swirl about, twist, and fortify racial divides.

In a lecture presented at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, cellist Yo-Yo Ma explained how the work of a musician or painter incorporates much more than technical skill. He said,

> It's not about how well you play the cello, it's not about how well you paint something -- it's about what you can use your every ounce in yourselves to identify something and do it so well and imagine it so that it lives in somebody else's mind, because then it's a very deep kind of communication that's hard to measure, hence it's always hard to talk about ... [W]e all know that we have an inner life that we use and that sometimes it's shared, sometimes it's not. And I'm saying that, for our society, if we develop a societal inner life that we can share in common we can do anything.[144]

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[142] Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 57.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Yo-Yo Ma, "Reflections on Life and Music" (lecture, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN, September 29, 2011).

Yo-Yo Ma envisions the arts as a means to connect one to another in a very powerful and moving way. To the extent that people unite in a common "societal inner life,"[145] the possibilities are limitless.

In *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture,* modern artist Makoto Fujimura affirms and expounds Tolstoy's teaching on ethnic, racial, and cultural divisions. Fujimura contends, "[T]he language of the arts translates the universal longing for peace into the tangible *experience* of the desire for peace. The arts provide us with language for mediating the broken relational and cultural divides: the arts can model for us how we need to value each person as created in the image of God."[146] This world is broken relationally and culturally. "The language of art" repairs and restores such fractures by offering a "language" to mediate these divides by creatively affirming the value of each individual person created in God's image.

Art plumbs the depths of human imagination in a way that resonates with the seen and unseen realities of the world. In many of the views presented, narrative is the wellspring of culture, and culture provides the activities necessary for personhood. Key factors contributing to this formative influence upon personal identity and people's sense of purpose include: art's ability to take the "chaos" of their lives and bring pattern, order, and meaning; art's universal grammar and compelling plot that reflects human experience; and art's unifying purpose that allows people to examine difficult matters with detachment and safety.

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[145] Ibid.

[146] Makoto Fujimura, *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 10-11; emphasis author's.

## Religiously Unaffiliated Americans

In the previous section, the researcher examined the place of narrative in personal identity. The focus will now shift to examine a particular segment of the American population referred to as, nones, those who describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated.[147] Research and literature on this subject will clarify the defining characteristics of nones and the cultural influences that shape their personal identity. The category of nones has come to the forefront as a rapidly growing segment of the population of US adults. According to the Pew Research Center, nones accounted for 22.8 percent of the US adult population in 2014, up from 16.1 percent in 2007.[148] Over the same period of time, those describing themselves as mainline Protestants decreased from 18.1 percent to 14.7 percent; Catholics decreased from 23.9 percent to 20.8 percent; and evangelical Christians remained relatively stable at 25.4 percent and 26.3 percent.

This re-ordering within the "Christian" segment of the US adult population led Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of LifeWay Research, to conclude, "One of the primary reasons it appears as though 'American Christianity' is experiencing a sharp decline is because the nominals that once made up (disproportionately) Mainline Protestantism and

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[147] To measure the religious composition of the country, Pew Research asks people a question about their religious identity: "What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox – such as Greek or Russian Orthodox – Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?" Katherine Ritchey, "New Pew Research Center Study Examines America's Changing Religious Landscape," www.pewforum.org, May 12, 2015, accessed May 12, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/new-pew-research-center-study—examines-americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[148] These results are similar to Pew Research Center's 2014 General Social Survey that reported 21% of American adults answered "no religion" when asked their religious preference. This was up from 14% in 2000 and 8% in 1990. See "Fewer Americans Affiliate with Organized Religion: Key Findings from the 2014 General Social Survey," 1.

Catholicism are now checking 'none' on religious affiliation surveys."[149] A decline in "nominal" mainline Protestants and Catholics is primarily driving the growth of nones in the US, Stetzer asserts. Noting the stability of the evangelical segment, he concludes with cautious optimism, "[T]he numerical decline of self-identified American Christianity is more of a purifying bloodletting than it is an arrow to the heart of the church."[150]

For the purpose of this study, the researcher examined religiously unaffiliated segment of the US adult population and recent trends, 2007-2014, in order to discern: a general profile of the nones compared to the larger US adult population, and how the composition of nones in the Chicago metropolitan area compared to the national population.

*Profile of Nones: US Population*

In an extensive study on the significant increase in nones over the past 25 years, Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer conclude, "Americans decreasingly identify with organized religion despite still holding religious beliefs because political backlash and generational succession, both rooted in cultural changes and conflicts in the 1960s, continue."[151] With respect to the political backlash, their study found a causal link between the increased tendency to answer no religious affiliation and the polarization of

[149] Stetzer defines "nominals" as Americans whose Christianity was in name only. He writes, "The big trends are clear, the nominals are becoming the nones, yet the convictional are remaining committed." Ed Stetzer, "Nominals to Nones: 3 Key Takeaways from Pew's Religious Landscape Survey," www.christianitytoday.com, May 12, 2015, access April 6, 2016, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/may/nominals-to-nones-3-key-takeaways-from-pews-religious-lands.html.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Michael Hout, and Claude Fisher, "Explaining Why More American Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012," *Sociological Science* 1 (Spring 2014): 424.

American politics.[152] In short, their research concludes that liberal political views cause religious disaffiliation.[153] Their analysis shows, "The root causes of much of the political polarization over the last 25 years – the conflict over the limits of choice and the relevance of traditional authority – also stand at the root of declining religious affiliation."[154] However, Hout and Fischer conclude that the generational component was more significant than political backlash, saying that "two-thirds of the increased tendency to declare no religion"[155] was tied directly to generational succession.

The Pew Research Center findings affirm the importance of the generational component in determining religious affiliation. According to that study, "Overall, 35% of adult Millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) are religiously unaffiliated. Far more Millennials say they have no religious affiliation compared with Millennials who identify as evangelical Protestants (21 %), Catholics (16 %), or mainline Protestants (11 %)."[156] There is a comparatively lower portion of nones in each of the older generational cohorts:[157] 23 percent of Generation X, 17 percent of Baby Boomers, and 11 percent of the Silent Generation. This generational slant away from religious affiliation is

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[152] Ibid., 425.

[153] Ibid., 438.

[154] Ibid., 437-438.

[155] Ibid., 428.

[156] Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing 'nones,'" www.pewresearch.org, May 13, 2015, accessed June 15, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/new-pew-research-center-study-examines-americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[157] Generational cohorts: Silent Generation (b. 1928-1945), Baby Boomers (b. 1946-1964), Generation X (b. 1965-1980), and Millennials (b. 1981-1996).

also evidenced by the lower median age of nones: 36, down from 38 in 2007. Yet, the median age of the general adult population and evangelical Christians remain level at 46.[158] In an interview with David Masci of the Pew Research Center, Michael Hout was asked why Millennials are less religious than older Americans. Hout surmises,

> Many Millennials have parents who are Baby Boomers and Boomers expressed to their children that it's important to think for themselves – that they find their own moral compass. Also, they rejected the idea that a good kid is an obedient kid. That's at odds with organizations, like churches, that have a long tradition of official teaching and obedience. And more than any other group, Millennials have been and are still being formed in this cultural context. As a result, they are more likely to have a "do-it-yourself" attitude toward religion.[159]

For Hout, upbringing explains Millennials' widespread rejection of religion. Baby Boomers raised Millennials and elevated the importance of self-determination in matters of morality, faith, and religion. Millennials have been imbued with self-confidence without having their competence informed, favorably or negatively, by larger cultural traditions or institutions.

Finally, in addition to differences between generational cohorts, over time there has been movement within the cohorts as well:

| **% Religiously Unaffiliated** ("Nones") | **2007** | **2014** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Silent Generation** (b. 1928-1945) | 9 | 11 | +2 |
| **Baby Boomers** (b. 1946-1964) | 14 | 17 | +3 |
| **Generation X** (b. 1965-1980) | 19 | 23 | +4 |
| **Older Millennials** (b. 1981-1989) | 25 | 34 | +9 |
| **Younger Millennials** (b.1990-1996) | n/a | 36 | n/a |

[158] Ritchey, "New Pew Research Center Study Examines America's Changing Religious Landscape."

[159] Michael Hout, "Q&A: Why Millennials Are Less Religious Than Older Americans," pewresearch.org, January 8, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/.

From 2007 to 2014, the percentage of every generational cohort, that identifies their current religion as unaffiliated, shows statistically significant increases.[160]

While the percentage of US adults describing themselves as nones has increased, this group is not uniformly secular. In fact, Hout and Fischer conclude that a decrease in religious affiliation did not have a corresponding decline in religious belief. To describe this phenomenon, they coined the term, "unchurched believers;" those who have no religious affiliation but believe in God. Hout and Fischer then observe, "American adults who were unchurched believers increased from 4 to 12 percent between 1988 and 2012 ... Unchurched believers continued to be most of the new 'nones;' unbelievers were a smaller portion of the unchurched in 2012 than they were in 1988."[161]

In a similar manner, the Pew Research Center study shows a significant portion of religiously unaffiliated people retain religious beliefs. In 2014, 31 percent of nones were atheist/agnostic, but the same study found 30 percent of nones said religion is somewhat or very important to them. Nonetheless, trends from 2007 to 2014 are increasingly away from religious belief. The 2014 statistics increased from 2007 when 25 percent of those responding described themselves as atheist/agnostic, while 36 percent said religion is somewhat or very important to them.[162] This trend of increased secularization is also evidenced by an increase in the percentage of nones (from 2014 to 2007) who indicate that religion is "Not too/not at all" important (65 percent, 57 percent), they "Seldom/never" pray (62 percent, 56 percent), and they do not "believe in God" (33

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[160] Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing 'Nones.'"

[161] Hout, and Fischer, "Explaining Why More American Have No Religious Preference," 430-431.

[162] Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing 'Nones.'"

percent, 22 percent).[163] In addition, the 2014 numbers are all higher than the general US adult population for the same questions: religion is "Not too/not at all" important (22 percent), they "Seldom/never" pray (23 percent), and they do not "believe in God" (9 percent).

Gregory A. Smith, Associate Director of Religion Research at Pew Research Center assesses the current trends, saying,

> These are modest changes, and the United States remains a very religious country... Still... these trends are significant, and the fact that they are pointing in the same direction and changing by about the same amount across so many important indicators of religious observance is very striking. Moreover ... the growth of the "nones" and their increasing secularism really are quite consequential for religion in American society... [164]

America is still a "very religious country." However, the consistency and nature of change in favor of a less religious and more secular culture portends a significant shift away from America's historically Christian affiliation, faith, and practice, especially considering the importance of religious upbringing in predicting future religious affiliation.

The Hout and Fischer study found that, for those born in the 1930s and raised without religion, "only 24 percent had no religious preference" as adults. In contrast, for those born in the 1980s and raised without religion, "over 80 percent preferred none" as adults. According to Hout and Fischer, this "intergenerational persistence" in being

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[163] Pew Research Center, "Event: Is the American Public Becoming Less Religious? A Discussion of the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study," pewforum.org, November 26, 2015, accessed February 25, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/16/event-is-the-american-public-becoming-less-religious/.

[164] Ibid.

unchurched is new, "But, unless there is some kind of 'awakening,' persistence among the unchurched will probably become quantitatively important in the future."[165]

On the whole, then, nones are increasingly secular, skewed toward the younger population, but also expanding across all generational cohorts. Also, men are more likely than women to be unaffiliated (57 percent versus 43 percent), while women make up a larger portion of the Protestant Christian (55 percent versus 45 percent) and Catholic (56 percent versus 44 percent) populations. In addition, according to Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and David Campbell, Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, there is broad agreement among scholars that nones "do not differ much from the rest of the U.S. population in terms of education and social standing..."[166] With respect to religious upbringing, Putnam and Campbell note that nones were "disproportionately raised in nonreligious backgrounds." They also note that the increase in nones is evident across the family spectrum, saying, "[T]he rise of nones is apparent even among young people whose parents were religiously observant."[167]

Andrew Fuligini, Melissa Chan, and Kim Tsai, from UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, reported a similar trend of declining religious affiliation in young adults. In their study, "Changes in Religiosity Across the Transition to Young Adulthood," they describe the transition from adolescence to young adulthood in the US as a time when individuals "engage in more reflective thought, examine their

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[165] Hout, and Fischer, "Explaining Why More American Have No Religious Preference," 443.

[166] Robert D. Putnam, and David E. Campbell, *Amazing Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 125-126.

[167] Ibid., 126.

personal identity and values to solidify their sense of self, and may encounter a wide spectrum of worldviews different from their own."[168] Fulitini, et al. discussed the results of their research pertaining to the years from 12th grade to 4 years out of high school. Of the participants, 91 percent enrolled in a two-year or four-year college or university over the course of the study. In their study, Fulitini, et al. examined how participants' religiosity changed during these formative years.[169] Fulitini, et al. conclude, "Disaffiliation from specific religious traditions and faiths appears to be relatively normative ... Furthermore, religious participation declines for those who have maintained high levels of participation during high school, resulting in generally low levels of participation for most individuals by 4 years out of high school."[170] Their research determines that it was typical for young adults in the years immediately follow high school to "disaffiliate" with religious traditions.

Finally, in subjective measures such as frequency of "[f]eeling spiritual peace and wellbeing" and "[f]eeling a sense of wonder about the universe" the nones answered, "Seldom/never" 32 percent and 24 percent, respectively, compared to the larger US adult population, which answered "Seldom/never" 16 percent and 24 percent, respectively. Thus, nones have an equal "sense of wonder about the universe" but a much lower frequency of "feeling spiritual peace and wellbeing."

Gregory Smith summarized the 2014 Pew Research Center Study's findings by highlighting the complexity of the questions considered,

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[168] Melissa Chan, Kim M. Tsai, and Andrew J. Fuligni, "Changes in Religiosity Across the Transition to Youth Adult," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 8, no. 44 (August 2015), 1555.

[169] Ibid., 1558. Religiosity was defined as "the importance individuals place upon their religious affiliation and practice."

[170] Ibid., 1565.

> The religious composition of the country is changing quite rapidly, driven by generational replacement, with dramatic growth in the religiously unaffiliated share of the population. And the religious beliefs and practices of the country are changing more slowly, but nonetheless trending downward. These are very important parts of the story, very important conclusions from this study. But they are only part of the story.
>
> It is also true ... that the United States remains a nation of believers, and despite the growth of the "nones," the big majority of U.S. adults do identify with a religion. Three-quarters of U.S. adults identify with a religious group, primarily Christianity. And this group – those who are religiously affiliated – is about as religious today as when we first conducted the Religious Landscape Study in 2007.[171]

The nones are not yet the majority in the US adult population, but this segment is growing rapidly. In numerous parts of the country and segments of the population, nones are larger than any other religious group (i.e., mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, et cetera). In light of these persistent trends, Hout and Fischer warn American churches, saying, "It is likely that the more pervasive disaffiliation becomes, the harder it will be for the churches to reach the unchurched. If unchurched believers stay unchurched for long, they or their children could easily become not only unchurched but unbelievers."[172]

A study by sociologists Nicholas Vargas and Matthew Loveland examined this social boundary between the religious and the non-religious. They write that common social status and participation in shared social settings help build friendships across the two groups,[173] and conclude, "When presented with diffuse images of atheists or 'secular

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[171] Pew Research Center, "Event: Is the American Public Becoming Less Religious? A Discussion of the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study," pewforum.org, November 26, 2015, accessed February 25, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/16/event-is-the-american-public-becoming-less-religious/.

[172] Hout, and Fischer, "Explaining Why More American Have No Religious Preference," 444.

[173] N. Vargas, and M. T. Loveland, "Befriending the 'Other:' Patterns of Social Ties between the Religious and Non-religious," *Sociological Perspective* 54, no. 4 (2011): 725.

progressives,' whether by self-proclaimed 'Culture Warriors' or curious social scientists, American attitudes may in fact become inflamed; but in the sidewalks, places of business, and homes that make up the bulk of life, average religious Americans seem not to experience the non-religious as a severe threat."[174] For Vargas and Loveland, accommodating and friendly interaction between the religious and the non-religious is enhanced and far more common in the sidewalks, businesses, and homes – far away from the incendiary chatter of media pundits and removed from staunch images of atheists and secular progressives.

*Profile of Nones: Chicago Metropolitan Area*

Statistically, the Chicago metro area has roughly the same percentage representation of nones as the nation as a whole (22 percent versus 23 percent), but the composition of the religious segments within the Chicago metro area is strikingly different in certain segments:

**Religious Composition Chicago Metro Area versus Nation[175]**

| | **Chicago** | **Nation** |
|---|---|---|
| **Christian** | 71% | 71% |
| Evangelical Protestant | 16% | 25% |
| Mainline Protestant | 11% | 15% |
| Historically Black Protestant | 8% | 7% |
| Catholic | 34% | 21% |
| Other | 2% | 3% |
| **Non-Christian Faiths** (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Other) | 7% | 6% |
| **Unaffiliated** ("nones") | 22% | 23% |

[174] Ibid., 726.

[175] Pew Research Study, "Religious Landscapes Study," 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Atheist/Agnostic | 8% | 7% |
| Nothing in Particular | 14% | 16% |

Compared to the nation as a whole, Chicago has substantially more Catholics (+13 percent) and far fewer evangelical and mainline Protestants (-13 percent, combined). The composition of the religiously unaffiliated segment is approximately the same as for the nation. However, some signs of secular influence in the Chicago metro area are modestly higher than national averages. Specifically, the total percentage of the full population sample who:

| **Percentage of Full Sample** | **Chicago** | **Nation** |
|---|---|---|
| Do Not Believe in God | 10% | 9% |
| "Seldom/never" pray | 24% | 23% |
| Religion is "Not too/not at all" important | 24% | 22% |

Looking specifically at the unaffiliated ("nones") in both the Chicago metro area and nationally, only a few statistics vary more than 5 percent from national averages:

| **Percentage of "Nones"** | **Chicago** | **Nation** |
|---|---|---|
| Gender Composition, Men/Women | 65%/35% | 57%/43% |
| Education – High school or less | 32% | 38% |
| Believe in Heaven | 31% | 37% |
| Believe in Hell | 19% | 27% |

Based on these statistics, when compared with nones nationally, nones in Chicago are more likely to be male and better educated, and much less likely to believe in heaven or hell.

