

Article

Spirituality and Narrative Identity: Three Case Studies

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Abstract: Since the narrative turn in the social sciences from the 1980s onward, there has been an increasing interest in the concept of narrative identity. The concept of narrative identity, however, is open to multiple interpretations. Here, we take a narrative hermeneutic approach and apply one particular model of narrative identity—to three case studies, exploring how each of these was shaped by the storyworlds of the participants. The case studies have been selected as examples of different forms of identity: received, bricolage, and guided. Following this exploration, we reflect on the potential of this approach in other areas of identity work and the implications for narrative understanding in the promotion of social justice.

Keywords: narrative hermeneutics; narrative identity; spirituality; Pentecostalism; Paganism; Rosicrucianism

1. Introduction

According to MacIntyre (1981), we come to understand who we are through understanding the stories of which we are a part. Our location within, outside of, or at the borders of such stories shapes both how we think of ourselves and who we might become. These stories are, of course, always and inevitably in flux—some may be more permanent or influential than others but even these are open to revision—and we navigate this narrative environment through the stories we tell about ourselves, others, and the world while at the same time being within, and accounting for, the stories others tell about us and wider stories circulating in the world.

Drawing on material from a larger study on “Spirituality in the Modern World”, here, we present a narrative hermeneutical analysis of three spiritual journeys—one Pentecostal, one Pagan, and one Rosicrucian. Following explication of our methodology and methods, we present the three case studies, applying Bamberg’s model of narrative identity to these which we offer as examples of differing identity formations: identity as received, identity as bricolage, and identity as guided. In conclusion, we reflect on the potential of this approach in other areas of identity work and how understanding the social, cultural, and political contexts in which we live can impact our identities. Finally, we point to the possibilities of increasing a sense of agency by acknowledging how the stories with which we engage influence our lives as by understanding this, citizens and service users can more effectively identify power dynamics and oppression.

2. Methodology and Methods

As a means of capturing the dynamics of identity-storytelling, we have adopted and adapted here, Bamberg’s model of narrative identity (Bamberg 2011). This model is structured enough to provide purchase on the fluidity of identity narratives by conceptualizing three “dilemmatic spaces” which individuals navigate through telling stories of their lives, without constraining that identity configuration.

Narrative hermeneutics seeks to place the interpretation of experience within the act of storytelling, whether as author/reader or reader/listener (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014;



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Freeman and Meretoja 2023). Essential to this “is how it [narrative hermeneutics] brings together engagement with issues of storytelling in linguistic, discursive, and artistic contexts with the wider existential relevance of narrative practices for our (self-)understanding and being in the world” (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014, p. 2). For Taylor (1985), humans are self-interpreting animals and for Bruner (1990), narrative plays a pivotal role in this process, “as an activity not only of self-reflection and self-resolution but also of social interconnection, linking people to others and to their storytelling activities” (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014, p. 6).

Narrative interpretation takes place on three levels—a triple hermeneutic (Meretoja 2017)—which shapes our analysis and understanding of participants’ stories. The first hermeneutic is an understanding that experience is never pure or uninterpreted but that, “We are always already entangled in stories, and we constantly reinterpret our experiences through them” (Meretoja 2017, p. 78). This first-order entanglement may be difficult to articulate but as Freeman (1998) states, “it is difficult to conceive of a mode of experience utterly and entirely shorn of narrative” (p. 457). This way of thinking about experience underlies our approach to our spiritual identity project.

Second-order interpretations or hermeneutics occur when we create meaning and shape our identity (Wiklund et al. 2002) through the construction of stories (narrativization) and draw on personally and culturally available narrative resources as a means of understanding ourselves, others, and the world (Brockmeier 2017). This places the individual within a configuration of pre-existing and emerging stories that shape not only our identities and experience but what counts as experience in the first place (Herman 2009).

This hermeneutic informed our data collection through narrative-based interviewing (see Ziebland 2013; Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016), exploring what Bruner (1986) calls “landscapes of action” and “landscapes of consciousness”, that is, the actions and events of and surrounding the protagonist’s story, and the protagonist’s conscious and reflective experience of those actions and events.