While the Pew Research Center has compiled extensive and detailed data on the religious landscape of America, their work only exposed the tip of an iceberg. The idiosyncrasies and nuances of an individual person's beliefs and practices always, at some level, defy simplistic categorization. In their study on the social characteristics of religiously unaffiliated, sociologists Joseph Baker and Buster Smith note,

> In reality "religious nones" is a broad term that oversimplifies the diversity of this group. There are distinct philosophical differences among people claiming to be atheist, agnostic and those who report traditional religious beliefs while being disenfranchised from organized religion. Combining all these and other non-religious positions into one category makes assessing the differences between these philosophical positions difficult.[176]

The "religiously unaffiliated" category contains a plethora of philosophical and religious beliefs and experiences that would be well-served by continued quantitative and qualitative studies.

## Theology of Common Grace

The previous section examined the religiously unaffiliated segment of the US adult population to understand the characteristics of this group and their distinctive characteristics within the Chicago metro area. Certain theological questions inherent in this study's purpose and research questions will now be explored, with particular emphasis upon a theology of common grace. Theologian Herman Bavinck explains that Christians should be grateful for the gifts God bestows upon those outside of Christ, "Yet it would not do to deny the true, the good, and the beautiful that one can see in mankind outside of Christ. That would not only be in conflict with experience but would also entail a denial of God's gifts and hence constitute ingratitude toward him."[177]

The study's purpose and framework required extensive interaction with the writing, production, and presentation of a cinematic work that is not necessarily the creative expression of professing Christians. In addition, the participants were chosen specifically because of their self-described "religiously unaffiliated" status. Finally, the

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[176] J. O. Baker and B. G. Smith, "The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated," *Social Forces* 83, no. 3 (2009): 1251-1263.

[177] Hermon Bavinck, "Common Grace," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989): 40.

matters considered and discussed pertained to the place of narrative in shaping an individual person's understanding and expression of such substantive matters as meaning, purpose, and one's overarching life-view.

The nature of this study, then, gives rise to certain theological questions pertaining to the veracity of expressions and insights that originate outside the orthodox Christian faith. Questions such as: How does God reveal truth, goodness, and beauty? Does the artistic work of the unregenerate offer true insight into these realities? To what extent do the unregenerate truly perceive and understand these realities? To answer these questions the researcher will first consider the means by which God reveals himself. Second, the researcher will consider the expansiveness of the grace involved. Third, he will ponder the role of the arts in humankind's encounter with truth, goodness, and beauty. Fourth, he will examine what biblical and theological warrant Christians have for expecting to see and eagerly receiving the benevolent work of God through the unregenerate.

### *Means of God's Revelation*

In his *Systematic Theology,* theologian Douglas Kelly offers this introduction to how God reveals himself,

> An inescapable sense of religious obligation is felt by all mankind. It arises from the presence of the Triune God pressing upon us in external creation and internal conscience. Old and New Testaments testify to a certain binding knowledge of God within pagan nations. This pressure from God or "revelation" has traditionally been spoken of as "natural" or "general" (from creation and conscience; non-verbal) and "supernatural" or "special" (given to the covenant community; verbal).[178]

[178] Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), 1:129.

God reveals himself through general revelation (creation and conscience) and through special revelation (scriptures) in a manner that presses upon the external creation and internal conscience.

Psalm 19 is a foundational text for understanding these means of revelation. Verses 1-6 draw attention to creation, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."[179] This proclamation goes out through all the earth and is there for all who have eyes to see. Harrison Higgins, a furniture maker from Richmond, Virginia, offered a description of a stand of trees he walked through one early winter afternoon, "I stop, just simply stop, and just open up my senses to be aware and you realize that these things, these beautiful things are built into this creation that God has placed us on...it means we handle them differently...You save the best lumber for pieces that are sort of worth that piece of lumber. And there's this sense that you want the furniture to measure up to the lumber, the tree that it came from. We want what we build from that tree to be worth what that tree was." This master craftsman could see, feel, taste, smell, and touch God's handiwork in the woods he walked through and the wood he used to create the finest handcrafted furniture. Because of that, he handled the wood differently.[180]

Then, in verses 7-15, the psalmist turns from rejoicing in God's creation to delighting in God's word, "The law of the LORD is perfect ... the precepts of the LORD are right ... the commandment of the LORD is pure ... the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether ... More to be desired are they than gold ... sweeter also than

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[179] Ps. 19:1.

[180] Nathan Clark, "Furniture Fit for a Kingdom," christianitytoday.com, May 2012, accessed May 24, 2012, http://www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/richmond/furniturefit.html.

honey..."[181] According to Calvin Seerveld, "The Good News of Psalm 19 is that the whole world of rocks and dirt, wind and seas, is a chorus of praise to the almighty Lord of heaven and earth, not metaphorically but literally!"[182] He continues,

> So Psalm 19 offers a reforming vision and redemptive direction to any Christian college and to every man and woman who has the eyes to see the inscape of late afternoon shadows and the ears to hear the glossolalia of night sounds and the mute speech of starts, and wants to join the world-wide chorus of "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" rather than be a human candle-holder looking on blankly as your 20, 40, 60, or 70 years go past like yesterday.[183]

Psalm 19 is not the only passage to shed light on how God reveals himself through creation. In Paul's letter to the Romans he writes,

> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.[184]

> For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness... [185]

God's invisible attributes–his eternal power and divine nature–are evident to all humankind. So much so that, on the basis of what has been revealed in creation and through the human conscience, all who do not honor him or give him thanks are "without excuse,"[186] that is, they will be held accountable. God reveals himself in what surrounds

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[181] Ps. 19:7-10.

[182] Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Downsview, ON: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 11.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Rom. 1:19-20.

[185] Rom. 2:14-15a.

[186] Rom. 1:20.

people and through what is within them – the law etched upon every human heart and conscience. To this latter point, Michael Williams, Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, wrote,

> God holds all people responsible to live within his moral order; an order that God has impressed upon his good creation. Though sin corrupts man's ability to see God's moral order with all the clarity that it possesses, God never withdraws the order; and sin never fully eradicates man's ability to perceive it.[187]

God created humankind in his image, and the corruption of sin never fully removes the moral conscience, the moral requirements, nor the dignity of every human being. This revelation, in creation and conscience, is called natural or general revelation.

The questions this study asks fall into the realm of natural or general revelation. Asking to what degree the unregenerate offer true insight into reality considers what is revealed to all humankind through creation and conscience and to what extent that revelation is discerned, expressed, and/or favorably received by the unregenerate. A corollary consideration concerns how the church is to receive the insights expressed by the unregenerate.

**Expansiveness of God's Grace**

The theology of common grace answers questions concerning the validity of insights into the nature of reality offered by the unregenerate. Scottish theologian John Murray defines common grace as "every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God."[188] This grace is distinct from special or salvific grace that is bestowed only upon God's

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[187] Michael D. Williams, *Far As The Curse is Found* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 233-234.

[188] John Murray, "Common Grace," *Westminster Theological Journal* 5, no. 1 (1942): 4.

elect and brings them to salvation by faith in Christ alone.[189] John Murray explains the relationship between special and common grace, saying, "Common grace serves the purpose of special or saving grace, and saving grace has as its specific end the glorification of the whole body of God's elect, which in turn has its ultimate end in the glory of God's name."[190]

Dutch theologian Herman Bakinck notes that while the "character and content" of common grace is different from special grace,[191] that is no reason to dismiss its significance or power,

> There is thus a rich revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers ... Furthermore, the revelation of God in nature and history is never a mere passive pouring forth of God's virtues but is always a positive act on the part of God. The Father of Jesus works always (John 5:17). His providence is a divine, eternal, omnipresent *power.*[192]

God graciously, purposefully, and powerfully reveals himself in nature and in heart and conscience to the regenerate and unregenerate alike.

In addition to nature and the heart and conscience of all humankind, God manifests the blessing of his common grace as God's people pray for and mingle their labors with the unregenerate in public spheres of life: the establishment and building of just and merciful societies, the pursuit of scientific discoveries, and the arts and other cultural endeavors. This was seen in the building of the temple in

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[189] Ref. Eph. 2:1-10.

[190] John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, England: Banner of Truth, 1976), 2:113.

[191] Bavinck, "Common Grace," 40.

[192] Ibid., 41; emphasis author's.

Jerusalem,[193] extended to Israel's exile to Babylon,[194] and continued in the early church.[195] God is Lord over all of creation and commands his people to pray for and humbly pursue the welfare and flourishing of justice and mercy as a means to their wellbeing and his glory.[196]

Common grace has traditionally been divided into two distinct operations: (a) the restraint of sin and its effects[197] and (b) the "bestowal and production of good."[198] Murray explains what he means by the bestowal of good, "[God] not only restrains evil men, but he also endows men with gifts talents, and aptitudes; He stimulates them with interest and purpose to the practice of virtues, the pursuance of worthy tasks, and the cultivation of arts and sciences that occupy the time, energy, activity and energy of men and that make for the benefit of civilization of the human race."[199] It is this latter operation – the bestowal of good – that is of particular interest as the study considers the true insights discerned, expressed, and/or favorably received through the arts.

In addition to common grace's powerful, gracious, and beneficial work of the Spirit of God, another importance aspect of common grace concerns the special place the "human instrument" occupies in creation. John Kilner, Professor of Bioethics and Contemporary Culture at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, explains that every

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[193] 1 Kings 5.

[194] Jer. 29:4-7.

[195] Matt. 5:44; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4.

[196] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 229-235.

[197] Gen. 3:22-23; Gen. 4:15; 1 Pet. 3:20.

[198] Gen. 39:5; Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:33; Acts 14:16-17; Murray, "Common Grace," 6-22.

[199] Ibid., 11.

individual person, redeemed and reprobate alike, was created in the image of God and therefore has a unique and special status in the created order,

> Because being in God's image is not a matter of current variable attributes such as reason, righteousness, rulership, or relationship, all people without exception can be – and are – in the image of God. This glorious truth grounds human and human destiny, and requires respect and protection for every human being.[200]

A person's worth is not contingent upon the manner or degree to which they evidence certain attributes. Rather, each and every human being is created in the image of God and therefore worthy of respect and protection.

Not only does all humankind enjoy this special status, but, according to Kilner, Christians should expect this status to influence how the unregenerate understands the place of humankind in this world. He explains, "There are ... grounds for expecting there to be some resonance in non-Christians with the idea that people have an innate dignity, even if the source of that dignity is unclear to them."[201] Charles Taylor connects this "innate dignity" to the concept of "the affirmation of the ordinary life" that undergirds the modern world,

> I believe that this affirmation of ordinary life, although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization ... This sense of the importance of everyday life, along with its corollary about the importance of suffering, colours our whole understanding of what it is truly to respect human life and dignity.[202]

For Taylor and Kilner ordinary life, human life, and dignity are woven so closely together that to remove one strand would unravel them all.

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[200] John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 113.

[201] Ibid., 323.

[202] Taylor, *Source of Self,* 14.

**Place of the Arts: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty**

The means of God's revelation and the expansiveness of his grace inform one's understanding of the place of the arts in people's encounter of truth, goodness, and beauty. From the start, there is an element of mystery here. The complexity and depth of human nature coupled with the veiled purposes of God do not allow for a great deal of precision in explaining God's definitive reason for every aspect of common grace. Richard Mouw, Professor of Faith and Public Life at Fuller Theological Seminary, explains that the mystery should not deter Christians from arts. He explains,

> I am convinced that there is such a thing as common grace, but I am not very clear about what it is ... We stand ... I am convinced, before a mystery. But the workings of *special grace* are enshrouded in mystery as well, as our Lord reminded Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."[203]

Dr. Mouw likens the Spirit's mysterious work in special grace to the Spirit's mysterious work in common grace. He goes on to suggest we know enough about saving grace to "challenge viewpoints that seem clearly confused," and can approach common grace "in that same spirit."[204]

Rather than discourage or hamper artists' quest, the element of mystery can heighten their interest to reflect reverently on what is revealed, entrusting the uncertainty and what is seen "dimly" to the hands of a gracious Father. Craig Dykstra offers parallel insights when writing about questions of humanity and morality, saying,

> George Hendry writes that a mystery in the New Testament sense is a mystery "not because it offers so little to our understanding, but because its superabundant

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[203] Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 13.

[204] Ibid., 14.

> wealth overwhelms our understanding." Here a mystery is not a problem that goes away once figured out. Instead, mystery is an enduring reality that we know only through a glass darkly and never exhaustively.[205]

In this context, mystery is not a puzzle soon completed on a holiday table. Mystery in morality, as with the Spirit's work of common grace, is reason to ponder the depth and riches of God's creation and his unfathomable ways.

Psalm 8 offers an illustration of King David taking a posture similar to that of Mouw and Dykstra. In this Psalm, he expresses a tone of reverent awe before the LORD's mysterious purposes. There is a sense of wonder in his words: The glory of God is set "above the heavens" and from "the mouth of babies and infants" his strength is established. In this vast wonder of creation, "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"

> Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth![206]

King David is amazed that humankind occupies such a special place in the created order and he responds with heart-felt worship, "How majestic is your name in all the earth!"

God's unique and significant purpose for humankind gives the opportunity for creative expression and reception fitting to that purpose. Robert Wilkens, Professor of Christian History at the University of Virginia specifically links the image of God with creative expression,

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[205] Dykstra, *Vision and Character,* 34.

[206] Ps. 8:3-9.

> Against any and all efforts to dehumanize man the doctrine of the image of God insists that the uniqueness of the human person is also found in man's love of beauty, awe before creation, and capacity for transcendence, in the wonder of a child learning language, a musician imagining the notes of a symphony, the giving of the self in love. These are divine works, hence distinctly human works. Unlike an animal, the course of whose life is set at birth, the lives of human beings are free, open, inventive.[207]

For Wilken, the doctrine of the image of God is the basis of people's humanity. Their unique worth is built into the created order, which gives rise to a beautiful and expansive vision of humankind's capacity in the arts.

Jerram Barrs links God's image with humankind's dominion to offer a similar refrain, "We might say that our dominion over this earth means that we 'till the garden' of color, words, form and texture, sound and harmony, stone and clay, and imagination; of God's works in creation and of human works in history and in society."[208] Finally, Abraham Kuyper explains it this way, "The world of sounds, the world of forms, the world of tints, and the world of poetic ideas can have no other source than God; and it is our privilege as bearers of His image, to have a perception of this beautiful world, artistically to reproduce, and humanly to enjoy it."[209] And these artistic expressions "by virtue of *common grace*" can come through and inspire believers and unbelievers, alike: "God remains Sovereign to impart it, in His good pleasure, alike to Heathen and to Christian nations." [210]

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[207] Robert Wilkens, "Biblical Humanism: The Patristic Convictions," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective,* eds. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 28.

[208] Barrs, *East of Eden,* 20; Gen. 1:28-30.

[209] Kuyper, *Lectures*, 156-157.

[210] Ibid., 161.

Douglas Kelly offers a present day example of God's common grace at work as the gospel advances and paganism collapses in certain parts of Asia, Africa, and South America:

> [W]e may look with glad anticipation on valuable aspects of beauty and creativity that will survive ... and "come out of the fire like gold." Perhaps this process is a foretaste of what Revelation 21 says will happen when at last there is a new heaven and a new earth, and the dwelling place of God is with men. Then the gates of the celestial New Jerusalem will ever be open, and according to verse 26, "They shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it."[211]

In the New Jerusalem, the gates will be "ever be open" to receive glory and honor offered by the nations. For Kelly, the bounty of beauty and creativity people reap today foreshadows a glorious harvest to come.

This is not to say every work of literature or creative expression in the arts affirms the truth, goodness, and beauty of this world. Artists live in a fallen world, one that corrupts, twists, and distorts the magnificence of God's original design. Calvin Seerveld offers a frank assessment of the effect of sin upon humankind and the arts. "Sin has cast a shadow" over art and culture ever since the fall. He elaborates,

> What sin does to the built-in cultural functioning of man is pervert it into the curse of never-ending trouble ("Your work is never done!") or gild it into self-adulterating vanity ("See the great Babylon my hands have built!"). Either way you could cry at the distortion, the disobedience and unrighteousness, the deception and aimlessness that sin works into what were the good gifts of God.
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> Architecture becomes the ziggurat of Babel. Rough-hewn desert dance becomes the sensual contortions of an Ashtoreth fertility cult service ... Again and again ... men and women without God as Lord turned his good gifts into lies...[212]

The propensity is for humans to pander to their own comforts and cravings and turn "his good gifts into lies." For this reason, Francis Schaeffer warns, "Not everything that man

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[211] Kelly, *Systematic Theology,* 1:209-210.

[212] Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World,* 28-30.

makes is good intellectually or morally. So, while creativity is a good thing in itself, it does not mean that everything that comes out of man's creativity is good."[213] Kuyper also acknowledged certain dangers if the arts are misused to inflame the baser aspects of human nature, saying, "And if it cannot be denied that many court these sensual pleasures in ways that are less noble and too often sinful, it is equally certain that in many instances this love of art leads me to seek enjoyment in nobler directions and lessens the appetite for lower sensuality."[214] According to Kuyper, the arts are a powerful instrument that can be wielded to elevate or detract from the nobler things of this world.