To this end, each participant was interviewed twice, either in person (Rowan and Gail) or via Zoom (Leo), with interviews lasting approximately 1–1.5 h. We opened the first interview with an invitation to participants to recount their spiritual journey. This was followed by open-ended questions designed to solicit further narrative aspects of their journey—for example, turning points, significant times, events and influences, the role of others in their journey, and challenges, doubts, and high and low points along the way.

We deliberately did not provide participants with a definition of spirituality to allow them to interpret this as they chose. This allowed the differing spiritual orientations of each—Gail being Christo-centric, Rowan eco-centric, and Leo gnoso-centric—to emerge through the two interviews. Similarly, we do not define spirituality here, save to indicate that such an identity “encompasses values, belief systems and meaning-making processes and pertains to formulating a purpose, fidelity to an ideology and maintaining a lifestyle that is consistent with one’s worldview” (Naudé and Fick 2022, p. 1).

Interviews were then transcribed and sent to participants for review, if they so wished. The transcript was then reviewed, and a second interview was arranged to explore aspects of the participant’s journey further, to invite the participant to reflect on their journey, and to locate their spirituality in wider societal discourses such as secularization, science, and culture. The interview was then transcribed, and the participant given the opportunity to review, amend, and comment upon it.

The third-order hermeneutic is the interpretation of second-order stories, again through the process of narrativization and the mobilization of narrative—for example, the interpretation of participants’ stories by narrative researchers. It is to be noted here that second- and third-order interpretations are often, if not always, in dialogue, summed up by Kenyon and Randall’s (1997) notion of inside–out stories that we tell the outside world and outside–in stories, those that are told about us or that we incorporate into our own.

In our second interviews with participants, we asked questions as prompts for them to reflect upon their experience and what they had said in the first interview as well as

questions focusing on wider societal stories of religion, faith, and spirituality and the place of faith in the world. Following transcription and further checking with participants, we analyzed each participant's interviews for stories that indicated Bamberg's (2011) three dilemmatic spaces: continuity and change, similarity and difference, and narrative agency and non-agency.

We also sought to trace narrative influences on participants by following up on references participants made to books, films, poems, and so on as important in their journey. We then constructed narrative summaries of participants' stories and related these to Bamberg's model of narrative identity.

In the following section, we present our three case studies in the light of Bamberg's model (Bamberg 2011), exploring how each navigates the three dilemmatic spaces and positions themselves within their respective storyworlds (see Schwab 2013). These three dilemmatic spaces focus on (a) continuity and change—the extent to which we see ourselves as the same as we were previously and the extent to which we see ourselves as having changed, thus establishing a diachronic temporal self (Bamberg 2011, p. 12); (b) similarity and difference—the extent to which we establish a synchronic connection between sameness and difference, that is as the same as, or different from, others—either individually or as a member of a collective; and (c) non-agency and agency—the degree to which we accommodate ourselves to the (story)world and how it attempts to frame and shape us and the degree to which we attempt to frame and shape the (story)world to accommodate us. On one end of this continuum, narrators view themselves as recipients, on the other, as agentive self-constructors (Bamberg 2012).

Drawing on Davies and Harré (1990), Bamberg (1997) argues that narrators position themselves in relation to others in the stories told, in relation to the audience, and in relation to wider stories. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) expand on this third form of positioning as “how the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regards to dominant discourses or master narratives”, a positioning which “establishes himself [sic] as a particular kind of person” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, p. 391). It is this third process of positioning with which we are particularly concerned here—how Gail, Rowan, and Leo position themselves in relation to and are positioned by the storylines of which they are a part.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, we take the position of MacIntyre (1981), that we know who we are by understanding the stories of which we are a part. We all have more or less articulated storyworlds, the main contours of which help us make sense of the flux of experience and classify experience into a more or less coherent whole and form the basis for action. Storyworlds consist of governing myths, morality tales, boundary stories of what can and cannot be told, and individual and collective stories about who we are and who we are in relation to others. Storyworlds encompass and make sense of our past and shape and direct our possible futures. Storyworlds may be more or less comprehensive and complete, more or less prescriptive and directive, and more or less liberating or constraining.

In our analysis and discussion below, we are cognizant that storyworlds shape individuals in unique ways and so refer specifically to Gail's, Rowan's, and Leo's Pentecostalist, Pagan, and Rosicrucian storyworlds, respectively, rather than making claims about those storyworlds in toto. Gail, Rowan, and Leo's identities, while shaped by their respective spiritual traditions, are not the only identities to be found within those traditions. More flexible and porous identities may be found within Pentecostalism (see, for example, Luhrmann's (2020) exploration of differing Pentecostals in the USA, Ghana, and India), more structured traditions may be found within Paganism, such as Gardnerian Wicca, and diversity is inherently Rosicrucian given the absence of required beliefs and the individualization of the spiritual journey. Whatever form the storyworlds take, however, immersion in a storyworld—and we are all immersed in one or more storyworlds—helps to shape personal identity.

All participants were invited at multiple points to review and provide feedback on our presentation, analysis, and interpretation of their respective journeys. We sent them the transcripts of their interviews, our summaries of their spiritual journey, the commentary upon those journeys, and the respective identities we were proposing prior to submission and incorporated all feedback received into the final manuscript. In this way, we sought to ameliorate, at least to some degree, the limits of our outsider perspective in understanding, interpreting, and representing insider experience of spiritual journeying. Our analysis, here, by no means exhausts the understanding of Gail, Rowan, and Leo's spiritual journeys, but by incorporating their feedback, we have, in small degree, attempted to develop our third-order hermeneutic collaboratively.

3. Three Case Studies

Here, we present our three case studies drawn from a larger project on "Spirituality in the Modern World", comprising two Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded projects (Files #430-2018-00160 and #435-2021-0151) exploring spiritual identity among members of new religious movements and alternative spiritualities, and two projects on Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel funded by internal research grants from St Thomas University, currently approved by the REB of St Thomas University under Files #2019-24 and #2021-22.

To date, we have completed sub-projects on Other-than-Human spirituality, Earth-based spirituality, and Ascended Master and esoteric beliefs. In addition, we have conducted a small study on Pentecostalism, on which we also draw. The case studies have been selected from interviews with ordinary members—not pastors or others holding any position in the respective religious or spiritual organizations—as exemplifying many of the key features of their particular spiritualities, and as illustrating differing formations of spiritual identity. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Permission has not been granted for public access to interview transcripts and other data.

3.1. Gail's Story

Gail was born into a church-going family. At church, she learned about God but only much later became aware that she could have a personal relationship with him. She experienced salvation at age 13 when she realized God was real and wanted to be the center of her life but, *"I didn't get any grounding in the Bible so it was like a seed that wasn't watered or nurtured. My faith didn't grow"*.

She reports having interfaith conversations at university, and *"took up World Religions"*, which made her wonder if there could be more than one way to God. She considered converting to Judaism due to a relationship with a Jewish boyfriend but thought *"I should find out who this Jesus is, who I'll be turning my back on the rest of my days"*, and by the end of the summer, following her father's serious illness, felt, *"I can't turn my back on this Jesus that I've come to know as real"*.

When her father took ill, she moved back home, attending a new Pentecostal church with her family. During a crisis involving her sister, they attended church together and found a sense of peace together.

Gail later met her husband, who played piano in a Pentecostal church, where she received foundational teaching about living the Christian life. After moving out west, they attended a new Pentecostal church within the Black community.

Gail's personal journey is punctuated by crises: her father's illness and later death, her sister's mental health crisis, her husband passing away after a long illness, a daughter's multiple miscarriages, the death of her younger brother, and her own health challenges. Each time, she could feel God in different dimensions and always felt God was with her.

Pentecostalism as Received Identity

Gail's storyworld is that of Pentecostal Christianity. While there is much written on the distinctiveness of the storyworld of Pentecostalism—the Pentecostal identity—there is

little material exploring how the Pentecostal storyworld shapes individual identity. Here, we highlight some of the contours of Gail's Pentecostal storyworld, indicating how this is so for her.

Pentecostalism is a pre-existing storyworld into which one enters through faith, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This storyworld is pre-formed and fixed, having its basis in the Bible as the Word of God the Father. It is both a teleological storyworld framing human purpose as living in accordance with God's will and an eschatological storyworld pointing to a future time at which Jesus will return and human beings will be called to account on the Day Of Judgment.