Finally, taking a slightly different angle, Jerram Barrs quells any inclination to entertain unduly romantic notions of art, saying,

> Romantic notions of art create practical difficulties for artists and art students who are sensible enough to see the problems of their approach. Indeed, we currently see a crisis in the arts that leads to the question, Why am I working at this? By the Romantic vision of art, the artist is driven inward to find his or her identity in and through the work produced. But the problem arises: what if one finds only emptiness inside?[215]

Art and the artist never stand alone. For Barrs, looking solely to the work of art for identity leads artists to face an uneasy emptiness within themselves. American realist author and playwright, William Dean Howells, offers a more stark assessment of the failure of the romantic spirit,

> Its error was to idealize the victims of society, to paint them impossibly virtuous and beautiful; but truth, which has succeeded to the highest mission of romance, paints these victims as they are, and bids the world to consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel,

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[213] Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 394.

[214] Kuyper, *Lectures*, 143.

[215] Barrs, *Echoes of Eden,* 37.

> filthy, and only not altogether loathsome because the divine can never fully die out of the human.[216]

Romanticism failed to be truthful about the human condition. For Howells and Barrs, art and artists are not self-sustaining. Like an ember removed from a fire, art that looks inward for meaning and identity leads only to smoldering darkness. God can use art for redemptive purposes, but art, standing apart from or against God and his creative and redemptive intent, is empty.

For the unregenerate artist and/or connoisseur, this matter is particularly vexing. In expressing and receiving creative truths, the unregenerate artist is not "a single step closer" to the divine favor of redemption. John Calvin notes,

> Still, though seeing, they saw not. Their discernment was not such as to direct them to the truth, far less to enable them to attain it, but resembled that of the bewildered traveller, who sees the flash of lightning glance far and wide for a moment, and then vanish into the darkness of the night, before he can advance a single step. So far is such assistance from enabling him to find the right path.[217]

The discernment received by the unregenerate was as bright, but also as fleeting as "the flash of lightning" lighting the world, disappearing before a single step could be taken.

Interestingly, one finds similar descriptions of the startling effect of art offered by artists as diverse as Tennessee Williams and Yo-Yo Ma. Williams wrote that the stagecraft of Laurette Taylor gave him "the same shock of revelation as if the air about us had been momentarily broken through by light from some clear space beyond."[218] More recently, Ma was asked to talk about the meaning of beauty. He responded in part,

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[216] William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, fullbooks.com, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.fullbooks.com/Criticism-and-Fiction.html, 49.

[217] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2.2.18.

[218] Tennessee Williams, "Creator of the 'Glass Menagerie' Pays Tribute to Laurette Taylor," nytimes.com, December 5, 1949, accessed January 1, 2013, nytimes.com/books/ 00/12/31/ specials/williams-taylor.html.

> Beauty is often an encapsulation of a lot of different things in a certain moment – a frame, let's say. It could be...music. It could be a poem... But, when that encapsulated form is received, there's a moment of reception and cognition of the thing that is, some ways, startling.[219]

For Yo-Yo Ma, beauty in the arts is captured in the richness of a certain moment; its effect is startling, etched deeply upon people's innermost being.

**God's Benevolent Work through the Unregenerate**

While the scriptures are clear that those who are "in the flesh" as opposed to "in the Spirit" cannot please God,[220] the scriptures, the church fathers, and the reformers gratefully received the benevolent work of God through the unregenerate. Herman Bavinck asserts that Christian theologians have long maintained, "Scripture itself gave them freedom" to profit from pagan art and learning. Bavinck elaborates, "For Moses was reared in all the wisdom of Egypt, the children of Israel decorated the house of the Lord with the gold and silver of Egypt, Solomon used the services of Hiram to build the temple, Daniel was trained in the science of the Chaldeans, and the wise men from the East laid their gifts at the feet of the baby in Bethlehem."[221]

The benefit and use of extra-biblical writing is seen on a number of occasions in Paul's ministry. As he stood before the Areopagus Paul proclaimed,

> Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god"... Yet [God] is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being;" as *even some of your own poets* have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." Being then God's

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[219] Yo-Yo Ma, "Music Happens Between the Notes" (interview, NPR, *On Being,* 2014).

[220] Rom. 8:7-8.

[221] Bavinck, "Common Grace," 64.

> offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.[222]

In this speech, Paul demonstrates an understanding of and appreciation for the insights of pagan poets Aratus the Cilician and Epimenides from Crete. In another instance, Paul quoted a popular Greek saying from Menander when he wrote to the Corinthian church, "Bad company ruins good morals."[223] Finally, in a letter to Titus, he reprimanded dissenters by quoting a Creatan prophet, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. This testimony is true."[224] The apostle Paul was well versed in the pagan culture of his day and freely adapted poetic truths into his preaching and teaching.

Douglas Kelly explains that the Church Fathers assumed a posture similar to Paul's, saying,

> Yet at the same time, the Church Fathers, even those who were most negative against false religions, gratefully assimilated much of the truth and value from pre-Christian pagan culture ... Basil the Great seeks to pass on much of the beauty and truth from Homer and others for the development of Christian education. Even Tertullian who decried most loudly about pagan philosophy, made more use than he was perhaps aware of, certain concepts from the physical philosophy of Stoicism...[225]

The Church Fathers stood forcefully against false religions and philosophies. Nonetheless, they "gratefully assimilated" the beneficial contributions of pagan sources to instruct their students concerning beauty and truth.

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[222] Acts 17:22b-23a, 27b-29.

[223] 1 Cor. 15:33.

[224] Titus 1:12-13a.

[225] Kelly, *Systematic Theology,* 1:206.

The same stance can be seen in the Reformation. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* reformer John Calvin carefully explained the work of the Spirit of God in the "admirable gifts" of the creator,

> Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears (*Institutes,* 2.2.15).

For Calvin, all truth is God's truth. The Spirit of God is the only fountainhead of truth. Christians should gratefully receive and give thanks for every good gift bestowed by God, irrespective of the human instrument.

Like the gleaming rays of an early morning dawn, the creative gifts of the unregenerate prepare Christian souls for the fullness of the glory to come. From the scriptures to the Church Fathers, and through the Reformation, Christians gratefully received poetry and art from the pen and paintbrush of the unregenerate. Their creative expressions and insights are a consequence of the powerful and purposeful work of God's common grace revealed through the mind and conscience of the heathen for his glory.

This section reviewed three relevant areas of literature: the place of narrative in personal identity, the religiously unaffiliated segment of the US and Chicago adult population, and the theology of common grace. Several important themes emerged from the study: First, narrative exercises a powerful and redemptive role as it creates, affirms, challenges, adds to, and informs meaning in human existence. Second, the religiously unaffiliated segment is the fastest growing, and in some parts of the country, the largest religious segment of the US adult population. Generational factors are largely driving this growth with the youngest groups, which evidence the largest representation of religiously

unaffiliated. Nonetheless, this growing segment is highly complex and the diversity within this group should not be overlooked. Third, when an unregenerate artist or audience member discerns, expresses, or favorably receives truth, goodness, and/or beauty in this world, they encounter general revelation, and the encounter is an operation of the purposeful and powerful work of God's common grace. General revelation and common grace lead Christians to expect and to gratefully receive the artistic gifts of the unregenerate that embrace and affirm God's creative designs and redemptive purpose.

The next chapter reviews the researcher's methodology for this study, including the study's design, participant selection, data collection and analysis, researcher's position, and the study's limitations.

## Chapter Three

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the suburbs of Chicago interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production. The New World Encyclopedia defines metanarrative as "a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account of various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based on the appeal to universal values." Examples include Marxism, religious doctrines, belief in progress, and universal reason.[226] Many stories, including those expressed through cinema, offer plots and themes that explicitly or implicitly appeal to certain universal truths and/or values. This study will explore if and how nones–religiously unaffiliated people–discern, interpret, and respond to the universal truths or values found in a contemporary cinematic production. This chapter offers a concise summary of the study's methodology, the methodology's application in the course of the research, and the means by which conclusions are drawn and applied.

Four key findings arose from the literature review that were instructive as researcher shaped interview questions and analyzed participants' responses: First, in the course of their lives, people navigate through and position themselves in relation to a vast array of moral evaluations. Second, personal, communal, and cultural narratives express and sustain a sense of self, personal identity, morality, and meaning in life. Third, the

[226] New World Encyclopedia, "Metanarrative," newworldnecyclopedia.org, accessed November 22, 2016, newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/metanarrative.

religiously unaffiliated constitute a significant, growing, and highly complex portion of the US adult population. Fourth, scripture, Church Fathers, and the reformers expected the religiously unaffiliated to express and favorably receive common grace insights that are in accord with God's creative designs and redemptive purpose.

In order to explore how nones discern, interpret, and respond to the universal truths or values found in a contemporary cinematic production, a qualitative study was designed to better understand the interplay of these dynamics in the lives of religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the Chicago suburbs. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions served as the focus of the qualitative research:

1. How do religiously unaffiliated persons interpret [production]?
2. How do religiously unaffiliated persons compare and contrast [production]'s metanarrative with their personal narratives?
3. How do these narratives [production and personal] affect the religiously unaffiliated persons' daily lives?
    a. How do they relate to their family?
    b. How do they relate to their occupation?
    c. How do they relate to their faith?
4. In what ways and to what extent do religiously unaffiliated persons' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation as summarized in Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God's People*?

## Design of the Study

This study was designed using qualitative research in order to gather and assess the resulting data in a manner fitting the depth of the specific subject and the insights offered. Sharan B. Merriam explains, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds,

and what meaning they attribute to their experiences."[227] That is, qualitative research examines how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world. Other characteristics noted by Merriam include: the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; the inductive process of gathering data to then build concepts and theories; the results of this research are typically conveyed in a richly descriptive manner.[228]

The researcher conducted interviews with nones using a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to take advantage of the unique insights offered by each interview subject. This allowed the researcher to go into the interview desiring specific information while adapting the sequence and adding follow-up questions in accord with the natural flow of conversation as it reflects real life experiences.[229] This was particularly important as the researcher sought candid viewpoints on personal matters that can be difficult to discuss. A series of open-ended questions served as the basis for the interviews. The list began with general informational questions and moved steadily to questions that interacted with significant themes in the production. This allowed the researcher to explore the interplay of these themes and subject's personal narratives, sense of self, moral evaluations, and regard for community. Of particular interest were those topics that demonstrated the participants' passions in life–what or who was admired and/or disdained–and the participants' purpose in living.[230]

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[227] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 5.

[228] Ibid., 15-16.

[229] Ibid., 90.

[230] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4.

## Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who were willing to communicate deeply about their beliefs, values, and life experience. Therefore, the researcher devised specific selection criteria in order to find a purposeful study sample. Criteria for the sample selection included people from the population of residents in the suburbs of Chicago who indicated they are unaffiliated with any religious tradition.[231] In addition, all participants were available to view a contemporary cinematic production that served as the focal point of the initial interview questions. Participants were interviewed in between two and ten days after viewing the production to allow participants time to reflect upon the film in light of their life experiences. The interviews were conducted at a location that offered the participant a comfortable and welcoming environment. The audio of each interview was also recorded.

Participants were chosen for a typical type of sample in order to provide for reasonable variance in the data collected.[232] Participants were purposefully chosen to vary in age (birth year 1962 to 1982) and life circumstance (marital status, vocation, education, etc.). The final study was conducted through personal interviews with six people who were invited to participate via an introductory email, followed by a personal call and/or email. Prior to the interview, each participant received written communication outlining the purpose of the study, the research questions, and a consent form. Each participant completed a one page demographic questionnaire before the interview. The

[231] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 78.

[232] Ibid.

questionnaire asked for information concerning participant's year of birth, city/town/village of residence, and religious preference.

## Research Subjects

Information about the research subjects, their demographic profile, and religious designation is given here. Pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain confidentiality.

| Pseudonym | Generation[233] | Gender | Religious Self-designation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cynthia | Millennial | Female | Student of multiple faiths & humankind |
| Craig | Gen X | Male | Agnostic |
| Kendra | Gen X | Female | Believe in God, not religion |
| Scott | Gen X | Male | Formerly Catholic, nothing in particular |
| Nathan | Gen X | Male | Non-affiliated |
| Joel | Boomer | Male | None |

All participants resided in the Chicago suburbs at the time of the interview. Two participants immigrated to the United States from their country of birth, while the remaining participants were born and raised in the United States and/or its territories.

## Interview Framework: Contemporary Cinematic Production

The contemporary cinematic production that served as the focal point for the interview questions is Walt Disney Pictures' *Saving Mr. Banks.* This film, released on December 20, 2013, recounts negotiations for the rights to and the production of Walt Disney's film adaptation of the *Mary Poppins* series of children's books by P. L. Travers (IMDB.com/etc.). The primary characters in the film include P. L. Travers, Walt Disney, songwriters Richard and Robert Sherman, writer and layout artist Don DaGradi, and the

[233] Millennials (born 1981 or later), Gen X (born 1965-1980, and Boomer (born 1946-1964). Generational categories derived from Pew Research Center, "Nones on the Rise," posted October 9, 2012, accessed May 14, 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

only fictional character, Ralph, Mrs. Travers' chauffeur. The screenplay was produced by Walt Disney Pictures, written by Kelly Marcel, and directed by John Lee Hancock, and starred Emma Thompson as P. L. Travers and Tom Hanks as Walt Disney (Ibid.).

*Saving Mr. Banks* utilized three alternating settings, Anaheim, California (1961), London, England (1961), and Australia (1906). As Disney negotiated for the right to produce a film version of *Mary Poppins,* Travers insisted on involvement in script development and final script approval.[234] The film portrays Travers' visit to The Walt Disney Studios to collaborate on the project and includes several flashbacks to Travers' early childhood, memories that inspired the books. This juxtaposition of Travers' formative life events and the movie's production process brought metanarrative themes – those themes that appeal to perennial truth and/or values universal to the human condition – to center stage.

Two themes intertwine throughout the narrative: the lifelong importance and formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, and familial love; and the consequential human longing for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness. Screenwriter Kelly Marcel explains,

> For me it was always going to be a film about forgiveness and the effect that our parents have on us as children and how we carry that into our adulthood and how do we let it go. I always wanted it to be about catharsis and letting things go. And I feel like the negotiation between Disney and Pamela is actually secondary to that.[235]

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[234] Valerie Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P. L. Travers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1999), 244-245.

[235] Kelly Marcel, "Academy Conversations: Saving Mr. Bank*,"* December 9, 2013, accessed May 1, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASE_p4Piuaw.

While the interplay between Disney and Travers is very entertaining, for Marcel, Travers' personal struggles with a very broken family and the need to offer and receive forgiveness is of foremost importance (see Appendix A for scenes that give expression to these metanarrative themes).

In *Saving Mr. Banks*, P. L. Travers is depicted as very protective of her stories. Flashbacks to her childhood accentuate why she was so reluctant to allowed Disney to translate her personal anguish into a light-hearted family film for the masses. It was a struggle for imaginative authorship in life – how to deal truthfully with life's dark corners without abandoning genuine hope. While the film depicts Walt Disney as finally discovering the familial roots of the struggle with Travers over the story, in an interview that coincided with the release of *Saving Mr. Banks*, Robert Sherman indicated he was completely unaware, "I wish I had known this script when I was working with Mrs. Travers fifty years ago, I would have had a little more understanding of what was going on."[236] In this film, the intersection of personal, communal, and cultural narratives, personal identity, and purpose in living is powerfully and poignantly illustrated.

## Interview Questions

1. **How do you interpret the production?**
    a. Take a minute to reflect the storyline of *Saving Mr. Banks*. If a friend asked you for the plot summary of the film, what would you say?
    b. What moments, scenes, or lines in the film stand out as most memorable?
    c. Now I'm going to ask about some of the relationships in the film.

        How would you describe the relationship between:

[236] Robert Sherman, "Academy Conversations: Saving Mr. Bank," December 9, 2013, accessed May 1, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASE_p4Piuaw.

i. P. L. Travers and
   1. Walt Disney
   2. Don DaGradi and the Sherman brothers
   3. Her father
   4. Her mother

ii. Walt Disney and
   1. The employees
   2. His father

**2. Compare/contrast production metanarrative and personal narrative(s):**

Thinking about the interplay of events, relationships, and dialogue

a. I would like to hear your impression of or reaction to the following excerpts:

i. Travers explains to Disney that Mary Poppins doesn't "sugar coat the darkness" rather she "prepares [the children] for it." Regarding the Disney script, "Where is its heart? Where is its reality? Where is the gravitas?" Throws script out the window.

ii. Travers and Ralph (chauffer) are sitting in the grass and he mentions his handicapped daughter, "I worry about the future, but you can't do that, only today."

iii. At the Merry-Go-Round, Disney to Travers, "Now, there's no greater joy than that seen through the eyes of a child, and there's a little bit of child in all of us." Travers, "Maybe in you, Mr. Disney, but certainly not in me."

iv. Recall, toward the end of the film Disney is at Travers' home in London. There he tells a story of struggle and hardship with his father. He then makes the connection to Travers' father:

**Walt:** It's him this is all about, isn't it? All of it, everything. Forgiveness, Mrs. Travers. It's what I learned from your books.

**Mrs. Travers:** I don't have to forgive my father. He was a wonderful man.

**Walt:** No, no. You need to forgive Helen Goff. Life is a harsh sentence to lay down for yourself.

v. Then the scene continues:

> **Walt:** Give her to me. Mrs. Travers, trust me with your precious Mary Poppins. I won't disappoint you...
>
> In movie houses all over the world, in the eyes and hearts of my kids and other kids, and mothers and fathers for generations to come, George Banks will be honored. George Banks will be redeemed. George Banks and all he stands for will be saved.
>
> Now, maybe not in life, but in imagination. Because that is what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.
>
> **Follow-up Questions:**
> 1 → In your opinion, what does Disney mean by "we restore order (and) we instill hope again & again & again"?
>
> 2 → In your opinion, what is the connection between "restoring order" and "instilling hope"?
>
> 3 → Discuss your thoughts about Walt Disney's conviction concerning the important role of storytelling and imagination as we respond to and/or deal with the difficulties and disorders we face in life? Explain. Examples, etc.

b. What other **scenes resonated** with you, struck you in a **favorable** way?

c. What other scenes, if any, **scenes struck** you in an **unfavorable** way?

**3. How are you affected by these narratives [**production and/or personal**]? How do they relate to your family? Your occupation? Your faith?**

Regarding the **stories** and/or **themes**,

a. Did this film bring to mind events, people, and/or relationships that have shaped <u>*your life*</u> in a manner similar to the way PL Travers' *family* shaped hers?

b. Discuss how *your* view of [central themes] has progressed/ matured/ changed over the course of your life.

c. What connections do you make between these themes [film and/or personal] and how <u>*you*</u> approach (family, work, and/or your faith)?

d. When discussing *Saving Mr. Banks*, one person described it in this way:

> This was "a film about forgiveness and the affect our parents have on us as children and about how we carry that into our adulthood and how do we let it go... I believe the negotiation between Disney and Pamela is actually secondary to that."[237]
>
> What is your impression of or reaction to this assertion?

## Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitated the researcher's ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.[238] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[239]

A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed to help evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[240]

Six participants were interviewed for one to one and a half hours each. The researcher recorded the interviews with a digital audio recorder. After each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were written.

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[237] Kelly Marcel, "Academy Conversations: Saving Mr. Bank," December 9, 2013, accessed November 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASE_p4Piuaw.

[238] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 90.

[239] Ibid., 178-188.

[240] Ibid., 170-175.

## Data Analysis

As soon as possible, and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher transcribed each interview by using computer software to play back the digital recording. The analysis used the constant comparative method where various segments of data were compared across dimensions or categories. This method provided for ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[241] Then, the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed and studied using analytical coding. The analysis focused first on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, and findings across the variation of participants. Second, the analysis explored the discrepancy between the study participants. The constant comparative method provided the researcher the opportunity to note trends, similarities, and differences, and thus the researcher inductively built a theory based firmly in the research.[242]

## Researcher Position

Researcher approached this study with certain expectations based on the researcher's convictions. Researcher is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. His fundamental presuppositions assert that humankind lives in an open universe created and ordered according to the providential designs of an infinite, personal God. People learn about their creator by observing the natural order of the world, but such understanding of the natural order and human condition is greatly enhanced, and distortions often corrected, by special revelation revealed by God through the sacred writings of the Old and New Testament scriptures. Specifically, the researcher assumed

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[241] Ibid., 30-31.

[242] Ibid., 30.

all humankind is created in God's image and that vestiges of his nature can be apprehended by participants in their individual nature and in the world around them.

In addition, participants were aware of the theological context of the study, which may have shaped their posture and response to the researcher and to the interview questions. These concerns were substantially mitigated by the researcher's awareness of these issues, careful adherence to objective data collection procedures, interviewing multiple participants, not projecting presuppositions into participants' perspectives, and peer input and review.

## Study Factors

As stated in the previous section, religiously unaffiliated persons who were interviewed for this study resided in the suburbs of Chicago and had some personal connection to the researcher or acquaintances of the researcher. Time and resources further restricted the number of people interviewed to six subjects. Finally, the matters examined were personal in nature and required a certain level of transparency not easily offered in a research setting. Therefore, as with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

# Chapter Four

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the suburbs of Chicago interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production. *Saving Mr. Banks* was selected to serve as the basis for the study. The researcher was particularly interested in the intersection of personal, communal, and cultural narratives, personal identity, and purpose in living as the point of departure for exploring how religiously unaffiliated persons attribute dignity and worth to human life and experience. This chapter draws on the findings of interviews with six religiously unaffiliated adults who viewed the film and were interviewed concerning their interpretation and response. This chapter presents the patterns, common themes, differences, and insights relevant to the study's research questions.

## Interpretation of Production

The first research question sought to understand how the participants interpreted *Saving Mr. Banks*. That is, how do they answer the questions, "What was being said?" and "What does it mean? What truth(s) about humanity and the human experience is (are) being asserted?" In Chapter Three, two metanarrative themes were identified as being intertwined throughout the film:

(1) The lifelong importance and formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, and familial love ("familial formation"); *and*

(2) The consequential human longing for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness ("relational brokenness").

Before assessing the participants' response, connectedness, affinity to, or disdain for those themes, it was important to first ascertain their understanding of the film's metanarrative themes.

*Discerning Familial Formation*

When asked to summarize the central theme(s) of the film, five of six participants freely noted the formative influence of childhood relationships and experiences and their influence upon adulthood. Kendra explained that it was during Disney's visit to P. L. Travers' home in London that she fully apprehended the film's central theme, "[W]hen Disney came and talked to her about his father, I felt like that was where ... the central theme came to me, we all experience life in a different way and our perceptions are based on that (experience)." Cynthia mentioned that Travers' relationship with her father was both nourishing and destructive. She recalled a "precious" scene when Travers Goff held little Helen[243] tightly in his arms as he rode a horse galloping through a field saying, "There was this deep connection that truly impacted her life completely ... [T]his deep connection and this imagination that he was able to foster in her was what truly saved her, what truly kept her alive and made her this genius she became." Cynthia saw the father's nurture of Helen's imagination as a gift that made her the creative "genius" she became.

Conversely, Scott highlighted the more difficult aspects of that relationship. He described Travers as being "borderline haunted by ... memories of her father slipping from the man she loved to the drunk" who was not able to take care of himself. He then

[243] P. L. Travers was the penname of Helen Goff, adapting her father's first name, Travers, as her last name. In the film, the child goes by the name Helen Goff while the author visiting the Disney Studios goes by P. L. Travers or Pamela.

remarked that a person's family and how they are raised "can mold everything about who you are," good and bad.

### *Discerning Relational Brokenness*

Four participants gave human longing for redemption and healing of relational brokenness a central role in their understanding of the film, but only one raised the subject of forgiveness without prompting. At the start of his interview, Nathan discussed P. L. Travers' relationship with her father, "I think he was a really good dad, most of the time. I think... ultimately (his alcoholism) impacted her more than anything else in her life ... that was what drove her through her whole life, those memories of her father..." For Nathan, much of the movie centered on P. L. Travers' inability to "come to terms with [her father's] alcoholism" and its damage to their family and to her personally. In a similar manner, Scott spoke directly to the devastating impact Travers Goff's vices had on his daughter, "I think ... her entire role in the movie was to show how much that really did affect her, and that she was incapable [of letting go]." In Scott's view, P. L. Travers' childhood suffering, particularly her father's alcoholism and death, left a relational wound that never fully healed.

Craig pointed out, however, that her father's death was preceded by a moment of redemption. Craig said that on his deathbed, her father probably wanted alcohol, but "he asked for pears ... instead of booze. He wanted to get his wife her favorite fruit." While it was too late to save her father, for Craig the pears scene exhibited a measure of redemption for the character.

In three instances, the participants noted to lack of trust in others as being indicative of relational brokenness. Specifically, P. L. Travers did not trust Walt Disney

or his associates with her precious *Mary Poppins*. Craig described Travers as being very protective of her book, "I don't think she trusted anybody to present it in any other fashion (than) she wanted and it took her a long time to...trust somebody to expand and make something out of it that maybe she didn't ever envision." Kendra noted that trust was pivotal to Walt Disney's plea to P. L. Travers near the end of the film, "I think he's really trying to talk to Helen and say, "Let it go. Let her go ... I know you feel like you can't trust anyone, especially men in your life, but you can trust ... if you're going to take a chance, trust me.'"

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to respond directly to the assertion that this was "a film about forgiveness and the affect our parents have on us as children and about how we carry that into our adulthood and how do we let it go ... I believe the negotiation between Disney and Pamela is actually secondary to that." This quote was offered without disclosing that it came from the film's screenwriter, Kelly Marcel. All of the participants concurred with the validity of Marcel's statement. Only Scott hedged mildly by saying, "Yeah. That is certainly a theme that I picked out in the movie ... Maybe the reason that I don't come out of that as the core of the movie is that ... I do feel like I was influenced in such a positive way by my childhood."

The others strongly affirmed Marcel's perspective. Kendra described family relationships as contributing to how we evolve, "Yeah, I totally agree with that. This (film) is about what we carry from our childhood from the people we're looking up to, to guide us. And sometimes there are parents or grandparents or whatever, and they're misguided themselves. And so, it's how we all evolve past that." Nathan detected this

theme as well, “We’re often trying to live with the choices that were made for us to us and by us as we grow older and learning to live past those.”

On the whole, in their individual way, each of the six participants discerned the film’s two metanarrative themes identified in the literature review – the lifelong and formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, and familial love, and the consequential human longing for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness. The researcher noted one minor exception: only one participant specifically mentioned forgiveness, or any analogous term, without being prompted. The next research question examined the relationship between the production and personal narratives.

**Relationship of Production and Personal Narratives**

The second research question addressed how religiously unaffiliated persons compared and contrasted *Saving Mr. Banks’* metanarrative with their personal narratives. While the first research question dealt with the participant’s arms-length observation and understanding of the film’s metanarrative, this second question examined to what extent the participants personally connected the metanarrative and/or offered alternative narratives. The participants’ narratives either built upon or diverged from those of the film.

Several interview questions gave the participants an opportunity to interact with the primary metanarrative themes identified in the literature review – familial formation and relational brokenness. The participants could also disclose alternative narrative themes that shape who they have become and where they are going. To identify themes that rose to the level of a defining role in the content and trajectory of the participants’

lives, the researcher looked for (a) themes that touched on personal identity, morality, and meaning in life, (b) the participant's passion in expressing their views, and (c) what Charles Taylor described as "strong evaluations," particularly when such sentiments conveyed admiration or contempt.[244]

*Familial Formation*

Each of the study's six participants offered strong affirmation of the formative influence of their respective families as they seamlessly wove comments about the film together with their own life stories. When asked to discuss her personal formation Cynthia spoke about her mother tearfully, "The relationship I have with my mother has been something that has only deepened ... it's only getting deeper (over time)... But something that she has transmitted to me since I was born was this reverence for life, this passion about life, and that has endured, nothing can take that away." For Cynthia, her mother embodies a reverence and passion for life. Cynthia cherishes that gift and how it has formed her. Reverence and passion for life will never be taken from Cynthia.

Similarly, Kendra connected with the characters in the film when she expressed how the death of Helen's father deeply touched her. She shared about the loss of her own father and situations where she has had to parent her mother, "I would say that Helen reminded me of me, a little bit more mature as a child than my peers. But not maybe necessarily emotionally mature." She responded to Marcel's assertion about the formative "affect our parents have on us as children" by saying that a lot of parents want their kids to be better off financially than they were. Kendra added, "And I would love that for my kids, too ... But I hope they are emotionally more evolved than I got to be."

[244] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 523.

For Kendra, her children's emotional formation is more important than their financial circumstance.

For Joel the film brought to mind his father, whom he described as a serious and rigid man, "He was a very good father all the time, but it was always very difficult to relate to him." Joel attributed this dynamic to his father's childhood, "because his own father was a widow(er) and he was left with eleven children to look after. So that was the pattern that he inherited from our grandfather. In order to control all these children you had to be very stern." This experience motivated Joel to approach his own children differently, "So to this day I can say that my relationship with my kids is a wonderful relationship of love, one hundred percent."

Like Joel, in addition to sharing their own childhood experiences, all six of the participants spoke specifically about the vital role of parenting, often commenting on experiences with their own children. When asked if there were scenes that struck him in a strongly favorable way, Nathan immediately made a connection to his daughter, "I really liked the relationship between the father and her ... when drinking wasn't involved, (his) encouraging the imagination and the play and all those things, because I try to do that with my daughter ... not to miss those moments, to be in your child's life, to encourage them and inspire them and play."

Nathan connected favorably with and personalized Helen's experience with her father. However, he spoke about how scenes that brought her father's alcoholism to the forefront disturbed him. Nathan described these scenes as, "... destructive ... horrible ... (and) hard to watch," concluding, "I think that is what made the most impact." As he discussed the film, he pondered the difficulty but also the responsibility inherent in

parenting, "You want to maintain that childlike appreciation of the world and that embracing attitude that children have. But, at the same, time there're a lot of dangers ... I think that is an unwinding and unfolding of lessons, but to me it's critically important." For Nathan, parents lead their children through an "unwinding and unfolding of lessons," and this, for him, is a crucial and formative journey.

Cynthia struck a similar chord, but offered her insights with spiritually oriented terms. She described the family institution as "holy because the work of God is present – the wonders of God, the relationships, how we choose to come into this family, what the parents have to teach us, what we have to teach our parents, that wonderful thing, that balance, ... that union." When asked to comment on the scene where Travers chastises Walt Disney for a script that "sugar coats the darkness," she described the moral confusion of children in the present culture and argued that such a lack of moral guidance is debilitating and dangerous. She looked at parents as "spiritual guides," and spoke fervently about the need to pursue "the goodness of stories and all that ... but (also for) something that awakens a different kind of parenthood, a different kind of bringing about the human being." Cynthia's sentiments echoed those of Vigen Guroian found in the literature review, where he argued for the vital role of telling fairy tales and fantasy stories to children as they awaken their "moral imagination" and shape them into persons "able to stand face to face with the truth about themselves and others, while desiring to correct their faults and to emulate goodness and truth wherever it is found."[245]

[245] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue,* 27.

### *Relational Brokenness*

The participants' personal connection to the need for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness was less comprehensive and more nuanced than their connection to familial formation. While all six participants connected meaningfully to the formative influence of family, five participants strongly affirmed humankind's need for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness. In both their words and manner of speech, this subject resonated in such a way that it shaped who the participants had become and where they were going in life.

For example, when asked about Walt Disney confronting Travers concerning her need to forgive herself, Nathan said, "There are things that happen in our lives, often it is with relationships with family or traumatic things, that can impact us for the rest of our lives, indelibly." For Travers, this may have been the need to forgive herself or her situation or her father, "Being able to accept them and ... allow yourself to go past them, I think that was for her a critical moment ... (for her)." Nathan went on to talk about friendships that have endured for more than thirty years now, "Like anything, you cultivate it ... If you find goodness in someone and you're willing to forgive them, then that friendship can endure." He was intrigued that many people say, "My family is just crazy!" He begs to differ, "The reality is that we're all kind of crazy." With family and friends, people see others up close, in person. Nathan said, "We're all filled with heaven and hell, at times. When it comes to friends and family, you learn to recognize it, but you'll forgive them that." For Nathan, to forgive and be forgiven is essential for navigating through conflicts and maintaining healthy relationships that endure over time.

As she discussed the relationship between Walt Disney and his father, Kendra admired how Disney was able to realize his father was not perfect and still appreciate him. She explained that she tried to do the same in her life,

> I love my father, but he definitely wasn't perfect ... My dad died when I was [in my late teens] and he was my primary caregiver and I thought he was perfect. But, though his death and everything that ensued afterward, I definitely went through a period where I was like, "Wow, he wasn't perfect." But I can forgive what I can forgive.

To move forward from the unexpected loss of her father, Kendra had to forgive him for things she was not even aware of when he was alive.

In contrast to five participants, a sixth participant did not draw strongly personal connections with the theme of relational brokenness. This person acknowledged experiencing relational brokenness, however the participant described that brokenness in a routine manner and displayed reservations concerning their ability to initiate or participate in a remedy. The response lacked strong evaluations, indicative of matters shaping their personal identity, moral frameworks, and/or meaning in life. When they offered a personal example of relational brokenness, no connection was made between their admiration of the redemption and forgiveness in the film and the possibility they might offer the same as they faced a similar circumstance in their own life.

### *Alternative Narrative Themes*

Participants demonstrated an understanding of and/or personal identification with the two metanarrative themes of the film disclosed in the literature review – familial formation and relational brokenness. However, the researcher was also interested in determining if and how the participants offered alternative personal narrative themes that either built upon or had no direct connection to the these two themes. The researcher

found five alternative narrative themes that were offered by, resonated deeply with, and inspired the life trajectory of multiple participants. Three complimentary narratives built directly upon the metanarrative themes of *Saving Mr. Banks*: the creative process, childhood innocence, and perseverance. Two divergent narratives offered no specific link to the central themes found of the film: the dignity and worth of humankind and tempered expectations.

**The Creative Process**

All six participants strongly admired the creative process presented in the film. Two of the participants were particularly drawn to the collaborative nature of storytelling and the meaningful connections that are made with others participating in the process. Scott said, "The creative process was just awesome!" He went on to identify with the give and take and interplay of different personalities and ideas, observing, "There's nothing better than working with just really good people who ... have ideas that aren't necessarily yours." He offered that the film version of *Mary Poppins* as a remarkable example of how creative energy and creative processes take you to places you would never reach on your own.

Kendra had a slightly different appreciation for the connections made with others in the creative process of crafting a story. She shared, "When I see a good movie, it makes me want to be part of that world." She explained how previous work in journalism gave her the opportunity to weave "real people stories" and to connect with people who go beyond the story. But for her, it was a mixed blessing. Good stories and the powerful connections she made could be exhilarating but, conversely, "pretty bad stories" would sometimes shake her to the core, "It was very draining for me."

The other four participants were drawn to imagination and the creative process as a rich reservoir that nourishes community, shapes personal identity, and provides the moral frameworks that bring to life the dreams and aspirations of real people. Craig pondered this dynamic as he commented on the scene when Walt Disney explained to P. L. Travers that storytellers "instill hope again and again and again." Craig responded, "It's a nice feeling to have hope and realize that it's possible, what you've hoped for is possible."

Cynthia reflected upon the long, rich history of storytelling and its important place in society, "In the ancient times, imagination was truly fertile, the storytellers were the most wonderful people." They were wise and, as keepers of the stories, were entrusted with the wisdom concealed in these stories. Both Cynthia and Joel quickly noted that imagination was the seedbed of something that can be achieved in the future, shaping both who people have become and where they are going. Cynthia commented, "When you are able to imagine, to conceive in your mind, that's the beginning of creation." When pointed toward the future, imagination, "even though it hasn't happened yet ... in your mind it is almost concrete."