God's position in the Pentecostal storyworld as Father automatically positions believers as children. Gail's interview is peppered with references to how one has *"to be like a little child to receive the kingdom of God"*, *"see through a child's eyes"*, and *"come [to Jesus] as a little child"*.

This relative positioning of God as Father and child as believer shapes Gail's identity as dependent, ideally obedient but also willful and in need of guidance as can be seen in Gail's comments:

"All of a sudden Jesus was beside me and something made me pass the reins of my life which it was really hard because I was a strong women liber, very much my own person, wanted to be independent and do things my own way. So, to yield surrender of my spirit was, I look back now, that was a tough thing to do but I've never regretted it."

Gail's identity is thus upwardly oriented—focused on her dependent relationship with God—rather than an inwardly oriented identity focusing on the self. As Gail said: *"I can't imagine getting through a day now without knowing He's there"* and, *"I needed to give Him the first part of my day or everything would unravel"*.

Being dependent thus requires that the believer trust God *"to be that creator who has a plan and a purpose for our lives"* and that,

"He's going to not leave us on our own to blindly stumble through life. He's promised He'd be beside us, He'd be in us, He'd be everything we need, if we trust Him".

In short, *"God is good. And He works all things together for good."* Gail's Pentecostal storyworld is also a normative one, clearly setting out standards for, and a singular pathway to, whom the believer should become. Guidelines for living are to be found in the Bible, the *"living word"*, and *"it's very much living each day with His help and guidance and in a way that's pleasing to Him"*. Gail's journey is one of growing in her trusting relationship with God so *"that I think by the time we die, we're of some good to God"*.

A further characteristic of this storyworld is its strong boundaries, demarcating it (and its inhabitants) from the world in general and other religions in particular. For Gail, the world is seen as something that may draw Christians away from God:

"We're in the world, but we can't be contaminated by the things of the world that would draw us from God"

and so, it is important to

"[turn] down the voices of the world which are so loud and demanding" and to "to turn up the volume of His voice and my spirit".

This separation is reinforced by *"always knowing that our time on earth is temporary, that there's an eternal home"*. Similarly, Gail clearly demarcated Christianity from other religions:

"Every other religion I had pursued gave me some answers but basically they were worshiping a dead prophet" but "Christianity was the one religion where the Holy Spirit comes into you and lives the life you need to live through you".

These boundaries set Pentecostals such as Gail apart from others—ultimately, though not always explicitly stated as, creating a fundamental difference between Pentecostals and everybody else that is, those who accept (the Christian) God and are thus saved, and those who do not and are not.

For Gail, the Pentecostal storyworld is given and immutable, so her identity is shaped by her place in that storyworld. As such, her Pentecostal identity can be seen as a “received identity”, an identity received from God. The concept of received identity can be found in Pentecostal sermons (see, for example, [Elements City Church 2020](#); [Wierwille 2021](#)) and texts (for example, [Keller 2016](#)) though has, as far as we can ascertain, not been explored in the academic literature. In this view, a stable, authentic, unified, bedrock, and foundational identity is gifted by God and is more bedrock and foundation (35:36) in contrast to modern identity that is incoherent, illusory, crushing, and fracturing ([Keller 2016](#)).

In Bamberg-ian terms, Gail’s story indicates the acceptance and continuity of an identity shaped by a pre-existing storyworld. Gail’s Pentecostal identity emphasizes change in the transition from unbeliever to believer—Gail’s “salvation experience”—from sinner to saved, from orphan to child of God but constancy following that transition (provided one continues believing). We see this in, having turned to Christianity, how Gail holds fast to her identity as a child of God, returning to this following times of slippage: *“So, I did go back to that child-like faith, like, “I’m going to start all over again”, because I went adrift and I had pursuits that hadn’t given me peace, I still had that longing for something”*. Furthermore, Gail is proud of her continuity as a Christian and the intergenerational transmission of Christian identity from her mother and father through her and onto her daughters. For instance, she frequently mentioned the impact of her mother, who taught her to help the poor, give others dignity with practical action, not simply with words, encourage others, and devoutly attend church.

Gail’s Pentecostal identity emphasizes differences to others in setting apart those “who believe from those who do not”. Gail clearly draws a distinction between other religions which she describes as worshipping dead prophets or simply a set of rules and Christianity which is “real”, “alive”, and focused on a personal relationship with Jesus.