Nathan gave imagination, creativity, and storytelling an equally prominent and formative place in his personal moral framework and in the nurture of his daughter. As she is growing up, he pondered how to maintain her innocence while also preparing her for the "horrors" and "challenges" that await her. He explained how cartoons, which he described as "modern myths," were instrumental in teaching his daughter to discern between good and bad in a deceptive world. Through the use of story, he sought to foster

a childlike view of the world while also preparing her for and protecting her against the dangers.

**Childhood Innocence**

A second complimentary narrative theme was that of childhood innocence. All of the male participants spoke energetically about the carefree innocence of childhood, both as a time of moral formation and an instructive paradigm for the many uptight and/or jaded adults. Neither of the female participants expressed favorable sentiments about childhood innocence, either concerning the characters in the film or from their personal experience.

Many of the comments about childhood innocence gravitated to the scene where Walt Disney invites P. L. Travers to join him on the merry-go-round at Disneyland. Disney says to Travers, “Now, there’s no greater joy than that seen through the eyes of a child, and there’s a little bit of child in all of us.” Travers replied, “Maybe in you, Mr. Disney, but certainly not in me.” Kendra and Cynthia expressed strong feelings about this exchange. Kendra speculated, “I don’t think she ever thought of herself as a child. Because she had that role of being a parent to her parents, I don’t know that she ever thought she had a childhood.” Cynthia commented that there was a part of Travers that was still a child who never grew up, “That doesn’t mean she wasn’t innocent, but the world ... hit her hard very early. Therefore, [Disney and Travers] were talking about two different things ... I do agree with Disney, everyone would say the same thing, but she was coming from a much deeper place.” Kendra and Cynthia were more affected by Travers’ truncated or distorted childhood and thus less inclined to latch onto to Disney’s carefree cajoling of Travers or his celebration of childhood innocence.

In contrast, the four male participants strongly admired how Disney sought to look at this world "through the eyes of a child." Joel saw this innocence in Helen Goff's misguided desire to satisfy her father's every request, "I was very moved to see that the love of his child was so pure that even though she knew that [the alcohol] was going to kill the father she was bringing it to him..." The merry-go-round captivated Scott**.** He said, "When you are a child ... you get up on that horse and for two minutes nothing else really matters." Similarly, Nathan observed, "Nobody lives more in the moment than a child ... I think that is a great way to live," not burdened by or worried about the past or the future. Rather, Nathan described, "You're here, you're having a cup of tea, you're with a loved one, you're laughing with a friend, you're listening to good music." This is "one of the great ways to navigate through, but also to appreciate life." After all, "[T]he only way to do anything is to be in that present moment."

**Perseverance**

The final complimentary narrative theme that inspired the participants in a deep and enduring manner was perseverance – pressing on to endure, overcome, and even be strengthened by hardship, suffering, unexpected loss, and/or personal failures. Five of the participants spoke to this as a defining trait in their lives. Craig offered this as one of the film's central themes, "You can do anything you put your mind to." Nathan spoke to the virtue of overcoming a difficult childhood. And Kendra spoke about how perseverance is relevant to anybody's life, "You go for what you want to go for and if you have perseverance, even if you don't get it, you have not failed because you've continued to follow the dream."

One participant admitted having feelings of contempt for those who complain regularly about comparatively minor struggles when the participant's family had witnessed and experienced so much suffering and death. This participant was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome, "Because when you go through things like that, you carry it with you." Now this participant has to make a conscious choice every day, "I'm going to get out of bed, I'm going to go work out, I'm going to do the things that I know will help me feel better." Perseverance is essential for these participants' daily functioning, sanity, and survival.

**Dignity and Worth of Humankind**

One divergent narrative theme mentioned by five participants was the dignity and worth of humankind. This theme was evidenced particularly in these participants' attitudes and actions toward complete strangers as the participants had no vested interest in assigning value to such individuals other than their status as human beings.

When asked if there were any stories from the past that struck him in a meaningful way, Craig mentioned a short film called *Validation*. The theme of the video is the importance of validating the unique worth of people we encounter on a daily basis. After describing this storyline he said, "Who knows where you catch somebody, they might be ready to jump off a cliff and you do something generous and it might stop them from doing it. It's really important how we treat people and how we act around them." Craig pondered the economic distractions that cause people to obsess with "paying for things and buying things and how we look." Then he concluded with a rhetorical plea, "What are we really here for?" For Craig, one of the really important things people can

do is validate and encourage those they encounter in the common, every day moments of life.

Similarly, Nathan defined his goal of "being a better person" in relationship to how he treated other people – with compassion, empathy, kindness, and justice. The latter is particularly important where there is a need to standup for those who cannot standup for themselves. For Nathan, how people treat other human beings ought not be dependent on how deserving they might be. Every person encountered deserves to be treated in a certain way. Nathan explained, "That's what the idea of compassion or empathy is ... there are things within them that you don't see, that you don't understand, but you still extend (compassion to them)."

**Tempered Expectations**

A final divergent theme that exerted formative influence over the participants' attitudes and actions was the importance of tempered expectations. Three participants applied this dose of realism to everything from friendships to theater to the workplace to childrearing.

Kendra shared about a time when she experienced a series of relational disappointments, "I definitely feel like at that point I started living life with a different set of expectations." This is not to say that her view precludes pursuing formidable goals. This was demonstrated when she struck a more resilient tone, "I have been in careers when you're knocking on doors and the doors are slamming on you and you have to keep going. So, I am proud of the successes that I've had professionally, because I haven't given up." Nonetheless, in Kendra's view, ambition must, in some measure, be brought in line with reality, "There are (still) times when I let my expectations get too high ... and I

have to dial it back and remember I can't expect that." Nathan explained, "The world is harsh. To me the key is ... to be realistic about the challenges, the dark side of the world, as well as the possibilities and the hope and the healing of the world." For these participants, adjusting expectations to align with what can be reasonably expected from a certain person or circumstance avoided or mitigated disappointment, discouragement, and loss. This contrasts with the more ambitious posture of Craig, whose life philosophy reflected a more idealistic view of the world, "Whatever I can think of, I can create."

A careful analysis of the research interviews revealed that the participants had a high degree of connectedness to the two metanarrative themes of *Saving Mr. Banks*, and by in large, affirmed those themes as an important part of their defining perspectives and experiences. In addition to these themes, the research interviews gave evidence of several personal narratives that offered coherence and moral direction to their lives. In some instances, these alternative narratives built upon and in other instances they diverged from the film's primary themes. In several cases, the personal narratives were not "meta" in nature. While there was nothing to preclude a metanarrative understanding, in most instances the personal narratives were not presented in a manner that explicitly asserted they were to be received as truths universal to the human condition.

Nonetheless, four participants expressed stories with metanarrative implications: First, the "hero's journey" offered by Nathan in the context of discussing formative aspects of the creative process. He concluded, "I think the great (moral) themes are universal." Second, Craig's conviction that humankind's purpose for living must include validating and/or uplifting people around them. Third, Kendra held strong disdain for those who opposed opening public bathrooms to all who "lived" as a particular gender.

Fourth, Cynthia regarded P. L. Travers childhood experiences universal and timeless, "... the archetypal story of the human being ... when you really have to come to terms with your own past, truly accept it, and move forward and be open to a greater future."

## Narratives' Effect on Daily Life

The third research question sought to discern how religiously unaffiliated persons' daily lives were affected by *Saving Mr. Banks'* and/or their personal narrative themes. The first and second research questions addressed narratives that shape larger questions of personal identity and the moral framework of life. The third research question examined the extent to which these narratives take root in daily life. More specifically, how do these narratives affect the participants' family, occupation, and/or faith? Are they intriguing but fanciful escapes or truly formative of the human person, family, community, and/or larger culture?

### *Family*

Each participant made deep, meaningful, and sometime tearful connections between their family relationships and the narrative themes of the film and/or their lives. One of the most important connections was between participants who were parents and their children. Kendra talked about passing on the importance of perseverance to her children. Recently, when one child expressed disappointment over personal difficulties, Kendra told her child, "Walt Disney was told he wasn't creative enough to be a cartoonist ... and then look what he became! So, everybody who tells you no, you just use those as steps to get to yes."

Similarly, two participants with young daughters connected strongly to themes tied to the most prominent relationship in the film: between Helen Goff and her father,

Travers Goff. One participant described his daughter as always being the center of his world, "I can relate to how ... even when things are down, (your daughter) can snap you out of it and make you realize what's important (in life)." The same participant shared that if his children viewed the film, the most important message he would want them to take away would be, "Your father and your mother love you no matter what else is going on in your life." Familial love shapes every aspect of childrearing in that household.

The participants also frequently referred to their relationship with their spouse. Four of the participants mentioned a certain aspect of their marital relationship. One participant made an almost immediate connection between P. L. Travers' inflexibility and distrust with their spouse's inflexibility and distrust. For this person, marital harmony was a significant factor influencing direction and contentment in life. This participant saw parallels between their marital relationship and one of the film's subsidiary themes: the pivotal role of trust and growth in maintaining relational harmony.

Another participant shared about how their spouse suffered a relational tragedy. This participant explained that they initiated certain rituals each year on the anniversary of the event in order to help bring comfort and show love. Admitting that s/he will never truly know what it is like to experience such an event, the participant still tries to weave that seminal moment into their family's evolving narrative in order to bring some measure of redemption and healing to the day and to their loved one's relational brokenness.

### *Occupation*

The participants' personal narratives, communal narratives, cultural narratives, personal identity, and purpose in living also intersected with their occupation. As with the

data on family, every participant talked about narrative themes and their vocation in a way that conveyed the theme's fundamental importance to where they have come from and where they are going.

The movie's creative process, previously discussed in "complimentary narratives," resonated strongly with four of the participants with regard to their vocational calling. Scott connected powerfully with the interplay of personalities and creative energy as the script and songwriters worked together with P. L. Travers. In his view, the power and influence of story enjoyed on an individual level is exponentially more powerful when exercised in community with others moving toward the same goal.

In her work as a journalist, Kendra connected with this theme in a way that joined together the creative process with another theme discussed above – the dignity and worth of humankind. In the course of crafting a story in her work as a journalist, she often found herself connecting deeply with people whose lives went well beyond a single news event. For her, interviewees were not mere fodder for mass media consumption; rather they offered an opportunity to tell an important story about human beings who experienced a noteworthy triumph or tragedy. If dealing with a particularly difficult trauma, the personal anguish of the interviewees would reverberate through their lives for years after a brief moment in front of the camera, microphone, and lights. This deeply human and personal aspect to storytelling profoundly shaped both Kendra's attitude and manner of work.

Other themes that resonated strongly with the vocational calling of two participants included familial formation, relational brokenness, and perseverance. For example, when discussing the scene where Walt Disney confronted P. L. Travers

concerning her need to forgive herself, Cynthia described the background of that encounter as "the archetypal story of the human being." There is something universal and timeless about coming to terms with difficulties of the past and moving forward to a "greater future." This conviction is especially relevant in Cynthia's work as a counselor and educator, "And if I didn't trust in that betterment of humanity ... I wouldn't be able to do what I do." She trusts in the potential for overcoming the past's relational brokenness because she has seen it in her own life and in the lives of her students. In her view, this theme is a nonnegotiable prerequisite to her counseling and teaching.

The themes of familial formation and relational brokenness were also an important part of Nathan's work as a leader and manager in his organization. This came into view as he discussed P. L. Travers' childhood. Nathan noticed how many who worked with Travers at Disney Studios had no idea what was driving her unyielding view of the *Mary Poppins* story. A substantial part of Nathan's job is to make personnel assessments. Referring to the writings of Robert Anton Winton, Nathan explained that people often define others by "is-ness." That is, people define others by what happens in a specific moment or on a given day. Nathan argued that is an error, explaining, "We really lock down our impressions" without considering that "people are not as simple as we want to make them out to be." According to Nathan, accounting for the complexities of familial formation and relational brokenness is an important tool he uses to help broaden his understanding of people and to make the many judgments about people required in his daily work.

*Faith*

Of the three aspects of daily life examined in this section, the most idiosyncratic was tharena of faith. The researcher considered the following questions: How was the participant's personal faith affected by *Saving Mr. Banks's* metanarrative and/or by their own personal narrative themes? And, if there is a connection, do the defining narrative themes shape their faith? Does their faith shape the defining themes? Or, is there such coherence and unity that they inform and shape one another?

The researcher found that perspectives varied significantly by the person, subject, and even moment. Craig expressed some uneasiness with the subject when he replied to a question about the connection between the themes of the film and faith. He began, "Well ... Geeze ... I don't even know where to begin with that." However, as Craig reflected more on the matter, he explained that a belief in God and/or a desire to go to heaven were not motivating factors in his commitment to "help people and do good." He said he was willing to do the same things a religious person would do "without that guarantee of heaven or hell." Traditional religious faith did not affect Craig's life attitudes and practices. Rather, these attitudes and actions came from within him, from what Craig called "self-faith" – the narrative theme that grounded his personal identity, moral evaluations, and meaning in life. While this view does not preclude belief in God, it does demonstrate the close and possibly defining influence his "self-faith" exerted over his beliefs about the divine and/or spiritual realm and their relationship to this world, humanity, and/or the human condition. For example, Craig expressed very strong admiration for the creative process, "Whatever I can think of, I can create." While there is certainly some measure of hyperbole in this statement, it does fit well with a "self-faith"

that holds a more skeptical or arms-length view of dependence upon the divine or spiritual realm and elevates self-reliance in the here and now. Craig's defining narrative theme affects his faith.

For Kendra, the subject of God, religion, and faith came up as she said that she believes everyone is judgmental – people hold some views with such fervor that they have an attitude of contempt toward those with contrary perspectives. After acknowledging personal instances of "judgment," Kendra moved to a current cultural debate on certain LGBTQ[246] issues and communicated her disdain for those who opposed making the women's bathroom open to anyone "living as a woman." She said the sexual mores of others were not for her to judge, and that it bothers her when (religious) people say someone else's lifestyle is wrong. Kendra explained, "Well, if you believe in God, and believe God tells you it is not your place to judge, God makes the final judgment, so just live your life and be nice to people ... That's why I don't like religion very often..." A moral framework shapes Kendra's faith, and the framework insists on the personal freedom to make such choices and a corresponding obligation to accommodate a specific array of choices in the public sphere.

Two other participants subscribed to a broadly based faith that draws upon the collective wisdom from a wide array of disciplines across many cultures and through the ages. Nathan explained that in order to orient his life toward the good, toward "compassion and empathy and kindness and justice," he accessed "everything from the sciences to philosophy to poetry to religion." He still respects those who find the good in one path, but he finds, affirms, and shapes his life by wisdom wherever it may be found.

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[246] Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer.

For Nathan, this requires not granting one particular tradition or teaching preeminence over others. This synthesis of timeless, multi-cultural wisdom is a defining narrative that shapes all aspects of his life. His faith, wisdom, and life experience are so closely intertwined that they inform and shape one another.

Of the six participants, four offered comments on questions of faith without prompting, one responded to a direct question on the subject, and another only disclosed that they no longer align with any particular faith. Of the five who addressed matters of faith, four revealed that the shape and practice of their faith was strongly influenced by their personal narratives. One participant made a more impersonal comment that no matter how dark the circumstance, "Something that could truly help ... is your faith ... you have the possibility to find refuge in God" or in whatever sacred or holy image you create. "You see that as a ray of light, a ray of hope."

The participants' stories, illustrations, and comments demonstrated that their marriages, family, and occupational relationships give rise to and are often powerfully affected by the defining narrative themes of both the film and their own lives. The link between their personal faith and the movie's themes was more nuanced and varied significantly among the participants.

**Biblical Themes in Personal Experience**

The fourth research question asked in what ways and to what extent religiously unaffiliated persons' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation as summarized in Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God's People*?[247] The purpose of Wright's book is to seek a biblical theology

[247] This and the following summary are drawn from Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 39-47.

of the church's mission. Wright argues that one important piece of that labor is to understand the whole story of the Bible, which he divided into the four parts: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

Wright explains that, "The creation narrative ... answers two of the most fundamental questions" asked by philosophers and religions, "*Where* are we? and *Who* are we?" The first asks where the universe came from, why it exists, and if it is real. The second considers what it means to be human, "Are we gods, or merely animals that have evolved a bit further than the rest? Does human life have any value, meaning, and purpose?[248]

At the fall, "Evil and sin weave their way into every aspect of God's creation and every dimension of human personhood." God's physical world decays and dies under the curse. Intellectually, powers of rationality "normalize" evil. Socially, every human relationship fractured through all cultures and time. Spiritually, humankind is alienated from and rejects God, his goodness, and his authority.[249]

The scope of redemption matches that of the fall by addressing the problem of human sin and "the fracturing and confusion of the nations of humanity."[250] God initiated redemption demonstrating faithfulness, justice, and love.[251] Through the cross and resurrection, God ultimately reverses and destroys "every dimension of sin and evil in the

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[248] Ibid., 40.

[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid., 41.

[251] Ibid.

cosmos and all their destructive effects."[252] The church is "part of the gospel," a community of reconciled sinners that "demonstrates the gospel's transforming power."[253]

In the future new creation, "Our great hope of new creation gives value and worth to all we do in the present."[254] The return of Christ will "inaugurate the ultimate fulfillment of the whole point of the story – namely the redemption and renewal of God's whole creation."[255] This will be a time of judgment, but "beyond the purging fire of judgment ... there lies the new heavens and the new earth, in which righteousness and peace will dwell."[256]

Creation, fall, redemption, new creation – Wright uses these four sign posts to mark off God's story in the pages of scripture and the hearts of his people. Will these same themes be revealed in researcher's conversations with religiously unaffiliated adults residing in the Chicago suburbs? If so, how do their defining experiences and stories compare and contrast with these biblical themes?[257]

### *Creation*

This first biblical theme deals with the origin of the universe and humankind as created in the image of God. Creation contemplates human life's value, meaning, and purpose – the way the world ought to be. In the course of the interviews, the participants

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[252] Ibid., 43.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Ibid., 45.