Finally, Gail’s Pentecostal identity is characterized by a high level of person-to-storyworld adaptation. Gail embraces the Pentecostal storyworld and understands her experience through that storyworld. She referenced the Bible frequently when talking about her experience, drawing on biblical stories to illuminate her understanding of her life and the current state of the world, and finding Bible verses to sustain her during times of difficulty. Unlike the self-reflexive identity of [Giddens \(1991\)](#), the Protean identity of [Lifton \(1993\)](#), or the fluid identity of [Bauman \(2007\)](#), which is a construct or project of the self and can be edited and re-edited according to will and circumstance (see [Lincoln and Robards 2017](#), for a peculiarly modern example of this), Gail’s Pentecostal identity is a function of the Pentecostal storyworld, a storyworld that Gail sees can be accepted or rejected but not one that can be adapted to one’s own self-creation project.

3.2. Rowan’s Story

Rowan was in her mid-fifties and lived in eastern Canada when interviewed. She defines herself as a solitary practitioner, pantheist Pagan. She lived with foster parents until she was ten when she was adopted into a Christian minister’s family from a big city in Canada. As a teenager, Rowan spent much time in church with her father, who was faithful but told her: *“First off you keep questioning, always keep questioning, always keep questioning. Never blindly accept”*. Rowan became a liturgical dancer at her father’s church, “fully expecting that this was going to be my path somehow in the [Church]”.

At 15, Rowan began to feel the urge to head off into the wild and live an earthly secular life. Things changed for Rowan at 17, when she began to see Christianity in a new light through an experience of interpreting the Easter story with her father which she saw as illustrating the patriarchal power and the politics within the church. In her early twenties, Rowan moved again and joined what she describes as a conservative church. However, she realized her energy was feminine and could not find it in the patriarchal teachings of the church.

Rowan moved to the US, where she felt a *“very Pagan, feminine, alternative spirituality”* energy and followed multiple spiritual paths. She joined a Druid group and studied for

five years, was initiated into a Wiccan group, and into an Eclectic group, becoming a leader in it. She found a Gardnerian mentor who was one of the most influential people in her life, but she did not become a Gardnerian. In the Pagan community, Rowan saw “*the same politicking and backbiting*” as in other religions and a similar adherence to dogma, which she found difficult.

After many years of feeling lost and seeking, she, finally, “found her lobster” (an allusion to an episode of the sitcom “*Friends*”, meaning the right person for life), who had been a forester since he was 12. Rowan moved in with him into the forest a year before our interview.

They talked about the sacred divine in the forest around them and the vast universe above. Living in the forest, Rowan did not join any community, but one year, she volunteered to coordinate Pagan Pride, though plans fell apart after eight months. She continued questioning and searching for meaning, sometimes even feeling agonized for questioning. She thought her questions were quieter now and described her spirituality as:

“I want to say deeper but it’s not it’s actually not deeper it’s just a, a higher level. And all I’m doing is watching. I’m just watching the, the life around me. Watching it die, watching it be destroyed, watching be poisoned, watching it give birth”.

Paganism as Bricolage Identity

In stark contrast to Gail, Rowan’s storyworld is of her own making, and her identity is improvised and untethered, allowing for more creativity and choice in inhabiting the storyworld. Although Paganism includes paths that may be more structured, such as Druidry, certain forms of Wicca and witchcraft, and branches of Heathenism, for many, the Pagan storyworld is remarkably fluid. Solitary practitioners such as Rowan are free to construct their storyworld as they wish and still be accepted in the Pagan community should they wish to participate. The Pagan Federation sees the Pagan outlook as threefold—a veneration of nature, the worship of many deities, and the feminine principle, though the degree of adherence to and the manifestations of these can be highly pluralistic and diverse. As the Pagan Federation says, “*Pagans pursue their own vision of the Divine as a direct and personal experience*” (<https://www.paganfed.org/paganism/> accessed on 10 October 2023).