[255] Ibid., 43.

[256] Ibid., 44.

[257] At no point in the interview did the researcher impose these biblical themes upon the conversation. Any connection between their words and experiences and the biblical themes arose in an unscripted manner from the natural flow of conversation surrounding the characters and script of *Saving Mr. Banks*.

never touched on the origin of the universe or humankind, but on the whole, their words and experiences compared favorably with Wright's strong affirmation of the value, meaning, and purpose of life within the created order. Not one participant expressed sentiments that questioned, diminished, or in any way eroded the value or purpose of human life.

The value of life was expressly supported in interviews with five of the participants as the section "Divergent Narratives – Dignity and Worth of Humankind" explored. The participants closely aligned the value of human life with its meaning and purpose. Craig, for example, ascribed value when he stressed the importance of how people treat others and then concluded by asking about people's purpose, "What are we really here for?" For Craig, affirming the value of others is part and parcel with meaning and purpose in life.

In the section on "Occupation," Kendra's work connected powerfully with the deeply human aspects of personal, community, and cultural narratives. As a journalist, from time to time she interviewed people who experienced grievous personal tragedies. Kendra explained that her connection with the interviewee was sometimes so intense that, "I'd be crying as they were crying." The empathy offered to a person she just met demonstrated deep love and concern for a fellow human being and conferred dignity and worth fitting to the person in their time of loss.

Cynthia repeatedly described certain friends or characters as "human" or "human beings" When asked what she meant, she explained that a human being is more than their personality, character, or ways of being. Cynthia said people have a spirit or soul, "a force some will call God in them; that presence that animates them is sacred." She went

on to ponder, “What is truly the human being? ... Not only, what is the human being, but ... what are we here to do? Those are fundamental questions ... that I try to think about almost everyday. I get tremendous insight into them, but I don’t have a final answer. It always makes me wonder.” For Cynthia, she does not have a “final” answer concerning what it means to be human, but whatever it means, there is something “sacred” about human life that gives it innate value, meaning, and purpose.

Finally, all of the participants offered comments that either explicitly or implicitly argued for a certain moral standards or “ought-ness” to this world. The standards themselves infer a value to human life, and if one values human life, one is obligated to maintain certain moral standards. For example, Joel commended Helen’s relationship with her father, in its good times, as “a very beautiful relationship” because of the intimate love between them. He also remarked how her father stimulated “the dreaming life of the child,” which served as the foundation to her life as an author. For Joel, parents have a responsibility to love and nurture their children in such a way. Nathan also offered his personal philosophy on life, “We all want to love and be loved.” When things go awry it is because “we don’t have that connection: I don’t have somebody to love, or I don’t feel loved, or I can’t love you enough, I can’t express it.” For Nathan, love is a universal theme, something innate to humanity and the moral order of this world. This “ought-ness” was evident throughout the research interviews as participants affirmed the value, meaning, and purpose of human life and the corresponding moral obligations incumbent upon all humankind.

*Fall*

The second biblical theme addresses the destructive effects of the fall on God's creation and human personhood, including physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual brokenness, rebellion, and death – the way the world is. As with the question of creation, much of what was learned in the first three research questions is instructive here as well. The setting for the two primary themes of the film is the relational brokenness of Helen Goff's family and the death of her father. These themes connect immediately to the social and physical consequences of the fall that Wright outlines. Concerning the physical consequences, in the "Relational Brokenness" section, the researcher observed that five of the six participants demonstrated strong personal connections to this theme.

Cynthia's description of the importance of what she described as "healing stories" relates directly to Wright's description of the social effects of the fall. She said, "I think that the most powerful thing about this movie is the impact of the story in the world." Because Walt Disney and P. L. Travers were able to work through their difference, the value of a great story was rescued, "Families that are wounded, children that are in need of consolment (*sic*), those who are in need of healing, deep healing stories like this can truly benefit the world." According to Cynthia, families throughout the world are suffering from relational brokenness and in need of "healing stories."

The fall's most visible effect is decay, death, and a physical environment under the fall's curse. This was vividly displayed in Travers Goff's drunkenness, progressive illness, and grim death. As four of the participants discussed his demise, the tenor of the conversation communicated that it was a natural, if unfortunate, consequence of the father's addiction to alcohol. However, two of the participants described their reaction in

more stark terms. In the section on "Familial Formation," Nathan described Travers Goff's alcoholic episodes as, "tragic ... destructive ... horrible ... (and) hard to watch." Similarly, Kendra gave a deeply personal, first-hand account of the untimely death of her father, "Any film where a parent dies ... that's where I cry…When my father died our family fell apart…I don't have my dad. He's never going to know my husband, never going to know my kids…I still dream about [husband] all the time leaving. I think that's because the first man in my life that I adored and trusted left." The devastating consequence of the fall was no academic matter for Kendra. It was intensely personal and the effects reverberate for a lifetime.

In addition, two of the participants gave examples of the intellectual effect of the fall, when rationality is used to normalize evil behavior. For example, Nathan discussed how it would be important to teach his daughter about those people who "act like they are nice but they're not so nice." He commented, "There are people that don't (obey laws) and they work around that system. They may put on a face that they're good or that they are doing bad ... they'll sometimes exploit systems of trust, systems of honor, systems of the right things to do." Similarly, Kendra said the divisiveness of the political environment has become customary because many people "want to be offended." She explained, "Democrats are looking for why conservative Republicans are being jerks ... and Republicans are looking for how Democrats are being too liberal, instead of saying, 'Let's find some common ground.' It's all finger pointing." According to Kendra, this sort of divisiveness is now a normal part of American culture.

Finally, concerning spiritual aspects of the fall, the five participants who discussed faith were ambivalent concerning God, his goodness, and his authority. There

was no evidence of deep affection for or alienation from God. While they did not personally endorse or affirm a Judgment Day, two of the participants alluded to it in more personalized terms. For example, Craig explained he does what a "godly" person does "without the guarantee of heaven or hell." For him, eternal reward or punishment is not a relevant motive for a moral lifestyle. Instead, he said, "I just try to be a good person and I feel like when it comes time to that, I will still be looked (at) in a positive manner." Craig's explanation suggested that there will be a time of accountability, but his personal construction of that time removes the overtones of a decisive, and possibly damning, Judgment Day.

### *Redemption*

The third biblical theme deals with the redemption of creation and humanity. God reverses and destroys sin and evil. God frees the cosmos and humankind from its bondage – the way the world can be. Wright points out that redemption sweeps through the biblical narrative representing the largest part of the biblical story.[258] Similarly, redemption rests at the center of one of *Saving Mr. Banks*' primary themes identified in the literature review – redemption, forgiveness, and the healing of relational brokenness.

Any time sin and evil are pushed back, forgiveness is offered, and relationships are mended, humankind experiences some measure of redemption. The "Primary Metanarrative Themes – Relational Brokenness" section details how themes of redemption resonated with five of the six participants. Even the sixth participant twice commended the father who, on his deathbed, asked for pears, "his wife's favorite fruit." Despite the relational damage done by the father's alcoholism, he respected this final

[258] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 39.

gesture of self-sacrificing love, "If I can think of somebody else when I'm about to die, (that) would be a pretty positive message."

In *The Mission of God's People*, Wright asserts that redemption demonstrated God's "faithfulness, justice, and love."[259] Coinciding with this, Nathan included justice and love in his list of defining traits of what it means to be a good person. While Joel truly admired Helen Goff's faithfulness to her father as she carefully tended to his needs and sometimes even his vices, "[Y]ou could see ... the love in between the child and the father that doesn't question or criticize ... It was a very striking, very powerful scene." For Joel, love and faithfulness go hand in hand.

Three participants affirmed another display of relational healing when they spoke admirably of P. L. Travers finally warming up to the idea of having music in the *Mary Poppins* movie. Early on, she was so adverse to the idea that she alienated the songwriters by bluntly wondering aloud why they were even introduced, "We shan't be acquainted long ... Because these books don't lend themselves to chirping and prancing; no, certainly *not* a musical." Nonetheless, they did work together and Travers began to warm up to the idea of adding music and song to the story. At one climatic point in the film, she danced with one of the writers. Two of the participants were so struck by the sight that they described it as one of their favorite scenes in the movie. Kendra said, "The thing that stands out to me the most, as being a happy scene, was when she finally dances and sings and all that stuff. I loved that." What began as a strained and testy relationship concluded as the new dance partners pranced about on the dance floor accompanied by the piano and spirited singing of "Let's Go Fly a Kite." For three participants, this

[259] Ibid., 41.

moment of relational healing was one of the most memorable and heartwarming scenes in the movie.

Many participant comments demonstrated the comprehensive nature of redemption – freeing this world in some measure from the effects sin and evil through forgiveness and relational healing. Joel related a story about begging his son's forgiveness for a personal offense. Craig truly admired the bank owner when he offered Helen's father a second chance. Nathan said he was the "go to" person to mediate and help reconcile conflicts among his group of longtime friends. Kendra forgave her father and described family struggles in the wake of his death. Scott shared about how he advocated for fellow employees who had a work assignment that put unusual strain on their personal relationships. Cynthia said Helen's father saved her by giving the gift of imagination and described society's deep need for "healing stories" like those found in *Mary Poppins*.

### New Creation

This fourth and final biblical theme looks forward to the full and final redemption and renewal of God's whole creation, as he brings about the new heavens and new earth where righteousness and peace will dwell – the way the world will be. The participants did not offer the prospect of a heaven or hell or a "new creation" as something that defined their worldview or shaped their lives in any meaningful way. As mentioned in the "Fall" section, two participants alluded to a prospective Judgment Day, but in decidedly distant and hypothetical terms.

That said, the scene in the film that aligns most closely to the theme of new creation was when Walt Disney sat in P. L. Travers' home and asked her to trust him with her precious *Mary Poppins*. If she did,

> [I]n the eyes and hearts of my kids and other kids, and mothers and fathers for generations to come, George Banks will be honored ... will be redeemed ... will be saved ... [M]aybe not in life, but in imagination, because that is what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.

While this scene shares aspects of the previous section on redemption, here Disney puts a decidedly future orientation and comprehensive anticipation to the task of storytellers. They offer redemption, salvation – "maybe not in life ... but in imagination ... We instill hope again and again and again." This aspect of the biblical narrative captured the attention and imagination of four participants.

For example, Craig commented on Walt Disney's vision of storytellers when he said, "It's a nice feeling to like have hope and realize that it's possible, what you've hoped for is possible." Cynthia described the same scene as "beautiful ... the heart of the movie." She went on to distinguish between imagination and fantasy, "They are two different things. When you are able to imagine, to conceive in your mind, that's the beginning of creation." She explained that people's minds can go " to the past ... present ... or future, even though it hasn't happened yet, but in your mind it's almost concrete." Nathan was also inspired by Walt Disney's vision, "Throughout our lives we want those types of stories that lift us, things that make us feel whole, or inspire us and that's important." He also understood where Travers was coming from when she chastised Disney for sugarcoating the world, "To me the key is to balance those things – to be

realistic about ... the dark side of the world, as well as the possibilities and the hope and the healing of the world."

In contrast, Scott offered a more jaded view of Disney's motives and the "hope" for saving Travers' father, "[T]his is one time ... where I come off as a cynic. He wanted that story and he told her what she needed to hear ... It's not going to save who (her) father was and what happened." Others may enjoy and benefit from the story, but "... ultimately [Walt Disney] thinks, and I think she knows, he's not going to save [her father]." For Scott, Disney was not peddling imagination but sheer fantasy. He was making promises that he could not deliver, and he knew it. Scott chided Disney for being someone who plays fast and loose with reality in order to get what he wants.

While none of the participants communicated any meaningful link with themes relating to the ultimate creation or destiny of the universe or humankind, many of their stories and comments evidenced powerful connections to the value, meaning, and purpose of life (creation); physical, intellectual, and social (but not spiritual) brokenness (fall); pushing back against sin and evil through forgiveness and relational healing (redemption); and a winsome hopefulness concerning the healing of this world and an unspecified future realm (new creation).

## Summary of Findings

The chapter explored the variety of ways the participants interpreted the metanarrative of Walt Disney Pictures' production of *Saving Mr. Bank*, the personal connections to and formative influence of the production's metanarrative and their personal narratives, and the relationship of all of these narratives to the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This began by examining how the

participants interpreted *Saving Mr. Banks*, with particular attention paid to their detection and interpretation of the two metanarrative themes identified in the literature review – familial formation and the longing for the mending of relational brokenness. The participants as a whole discerned and understood the film's primary themes.

The report then studied how the participants compared and contrasted the metanarrative of the film with their personal narratives. This part of the report was interested in determining to what extent the participants connected personally to the metanarrative themes of the film and/or offered alternative or divergent narratives. The researcher discerned that the participants resonated deeply with the metanarrative themes of the film and that these themes gave direction and moral coherence to their lives. With only a few exceptions, researcher noted that personal themes and stories were not overtly presented as "meta-narratives," that is, in a manner that explicitly asserted that the underlying truths and/or values were universal to the human condition.

The study next focused how the daily lives of the participants were affected by *Saving Mr. Banks'* and/or personal narrative themes. The researcher discovered that there was a substantial and life-forming connection between the narratives of both the film and their families and occupations. Connections made to matters of faith was more nuanced and much more limited.

Finally, this report compared and contrasted the personal experiences and stories of the participants with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. The researcher observed no meaningful link to the ultimate creation or destiny of the universe or humankind. However, many of the participants' stories and comments aligned with and affirmed the value, meaning, and purpose of life; the physical,

intellectual, and social brokenness; relational healing and restoration; and, to a more limited degree, a hopefulness related to an undefined future realm.

## Chapter Five

## Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how religiously unaffiliated persons residing in the suburbs of Chicago interpret and respond to the metanarrative of a contemporary cinematic production. The stories people carry with them, and share with one another, offer a starting point for connecting with our neighbors with understanding and empathy. In an age and culture where respectful dialogue regarding important, life-defining matters appears to be on a precipitous decline, the church has the unique opportunity to model discussion of deep and difficult life questions with conviction, charity, and grace.

The researcher selected Walt Disney Pictures' *Saving Mr. Banks* for the participants to view and to discuss through interviews. This movie was chosen because of its recent release, well-defined metanarrative themes,[260] and creative engagement of story's formative role in personhood and its informative role in understanding and living with one another. The film portrays P. L. Travers' 1961 visit to Walt Disney Studios and her struggle to collaborate with Walt Disney and his production team to transform her *Mary Poppins* children's book series into a major motion picture. A series of flashbacks to her childhood brought to life Travers' reluctance to tamper with and/or embellish

[260] Two metanarrative themes intertwine throughout the film: the lifelong importance and formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, and familial love; and the consequential human longing for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness. See Chapter Three, p. 80.

stories vested with highly person experiences and meaning. This juxtaposition of Travers' formative life events, Disney's adaptation of *Mary Poppins*, and the production process highlighted the interplay of personal, familial and cultural narratives, personal identity, and purpose in living. This, in turn, enabled the researcher to explore participant's engagement of these aspects of self and to consider how they attributed dignity and worth to human life and experience. The research questions that framed this study were as follows:

1. How do religiously unaffiliated persons interpret [production]?
2. How do religiously unaffiliated persons compare and contrast [production]'s metanarrative with their personal narratives?
3. How are religiously unaffiliated persons' daily lives affected by these narratives [production and/or personal]?

    How do they relate to their family?

    How do they relate to their occupation?

    How do they relate to their faith?

4. In what ways and to what extent do religiously unaffiliated persons' experiences compare and contrast with the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation as summarized in Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God's People*?

In this chapter, the researcher will offer a summary of the study and its findings, consider these findings, discuss implications and recommendations for the church, and offer guidance for future study.

## Summary of Study and Findings

This study examined relevant literature in three areas and interview data from six religiously unaffiliated adults ("nones") in order to explore and offer insight into the

fundamental place of narrative in personal identity. The researcher focused primarily upon how nones interpret and respond to story and how they use story to create, shape, and express meaning in their earthly journey. Scholars from across an array of academic disciplines argue and field research demonstrates that human beings perceive, organize, understand, and express life experience as an "ongoing story" that offers significance and direction to life.[261] This significance and direction is shaped by the continual interplay of a person's relationship to events, persons, narratives, and moral evaluations.

Some authors assert that families, communities, and cultures are shaped by metanarrative(s) – narratives that express well-defined perennial truth(s) and/or values universal to the human condition.[262] In this view, morals are as fundamental to early childhood development as the alphabet and math tables; to treat them as matters of personal volition invariably creates chaos and moral confusion.[263] This segment of academic literature is significant, however, it has detractors. The literature review and interview analysis exhibited a variety of sentiments that affirmed, expressed ambivalence to, or reticence toward the promulgation of universal truth, values, and morals.

While one must be careful in drawing definitive conclusions across this highly complex and varied segment of the population, this study's literature and fieldwork offered evidence that in their experience, formation, and expression of narratives, nones are able to achieve unity of purpose and direction in life.[264] As they do, they are able to

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[261] Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 414.

[262] Taylor, *Sources of Self,* 28-29; Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, 31-32.

[263] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, 27.

[264] Taylor, *Sources of Self,* 47; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 203; Gregory, *Shaped by Stories*, 166.

discern, favorably receive, and convey common grace insights regarding truth, goodness, and/or beauty revealed in creation.

## Discussion of Findings

In an increasingly fragmented and divisive culture, an understanding of and appreciation for the important place of individual, familial, and cultural stories in personal identity and meaning in life is essential if the church is to be a faithful steward of the gospel's riches and a loving neighbor who seeks after her own welfare and the flourishing of her community – family, neighbors, and friends.[265] To that end, the most important findings of this study emerged as the researcher thoroughly examined and reflected upon the literature review and interview data through the lens of the study's research questions.