Pagan storyworlds are thus less bounded, more porous, and more inclusive than many other religious storyworlds, leaving individuals to shape their own storyworld according to their own desires. Rejecting the “dogma” of any organized religion, Rowan abides by no set practice or ritual, there being nothing one is “supposed to do”:

“because this book has said that if you take a black candle and you carve a sigel in it, and then you light it on the dark of the moon, and then you throw salt around, and you, it’s like none of that matters. None of that matters, none of that matters”.

She does not engage in as much questioning as she did when she was growing up because she can take or leave whatever she wants—for instance, she trained as a Druid and a Gardnerian witch—and lives out her own personalized spirituality:

“we’ve entered into the, this age where anybody can be anything. Which I think is great. Explore who you are, and figure it out, and then express yourself”.

Pagans find union in diversity and multiplicity (Harvey 1994). Drawing from multiple sources to construct her spiritual identity (including Christianity, Druidry, Wicca, and Gardnerian), Rowan emphasizes subjectivity by practicing Paganism her own way, with whatever was available to her; forest living, collecting rocks while walking, and engaging in personal and political reflection—a spiritual bricoleur who makes the world fit her identity (as she notes, “*spirituality has to hit you in such a, a private way*”). However, this diversity and multiplicity is woven into a consistent narrative identity.

Unlike the Pentecostal storyworld, Paganism has no sacred texts. While there are popular texts such as Scott Cunningham’s “*Wicca: A guide for the solitary practitioner*” and Starhawk’s “*The spiral dance*” and “*Dreaming the dark*”, these do not have canonical status, and Pagans shape their storyworld through a process of what Partridge (2004)

calls occulture—the configuration of “often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices” (Partridge 2004, p. 68). For Rowan, notable texts were the earlier work of Margaret Murray (1921) and K. and K. (2010), as well as Starhawk (1994, 1998; the latter a work of popular fiction). Even popular cultural artifacts, such as Rowan’s reference to *Friends*—finding her lobster—contribute to constructing her spiritual identity, and her incorporation of popular literature in building her identity is noteworthy.

Harvey’s ([1997] 2011) understanding of Pagan beliefs outlines its emphasis on locality—reflecting both global and local conditions—which is well represented in Rowan’s storyworld, shaped by her interactions with the local forest and community. It has the quality of being this-worldly (though it also recognizes lunar power, the other-worldly). This embodies the observation that for Pagans, “everything living is holy” (Harvey 1994, p. 40). Rowan identifies as an “environmentalist feminist” for whom patriarchy and capitalism threaten the environment, starkly contrasting egalitarian and eco-friendly living standards in matriarchal Pagan subcultures.

Rowan’s Pagan storyworld also interacts with other more dominant storyworlds, as evidenced by her continuing to accommodate the local Christian community surrounding her. While a solitary practitioner, and disenchanted with aspects of the Pagan community, Rowan clearly identified herself with others within the broad Pagan world. In her opinion, Pagans “look to their natural world” and are “very eco-warriors” now—just as she remembers as a child and as she later identified as an environmental feminist. Furthermore, different groups of Pagan people would also share the same kind of ritual, such as collecting rocks and crystals and it is clear that Rowan missed certain communal rituals: “I haven’t circled with anyone in years, I, I keep trying to and it never, it never seems to happen”.

Pagans still risk living outside the norm, which could discourage living “out” or lead to concealing their religious identities within the broom closet due to the societal risk of stigma and defamation (Harvey 1994; Reece 2016).

The concept of bricolage helps us to understand Rowan’s transition from Christian to Druid, Pagan, and Gardnerian, and eventually to her own eclectic style of pantheist Paganism. Bricolage means working or fiddling with (usually with one’s hands) and being pragmatic at inventing an assortment of odds and ends to accomplish a specific task (Altglas 2014). Bricoleurs’ eclectic approach enhances their ability to adapt to doing many things, drawing on various sources, and making do with whatever is at hand.

Rowan’s ecological focus and reverence for local nature (Harvey 1994, [1997] 2011)—depictions of Rowan’s walks collecting rocks and crystals—evoke the versatile hands-on approach and sustainable practices of bricoleurs to reuse available materials. Highlighting the intentional and improvisational elements of bricolage identity, she works with what is available to her at hand in her local environment and what feels right (which she differentiates from what is not right through an internalized process of discernment). In some ways, bricolage assists Rowan in meeting her spiritual needs; she endorses beliefs and practices based on what inspires and nourishes her (Dispenza 2006). Rowan’s identity as a solitary practitioner espouses a do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) strategy that is useful for interpreting Pagan spiritual trajectory as part of occultural bricolage (Kirby 2012).