### *Research Question One*
### *Interpretation of Production*

A careful assessment of the first research question, concerning the participant's interpretation of the contemporary cinematic production, revealed the importance of the arts as a cultural language that facilities community, connectedness, and understanding. The creative and performing arts have the noble role of forming and elevating human experience by bringing order and meaning to the chaos of life; providing a universal grammar and compelling plot that resonates with the human experience; and unifying people by allowing them to consider difficult topics with some measure of detachment and safety.[266]

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[265] Jer. 29:7.

[266] Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* 35, 38-40; Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 57; Yo-Yo Ma, "Reflections on Life and Music;" Makoto Fujimura, *Refractions*, 10-11; Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal,* 49.

**The Order, Meaning, Grammar, Plot, and Unifying Purpose of Art**

In *Saving Mr. Banks*, Walt Disney spoke to the first of these benefits when he said, "That's what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again."[267] This emphasis on the ordering of the world through imagination corresponds to Marshall Gregory's assertion that what makes story a compelling form of learning is how it patterns "the chaotic 'stuff'" of life "into intelligible and meaningful shapes."[268] The theme of story and imagination restoring order resonated with the research participants. Nathan commented, "Throughout our lives we want those types of stories that lift us, things that make us feel whole, or inspire us and that's important." For Nathan, there is something about the human experience that longs for wholeness. When it is missing, people are down and need to be lifted up; we are downcast and long for inspiration; we are adrift and incomplete. Stories lift, inspire, bring wholeness, and express meaning in life.

Art's second and third benefits – compelling plot and unifying purpose – came into view as *Saving Mr. Banks* took on the dark and difficult topic of relational brokenness stemming from P. L. Travers' experience with and loss of an alcoholic father. Robert Coles told the story of how his wife used Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* to instruct students about racism during the tense days of the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly here, screenwriter Kelly Marcel wove together themes from P. L. Travers' troubled childhood concerning the formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, familial love, loss, and the consequential human longing for redemption and forgiveness.

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[267] *Mary Poppins* 50th Anniv. Ed., commentary. DVD. Directed by Robert Stevenson (Anaheim, CA: Disney, 2013).

[268] Gregory, *Shaped by Stories*, 62.

In so doing, Marcel connected powerfully with all the participants who engaged these difficult topics and shared openly about their own relationships, families, and moments of personal loss.

**The Nobility and Limits of Art**

Some critics look askance at drawing close parallels between the "banality" of ordinary life and the themes of great literature.[269] While cultural sophisticates rightly commend the distinctive manner and depth of classic works of art, Jerram Barrs cautions those who look within the artist or art for identity and purpose by asking, "What if one finds only emptiness inside?"[270] A dismissive attitude toward the common people and places of this world loses sight of the fact that without the common man there is no uncommon art. Art does not bring meaning to life. Rather, art derives its value by creatively expressing the wonder and majesty of creation and exploring the profound significance and beauty inherent in the human experience.

This theme of human dignity was one aspect of *Saving Mr. Banks* that resonated most profoundly with the participants. Cynthia talked about the soul as a sacred and animating presence within human beings, while Craig eloquently pondered, "What are we really here for" if not to validate and encourage those we encounter in the ordinary moments of life? In encounters with friends and strangers alike, he recognized the innate worth of all humankind and the moral obligation to validate and lift up the downcast.

Craig connected with this theme as he viewed a short film on YouTube. Others make significant connections to the arts as they experience novels and films and paintings

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[269] Peter Lamarque, "On the Distance between Literary Narratives and Real-Life Narrative," 118-119.

[270] Barrs, *Echoes of Eden,* 37.

and photography and sculpture. Art is a medium, a means, an instrument that – when it speaks truthfully concerning the intrinsic value of each and every person – empowers humankind to bridge divisions, untwist deformities, reconcile adversaries, and restore the marginalized to a valued place in our communities and this world. In so doing, it exercises a powerful redemptive presence as it creates, affirms, challenges, adds to, and informs meaning in human existence.

### *Research Question Two*
### *Relationship of Production and Personal Narratives*

An examination of the second research question, addressing the relationship between the production's metanarrative and personal narratives, demonstrated that people use personal narratives as a primary means to create, shape, and express meaning in their lives. The researcher discerned that participants resonated deeply with the metanarrative themes of *Saving Mr. Banks* as giving direction and moral coherence to their lives. In addition, themes that were both complimentary to and divergent from those found in the film were also expressed by the participants through the personal stories that surround and flow through the ordinary moments of life.

Robert Coles explained that, from his earliest days as a medical student, he noticed some patients would repeat lyrics of a song or a phrase they heard in church, "holding on for dear life to some words."[271] Whether through the joyful cadence of a song or the somber crooning of lost love, this study's fieldwork illustrated that people hold on for dear life to some words. But not just any words – words that move in, around, and beyond our present circumstance; words that kindle fond memories, that inspire, that

[271] Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 100.

recount suffering and unspeakable loss; words that bring to life doubts and dreams and dread. People weave words into stories for a reason. Stories bestow meaning and give hope for the human experience. Hollywood may have perfected the art of cinema, but it is in the warp and woof of daily life that the art of storytelling finds its true home.

In the literature review, Charles Taylor explained that people are always changing and becoming. Personal narratives offer structure to the present and an orientation to what we have become and where we are going.[272] The Sherman brothers' four-line stanza, originally penned for *Mary Poppins* and brought to center stage in *Saving Mr. Banks'* opening and closing scenes, masterfully captures the mystery of story and its ubiquitous presence in human experience:

> Wind's in the east, mist coming in,
> Like something is brewing, about to begin.
> Can't put my finger on what lies in store,
> But I feel what's to happen all happened before.[273]

Stories shape our lives, and we shape our stories. The dynamic and evolving interplay of past, present, and future narrative expressions across the story-scape of our lives means the stories about to happen are shaped by what happened before.

One participant offered a poignant illustration of this mysterious reality. After experiencing the artistry of words and images in *Saving Mr. Banks*, Kendra shared her own story of relational brokenness and loss, "Any film where a parent dies ... that's where I cry…When my father died our family fell apart…I don't have my dad. He's never going to know my husband, never going to know my kids…I still dream about [my

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[272] Taylor, *Sources of Self, 47.*

[273] *Mary Poppins* 50th Anniv. Ed., commentary. DVD. Directed by Robert Stevenson (Anaheim, CA: Disney, 2013).

husband] all the time leaving. I think that's because the first man in my life that I adored and trusted left." Looking back to an earlier point in the interview, it was striking how closely the words used to describe her relationship with her own father paralleled those she used to describe the relationship between P. L. Travers and her father, "She adored him. And even after his death she adored ... it doesn't seem like she ever went through a time where she didn't adore him. And I think he adored her as well." As Kendra reflected on the film, past experiences, and prospects for her present and future circumstance, the narratives were entwined so tightly that bits and pieces of one were freely exchanged with pieces from the other. In this creative encounter between the film, researcher, and participant, stories were shared; a connection was made. In that moment, there was a common understanding; there was meaning, empathy, and love.

Here, at the intersection of narrative, personal identity, and purpose in living, one finds fertile soil that nourishes and sustains some of the most intimate and profound conversations about the mystery and majesty of human experience. When stories are shared and received with mutual respect, conviction, charity, empathy, and grace, people come to an understanding. People appreciate and become conversant in the personal narratives that shape the hearts and minds of their neighbors and are therefore able to communicate in a manner fitting to the posture, circumstance and language of their hearers.

### *Research Question Three*
### *Narrative's Affect on Daily Life*

The third research question, regarding how personal, communal, and cultural narratives affect the daily lives of religiously unaffiliated adults, showed that these narratives matter in the moment. Words and images are the ever-present canvas, brush,

and paints for the remembering, living, and hoping for life together in families, occupations, and faith communities. The researcher discovered that there were substantial and life-forming connections made between the narratives of the film, personal narratives, and life experience of the participants with their families and in their occupations.

**Educators' Plea: A Different Kind of Parenthood**

Educators in both the literature review and fieldwork pled for families to awaken to the importance of the stories that shape the hearts and life trajectories of our children. Cynthia described parents as "the greatest good we have in front of us." Nonetheless, her experience as an educator led her to yearn for "something that awakens a different kind of parenthood." A parenthood that recaptures storytelling from "olden time" when communities would gather around a fire and stories would come to life. When stories such as these are missing, a child "will not revere life ... will not see the beauty of life." Similarly, as Professor Guroian wrote about the importance of fairy tales and moral formation, he argued that we "desperately need to adopt forms of moral pedagogy" that bring our children to maturity, building within them the desire "to correct their faults" and "emulate goodness and truth wherever it is found."[274]

An illustration of the stark contrasts of parenting found in the varied places and temperaments of our day came to life one December evening in 1998. The researcher and his wife were invited to a banquet sponsored by a local Christian college and hosted at the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit. The keynote speaker that evening was James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family. In the course of his speech, Dr. Dobson

[274] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, 27.

offered an illustration of a deeply troubled family whose father repeatedly told his daughter, "You're ugly, you're dumb, and you're lazy – you'll never amount to anything." Those words brought a sad stillness to the room and no doubt left wounds within the little girl that might never fully heal. But that dark December evening, another more hopeful story was born. Less than a month later, the researcher and his wife welcomed their first child into this world – a baby girl. And, in the years that followed, two more girls were added to their quiver. Those little girls, who are now well into their teen years, have heard their father purposefully rewrite that troubled mantra into words of steady affirmation, offered time and time again, "You're pretty, you're smart, you work hard, and I'm so proud to be your Daddy." Our daughters know the origin of these words and the heart of their father. As they have "gathered around a fire" with their family, stories have come to life and their moral imaginations have been awakened. They have been nurtured in life-forming stories that not only celebrate the truth, goodness, and beauty of the world around them, but also the truth, goodness, and beauty that dwells deep within, knowing that the stories they will soon inhabit, "what's about to happen," will find their footing in and build upon "what's happened before."

**Workplace Complexity: Inhabiting and Expressing Personhood**

While the literature review and fieldwork demonstrated that family life is integral to forming personhood and morals, the researcher discovered everyday human life in the workplace is a central setting for inhabiting and expressing personhood and morals. Moving from the favorable confines of the family into the workplace, people often encounter a broader and more diverse array of personal and moral expression. In the literature review, Marshall Gregory explained that stories allow an individual to

"negotiate *vicariously* ... across a wider scope of possibilities" than possible alone.[275] In the fieldwork, Scott alluded to this dynamic when he delighted in gathering multiple people to bring their creative energy and stories to bear upon a given project at work in order to achieve what he could never do on his own. In such an environment, multiple people share multiple stories to offer an exponential combination of personal expressions and possibilities.

In the workplace, there is potential for great synergies, but also for significant disconnects and misunderstandings. Just as *Saving Mr. Banks* portrayed many people at Disney Studios as confused and even miffed by P. L. Travers abrupt personal style, so there is the potential for relational disconnects in the everyday workplace. One thing that can contribute to this tension is the uncertainty and misunderstanding arising from increasingly fragmented and disconnected communities. Robert Sherman understood and expressed sympathy for the effect of P. L. Travers' childhood on her personality and the difficulty she had relating to the other writers and artists at Disney.[276] However, it did not come until 50 years later. After reading the script for and viewing *Saving Mr. Banks*, Sherman offered understanding and sympathy. Then he understood. Then he saw the roads she had traveled and the stories that shaped who she was and how she related to the outside world.

This dynamic found across people's social interactions is brought to the forefront in the unique tensions and pressures of the workplace. In the fieldwork, Nathan talked about how people too quickly "lock down our impressions" without considering that the

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[275] Gregory, *Shaped by Stories*, 62.

[276] Robert Sherman, *Academy Conversations: Saving Mr. Bank,* December 9, 2013, accessed May 1, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASE_p4Piuaw.

same complexities of life experience and personal narratives that shape our hearts and minds influence and define the lives of those we encounter in the workplace as well. Such an attitude may serve the convenience of the moment and even facilitate the progress of personal agendas. However, in doing so, it reveals a startling ambivalence to the depth and complexity of human life experience and diminishes the dignity and worth of those whom people interact with on a daily basis: co-workers, neighbors, and friends deserve better.

### *Research Question Four*
### *Biblical Themes in Personal Experience*

Finally, the fourth research question, addressing the ways and extent to which religiously unaffiliated adults' life experiences compare and contrast to the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation, gave evidence of God's common grace as being discerned and displayed in and through all creation. While the researcher found links between the narratives of *Saving Mr. Banks*, personal narratives, the participants' life experience, and expression of faith, these links to faith were nuanced and more limited than the same connections to family and the workplace. One reason for this might be that, unlike family and work, the film did not offer any overt discussion or description of faith or God or matters beyond the characters' present, earthly existence. Nevertheless, while explicit references to faith were limited, the film, literature review, and fieldwork were replete with parallels, analogies, and clear connections to the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

**Human Beings: Shaped for Story**

In the literature review, Jonathan Gotschall argued that, "Story, and a variety of storylike activities, dominates human life."[277] Not only do narratives span the ages, as they are examined a consistency of themes is revealed. Gottschall offers the storyline, or "universal grammar," that story equals character plus predicament plus attempted extraction.[278] He then made this striking claim, "I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped *for* story, so that it could be shaped *by* story."[279]

This conviction regarding the consistency of themes and importance of story were echoed in the field research. Many of the participants' stories and comments aligned with and affirmed the value, meaning, and purpose of life (creation); the physical, intellectual, and social brokenness (fall); relational healing and restoration (redemption); and, to a more limited degree, a hopefulness related to an undefined future realm (new creation). While sharing his view of the place of story in human history, Nathan appealed to Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* and to the "hero's journey," the conviction that the myths people share with one another have a common underlying storyline that is retold at different times, through different traditions, as a conduit for gaining wisdom and the betterment of humankind. He explained, "But the idea is, there's a hero, this hero is living a simple life, something jars it or some traumatic thing happens, which starts this

[277] Gottschall, *The Story Telling Animal,* 8.

[278] Ibid., 53.

[279] Ibid., 56, emphasis author's.

hero in. He's challenged, he meets a wise teacher, this teacher mentors him, he begins to grow and learn ... and eventually ... becomes transcendent or a great figure."

**Human Experience: Inklings of Hope**

Human beings are, by their very nature, creatures of story. That storyline has remarkable similarity to the themes found in biblical revelation: story equals character (creation: Adam and Eve) plus predicament (fall) plus attempted extraction (redemption/new creation).[280] These themes are evident in works of literature and, more importantly, seen in the less polished but often more poignant words of ordinary people in common moments of life. Joel saw joy beaming from the face of little Helen Goff as she embraced her father and commended the beautiful aspects of that relationship – the way the world ought to be. Kendra gathered close to complete strangers experiencing dreadful heartache and loss, and she wept with them for the way the world is. Craig saw Helen Goff dance with Don DaGradi and rejoiced at the restoration of the relationship and her new found trust in and endearment for the writers at Disney – the way the world can be. Cynthia saw Walt Disney's ambition for storytellers to restore hope through the imagination as, "beautiful ... the heart of the movie." She looked toward the future with a winsome expectancy – the way the world will one day be.

These are the seminal themes of the human experience: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. A clear view of them in this present world is in some measure twisted, distorted, deformed, and marred, but by God's common grace, inklings of them remain in the hearts and minds of all humankind. In the un-twisting, the re-storing, the re-forming

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[280] Reference Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal,* 53; Barrs, *Echoes of Eden*, 26; Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 229-235.

of these realities, people find genuine hope: healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new birth.

## Conclusion: Implications and Recommendations

Like the winds and waters that carve through the weathered, rust-colored bands of rock in America's Grand Canyon, people's stories press up against and sculpt their hearts, their minds, their lives. These stories are relived in memories and retold from the moments of everyday life to the artistic expression through a myriad of cultural mediums and venues. Stories constitute and shape who people have become and where people are going; so much so that what is about to happen is, at some level, the outworking of what has happened before.

In Chapter Two, the researcher recounted the unique perspective of Harrison Higgins, a master woodworker, as he strolled through the woods one winter's day. He described the rough gray bark of a tree trunk saying, "It doesn't look like anything particularly wonderful." However, if you open the tree up and "smooth out that wood that's on the inside and put some sort of a coating on it that brings the color that's already there out, it just becomes gorgeous." As Higgins continued his stroll he pondered the beauty of God's handiwork in the trees and realized, "These things, these beautiful things are built into this creation that God has placed us on. These things are here because God loves us. *It means we handle them differently*." For Higgins, handling these beautiful things "differently" comes to life as he makes handcrafted furniture, seeking to create furniture worthy of the tree from which it came.[281]

[281] Harrison, "Furniture Fit for the Kingdom."

In the same way, as we stroll the streets and byways, travel through the workplaces and neighborhoods, the schools and coffee houses of our communities, we see people and faces that may not "look like anything particularly wonderful." But if you open them up, if you listen to their stories, you come to see and feel and understand the beauty and complexity deep within; and you come to know the course layers of life and colors that have developed and grown through the years. Human beings are made in God's image and have been placed on creation. Because of that, people have unique majesty and worth that arises simply from being human. It means we handle people differently. The church must handle these beautiful people and their rich and mysterious stories differently. Consequently, and in light of the findings of this study described above, I advise the 21st century American church to consider a different view of the unchurched, the arts, community, our children, and the gospel.

*View the Unchurched Differently*

Christians are not conquistadors. Too often evangelical Christians treat those outside the church as spiritual lepers; as pagans to be shunned or adversaries to debate or inanimate objects to be conferred new life. There is little or no appreciation for the innate dignity, worth, beauty, gifts, or place of the unregenerate in the created order, or heartache for the tragic estrangement of a prodigal world from their benevolent Lord. Christians must remember they are not in any way more worthy of God's grace than the unregenerate.

Christians must view the unchurched differently. While there can be deep and irreconcilable differences concerning important matters in life, and the courtesies extended may not be offered in return, still, loving our neighbor requires a more gracious,

humble, and engaging posture than is often evident in the church today. It begins with knowing a person's name. If Christians can write a check to fund missions in the remotest parts of the earth, surely they can cross the street, extend a hand, and learn a name. In due time, they may invite their neighbor for a cookout, to have coffee and dessert, or to watch a ball game. In offering such simple kindness, Christians confer on their neighbors a measure of respect fitting to one created in God's image and obedient to God's greatest command.[282] Love God. Love your neighbor. At the end of the day there is nothing more important than this.

### *Regard the Arts Differently*

The use of *Saving Mr. Banks* as the means to research how religiously unaffiliated adults interpret and respond to a contemporary cinematic production demonstrated that the creative and performing arts have the potential to facilitate connectedness and understanding. As Christians encounter the arts and converse with friends, family, and neighbors, there is an opportunity to talk about the most fundamental questions of life – its joys and sorrows, moments of redemption and forgiveness, and times of unspeakable loss – in a gracious, sensitive, and winsome manner.

Some in the church consider the arts to be anathema, beyond redemption and a danger to any god-fearing Christian. Others want to baptize the arts in religious rhetoric, slap a fish in the corner of every paint-by-numbers painting, and put Jesus into the lyrics of every song. Neither extreme does justice to the wonder and expansiveness of God's common grace or fully embraces the art's potential to bridge divisions, untwist deformities, reconcile adversaries, and restore the marginalized in society.

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[282] Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:30-31.

Christians must regard the arts differently. The church must pursue the arts with passion for the creative expression of truth, goodness, and beauty, wherever it may be found, and with compassion for those who look to the arts to inspire and make them feel whole. “Art for art’s sake” is an illusion. The adage promises but cannot deliver. The artist and/or the art connoisseur who turns away from the creator will only find a deepening darkness. This gives the Christian, who humbly enters into the world of the arts, a distinctive and intriguing presence. As Christians travel this road, they must prepare to discuss with their friends, family members, and neighbors: what the painting or play or musical performance says, what it means, how it connects favorably with human longings or unsettles sensibilities, if it is true to God’s creative designs and purposes, and why it matters. Then, patiently, prayerfully, and lovingly explore these questions as a fellow-sojourner in this world longing for love, redemption, and a way back home.

### *Cultivate Community Differently*

While there are unquestionable benefits to the technologies of today, one of the most insidious and troubling aspects of this new way of life is the trivialization and disintegration of connectedness and community. It seems people rarely, if ever, take the time to sit down and truly visit with one another, to linger over a meal, to share a cup of coffee without one eye on the watch, to be still, to ponder, to encourage, and to embrace one another with presence. Instead, life is an emoji. People whisk by and around one another in this digital world like a child rollerblading through an art museum, blissfully unaware of the richness and depth and beauty within the human landscapes they so glibly pass by; all is lost to the flurry and hurriedness of a careless life.

Christians must cultivate our communities – neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and recreational and cultural gatherings – differently. Just because we share a common spoken language does not mean we share a common cultural language. Christians know the English language but we do not understand our neighbors. The meaning people assign to words and stories are as varied as the person recalling a special experience or a troubling encounter. If the church is to be a redemptive presence in an increasingly fragmented and divisive world, we must love our neighbor by slowing down enough to listen, to truly listen to the stories they carry with them, the stories that bestow meaning and give hope for their place in this world. We must come alongside with loving curiosity and a hearing heart,[283] ready to enter into their world before we seek to make connections to our own; eager to affirm and explore and celebrate and grieve together. Make social connections, but as you do, listen carefully for the deeper aspects of the storyteller's life, because the gospel penetrates and brings forgiveness and healing to the darkest corners of human sin and brokenness.

In outreach to the world and relationships with one another, Christians must stop whisking by with empty greetings and idle promises of prayer. Genuine community requires that we linger, we come alongside, and we share stories, one with another. It requires more humility, more patience, more wonder, more depth, more love. May God grant his church the eyes to see our neighbor, the ears to hear their stories, and the heart to truly seek the welfare and flourishing of our communities.

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[283] Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 47, 76.

*Nurture Our Children Differently*

The stories people tell matter. With the expansion of entertainment and communication technologies, children are immersed in stories, short and long, that reinforce messages about this world and their place in it. These stories will shape their supple hearts and minds as potters shape their clay. There is a temptation to exercise limited oversight over the little electronic device that buys some peace and quiet at the end of a busy and troublesome day. But parents must regain their footing and re-exert loving guardianship over the images and stories that inform and shape these little minds. To do otherwise is to cast our children adrift in a spiritual and moral wasteland.

That said, a more engaged parenthood provides more than protection. Storytelling has a long history that has proven to enrich cultures and "awaken the moral imagination" of young and old alike.[284] Because these little ones are created after the image of God, their young minds are inquisitive and unguarded, and story exercises such a formative influence over the course of our lives, Christians must nurture our children differently. Parents can join this grand adventure by carefully selecting books to read with their children, from the earliest ages. This will establish a foundation for the children, kindling their imagination and preparing them for events, people, and travails they have already encountered, safely and vicariously, through Aesop's Fables or the stories of the Brothers Grimm or the legend of Sir Lancelot or Pilgrim's Progress or the Velveteen Rabbit. The church must nourish and enrich our children's minds with the truth and goodness and beauty of God's world and the wisdom of his decrees.

[284] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*; Coles, *The Call of Stories*.

### *Approach the Gospel Differently*

Christopher Wright offers a robust and fully biblical vision for the depth and breath of the gospel entrusted to the people of God. While Christians may be well versed in the sin besetting humankind and the redemption found by grace through faith in Christ alone, is our understanding of the gospel message limited to a few key verses in Paul's letter to the Romans or memorized excerpts from a favorite gospel tract? Or does it take into account the fullness of the message as it is revealed in the scriptures, accounting for creation–the way the world ought to be, fall–the way the world is, redemption–the way the world can be, and new creation–the way the world will be.

As the literature review of theological and scriptural teaching on common grace suggested and as the fieldwork supported, one can expect these seminal themes of human existence will be in some measure perceived, favorably received, and expressed by religiously unaffiliated adults. Therefore, Christians must approach the gospel differently. Going into conversations with the unchurched, we should listen carefully for and anticipate multiple points of unity and resonance with the biblical explanation for the plight of this world and genuine hope for the future. This does not undermine or in anyway preempt the work of the Holy Spirit in these encounters. Rather, it places the gospel message in its proper, more expansive biblical context–offering redemption for both the rebellious sinner and this sin-laden world; contemplating and asserting the special, intrinsic value of and purpose for all humankind; instilling hope in a new creation that will untwist, fully restore, and bring complete healing to the ravages of sin upon humankind and all creation; and accounting for the human inkling that this is not the way it ought to be and the human longing to return home.

Finally, the narrative construction of reality calls for more than thinking and doing, it calls for being; it calls for an orientation toward life and this world that "realizes life while they live it — every, every minute." Realizing life is not only a cognitive exercise. It includes that but goes deeper than Gottschall's assertion that "the human mind was shaped *for* story, so that it could be shaped *by* story."[285] Humankind was created in the image of God, and because of that the church must pray for and, by God's grace, earnestly pursue the work of the Holy Spirit to un-twist, re-store, and re-form her whole being after the image of Christ. As the church lives into the creation-fall-redemption-new creation narrative, she embodies and brings hope to a hopeless world. Through Christ and His church, the Holy Spirit brings humankind genuine healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new birth – a foreshadowing, foretaste, and guarantee of the Last Day and new creation.

## Future Study

As the researcher has focused exploring the place of story in the lives of religiously unaffiliated adults, there were a number of intriguing avenues left untraveled. As the church seeks an understanding with our neighbors and considers a broader view of loving, cultural engagement in our communities, the researcher believes the following areas of study could contribute valuable insights to help build bridges and bring healing and wholeness to our fractured world.

Other research projects could explore how Christian's view the unchurched: Examine how religiously unaffiliated adults view life after death. What do they believe? What do they tell their children? Why? A film like *Finding Neverland* may be a means into this conversation.

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[285] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal,* 56.

Similarly, further research could study how the unchurched view Christians: Examine how religiously unaffiliated adults view the evangelical church. What stereotypes are off base? What views are founded in real life experience? Examine the same concerning the Christian's view toward those outside the church. How can rapport with and respect for one another be improved?

There are also several avenues those wishing to study community could take. First, a study on cultivating community within the church would be beneficial: Examine the shepherding responsibilities of elders in the PCA (ref. Book of Church Order) and how the calling squares with practice. Look for obstacles and ways to strengthen our shepherding. Are we truly listening to and caring for one another? It is better not to make a vow than to make it and not fulfill it.[286] Second, studying community might involve looking at how to cultivate community outside of the church: Examine what has become of neighborhoods and neighborliness. It seems neighborhoods have turned into a gathering of houses that share streets, sewers, and other utilities. What can the church do to help restore community?

Regarding the arts, there is much to explore from a Christian perspective: Examine how the arts (local theater, art museums, and/ or symphonies, etc.) contribute to the common good. How might Christians co-labor in this arena in order to seek the welfare and flourishing of our communities?

Finally, a study on how Christians can nurture our children would be highly beneficial: Examine the opportunities and threats facing Christian parenting in the digital

[286] Eccl. 5:5.

age. How might the reading of stories and classic fairy tales can "awaken the moral imagination"[287] and strengthen families?

Love is a verb. At a time when the communities we inhabit are often marred by deep-rooted fragmentation and distrust, the church must relinquish her peculiar penchant for spiritual fratricide, turn her eyes and heart outward, and assertively seek the unity, welfare, and flourishing of her neighbors. It is researcher's sincere desire and prayer that others will pursue the areas of study suggested above so that the church can step more fully into her noble, god-honoring call to love God and love her neighbor. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.[288]

[287] Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*; Coles, *The Call of Stories*.

[288] Matt. 22:40.

## Appendix A

Themes intertwined with the narrative include the lifelong importance and formative influence of parent/child nurture, conflict, and familial love, and the consequential human longing for redemption, forgiveness, and healing of relational brokenness. Scenes from *Saving Mr. Banks* that give expression to metanarrative themes and universal truths and values.

Format: Time mark (00:00), brief description of scene, metanarrative theme(s), and transcribed excerpt from the film:

| | |
|---|---|
| **46:30** | **"A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down..."**<br>**Scene with Sherman brothers, Disney, Travers**<br>**Theme(s):** The depth and enduring influence of childhood/familial perception and experience; the redemptive value of story |
| **WD**: | It's iconic ... I won't be able to stop singing that for weeks. |
| **PLT**: | Well, it seems enormously patronizing to me. Just the sort of annoying tune you'd have playing in your theme park I daresay. All giddy and carefree, encouraging the children to face the world unarmed. All they need is a spoon and some sugar and a brain full of fluff and they're equipped with life's tools. Wonderful. |
| **WD**: | What's your point Pam? |
| **PLT**: | "Mrs. Travers," please. My point is that, unlike yourself, Mary Poppins is the very enemy of whimsy and sentiment. She's truthful. She doesn't sugarcoat the darkness in the world that these children will eventually, inevitably come to know. She prepares them for it. She deals in honesty. One must clean one's room. It won't magically do it by itself. This entire script is flim-flam. Hmm? Where is its heart? Where is its reality? Where is the gravitas? [Throws script out the window] No weight, Mr. Disney. See? |
| **WD**: | "No whimsy or sentiment" says the woman who sent a flying nanny with a talking umbrella to save the children. |

**PLT**: You think Mary Poppins has come to save the children, Mr. Disney? [Pause, look around] Oh, dear. [Exit]

**50:42** **Travers Goff and Ginty with ice cream by a pond.**
**Theme(s):** Importance and triumph of familial love over greed and through the darkest moments of life.

**TG**: We share a Celtic soul, you and I. This world, its just an illusion, Ginty old girl. As long as we hold that thought dear, they can't break us. They can't make us endure their reality. Bleak and bloody as it is. [Swing/drink] Money. Money, money. Don't you buy into it, Ginty. It'll bite you on the bottom.

**52:50** **Reflecting on frustration over selling story.**
**Theme(s):** Corruptive influence of money

**PTL:** Serves me right. Money, money, money. It bit me on the butt. [Out of bed, returns, cuddles oversized stuffed Mickey]

**1:11:25** **"I got a kid ... worry about the future"**
**Theme(s):** Familial love; nobility of perseverance in love and life

**Ralph:** I got a kid.

**PLT:** Most people do.

**Ralph:** Jane. Yeah. What a terrific kid. Beautiful little girl. She's got a lot of problems, though. She's handicapped you know? She's in a wheelchair. See, that's why I concern myself with the weather so much. Sunny day, she can sit outside in the garden. Rainy day, I gotta leave her cooped up inside. I worry about the future, but you can't do that. Only today.

**1:22:05** **Disney – Travers at Merry-Go-Round**
**Theme(s):** Innocence, wonder, & formative influence of childhood

**WD:** Mrs. Travers, I would be honored if you would take a ride on Jingles, here. It's Mrs. Disney's favorite horse.

**PLT:** No thank you. I'm happy to watch.

**WD:** Now, there's no greater joy than that seen though the eyes of a child, and there's a little bit of child in all of us.

**PLT:** Maybe in you, Mr. Disney, but certainly not in me.

**WD:** Get on the horse, Pamela.
[Pause. She moves toward horse. WD Chuckles.]

**1:40:00** **Disney with Travers at her home in England**
**Theme(s):** Human frailty and failures; formative influence of story

**Walt**: No, you expected me to disappoint you, so you made sure I did. Well, I think life disappoints you, Mrs. Travers. I think it's done that a lot and I think Mary Poppins is the only person in your life who hasn't.

**Mrs. Travers:** Mary Poppins isn't real.

**Walt:** That's not true, no, no, no, no. She's as real as can be to my daughters. And to thousands of other kids. Adults, too. She's been there for nighttime comfort to a heck of a lot of people.

**Mrs. Travers:** Well, where is she when I need her, hmm? I open the door for Mary Poppins and who should be standing there but Walt Disney?

**Walt:** (SIGHS) Mrs. Travers, I'm sorry. I'd hoped this would have been a magical experience, for you and for all of us, but I've let you down. And, in doing so, I've broken a 20-year-old promise I made to my daughters.

I've been racking my brain, trying to figure out why this has been so hard for you and I. And, well... (SIGHS) You see, I have my own Mr. Banks...

**1:43:35** **Tells story of struggle and hardship with his father...**
**Theme(s):** Forgiveness, redemption, familial love, restoring hope through imaginative storytelling, and the lifelong formative effect of familial events/stories.

**Walt:** I don't tell you this to make you sad, Mrs. Travers. I don't. I love my life. I think it's a miracle. And I loved my dad. He was a ... He was a wonderful man. But rare is the day when I don't think about that eight-year-old boy delivering newspapers in the snow, and old Elias Disney with that strap in his fist.

I am just so tired, Mrs. Travers, I'm tired of remembering it that way. Aren't you tired, too, Mrs. Travers? Now we all have our sad tales, but don't you want to finish the story? Let it all go and have a life that isn't dictated by the past?

It's not the children she [Mary Poppins] comes to save. It's their father. It's your father. Travers Goff.

**Mrs. Travers:** I don't know what you think you know about of me, Walter...

**Walt:** You must have loved and admired him a lot to take his name.

**Mrs. Travers:** I ...

**Walt:** It's him this is all about, isn't it? All of it, everything. Forgiveness, Mrs. Travers. It's what I learned from your books.

**Mrs. Travers:** I don't have to forgive my father. He was a wonderful man.

**Walt:** No, no. You need to forgive Helen Goff. Life is a harsh sentence to lay down for yourself.

Give her to me. Mrs. Travers, trust me with your precious Mary Poppins. I won't disappoint you.

I swear, every time a person walks into a movie house, from Leicester Square to Kansas City, they will see George Banks being saved. They will love him and his kids. They will weep for his cares. They will wring their hands when he loses his job. And when he flies that kite...Oh, Mrs. Travers, they will rejoice. They will sing.

In movie houses all over the world, in the eyes and hearts of my kids and other kids, and mothers and fathers for generations to come, George Banks will be honored. George Banks will be redeemed. George Banks and all he stands for will be saved.

Now, maybe not in life, but in imagination. Because that is what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.

So, trust me, Mrs. Travers. Let me prove it to you. I give you my word.

**1:55:15** **Travers watching premiere of *Mary Poppins***
**Theme(s):** Corruptive effect of greed ("economic cage") upon humanity; mysterious yet formative influence and effect of childhood – "what's to happen all happened before"

**Bert:** You know, begging your pardon, but the one my heart goes out to is your father. There he is in that cold, heartless bank, day after

day. Hemmed in by mounds of cold, heartless money. I don't like to see any living thing caged up.

**Jane:** Father in a cage?

**Bert:** They make cages in all sizes and shapes, you know. Bank-shaped some of them, carpets and all.

**Jane:** Mary Poppins, you won't leave us, will you? Whatever would we do without you?

**Mary Poppins:** I shall stay until the wind changes.

**Travers Goff:** Wind's in the east, mist coming in,
Like something is brewing, about to begin.
Can't put my finger on what lies in store,
But I feel what's to happen all happened before.

In his commentary on the 50th anniversary edition of *Mary Poppins,* Disney songwriter Robert Sherman describes his affection for the "Wind's in the east" stanza from *Mary Poppins* that would later become the opening and closing lines of *Saving Mr. Banks*:

> I've always been partial to this simple four-line stanza, "Wind's in the east." It says something so succinct. This verse is as much about what isn't said as it is about what is said. It's mysterious and it keeps you guessing. In fact, if we wrote any more lyrics here the moment would be ruined. You've got to leave something for the imagination.[289]

For Robert Sherman, the brevity of the stanza communicates as much as the words themselves – leaving room for the imagination of the audience as they participate in the story.

[289] *Mary Poppins* 50th Anniv. Ed., commentary. DVD. Directed by Robert Stevenson (Anaheim, CA: Disney, 2013).

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