It is helpful to consider Rowan’s bricolage identity as part of her self-creation project—“...we are the meaning... we are the universe knowing itself”—rather than incoherent, illusory, crushing, and fracturing (Keller 2016); to the contrary, Rowan’s bricolage nourishes and empowers her. Her adoption of this improvisational, free style of spirituality is Rowan’s expression of an inwardly oriented identity, focused on the self and the local.

In Bamberg-ian terms, Rowan’s identity emphasizes navigating differences and similarities in that she sees human nature as connected, interdependent, and mutually implicating. In navigating continuity and change, Rowan endorses a fluid approach while maintaining a coherent sense of self. As with other Pagans (Johnston 2013), Rowan sees her current self as in continuity with her early memories:

“From the, from the earliest I remember forests, and meadows, and the sky, sitting, lying down in fields just, you know, the heat, and the butterflies, and the bugs, and the waving grains, and just that’s how it was for me”.

Her spiritual journey was also one of personal change. From growing up in a relatively traditional Christian family, she came to question those beliefs and thus her path. Through interpreting the story of Mary of Magdala while her father, a Christian minister, read the story to his congregation, she *“started seeing Christianity through a different lens”* and rethinking her spirituality.

While Rowan’s move from Christianity to Paganism suggests a significant change, she views this as a gradual process: *“My, I was very gradual. I came out more as an environmentalist feminist first”*. Her subsequent journey led her through Druidry, Wicca, and eclectic and Gardnerian witchcraft, though she settled for none of these.

Rowan can be read as highly agentic in that, as a Pagan, she experiences a storyworld geared-to-person orientation versus a person-to-storyworld one. Rowan’s storyworld is customized and is at her behest—she can make it work to suit her needs. Improvisation is part of her Pagan storyworld. If Rowan wants to incorporate something into her identity, her relationship with the storyworld will adapt.

3.3. Leo’s Story

Although his mother was a Christian, from age 11, Leo lived with his father who had left the Catholic Church and raised his son non-religiously. At the age of 16, Leo began to explore his spirituality by asking questions, such as, *“Am I God?”*, becoming first agnostic and then moving toward atheism, though a chance meeting with a Christian man and a conversation about belief in God returned him to agnosticism and to attending a Christian church. Leo, however, never felt he fitted into mainstream Christianity: *“I didn’t like the born to burn kind of thing. Never resonated with me”*. At the age of 18, he was profoundly affected by Shirley McClaine’s book, *“It’s All in the Playing”*, saying it, *“really, really changed my understanding of everything. And so thus the spiritual journey was born”*.

A few years later, he became a nativist, and then a Buddhist, but also engaging with Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Leo moved to the US for several years, living with his mother and attending a Christian church with her, where he had a mystical experience and *“... walked out of there believing”*.

In the US, he experienced drug addiction with his girlfriend who at some point suggested he read *“The Alchemist”* by Paulo Coelho. His tumultuous lifestyle led to being jailed on charges following a fight while on drugs. He reported that while in jail, he had a long conversation with another inmate whom he considered as very spiritual, and *“I let the Master Jesus into my heart that day”* and afterward, felt that he had been given a conscience. It became his main goal to listen to it. He started a new and healthier life which took root after returning to Canada two years later.

In 2017, while sitting alone at home, he wondered if there was a Rosicrucian Temple where he lived. He found this strange having only ever seen or heard the word Rosicrucian once before years ago. He soon attended an open meeting and was attracted to the meditation—having already studied *“Zen Buddhism, the art of zazen, which is just basically sitting and breathing, seeking enlightenment”*—and the open discussion in the meeting. He joined the Order, appreciating the freedom to ask questions rather than being given answers.

Studying Rosicrucianism, Leo finally found peace and the purpose of serving the whole; he also quit drugs and alcohol, becoming a calm and loving person who woke up with joy every day, as in his words, he *“got a real life”*.

Rosicrucianism as Guided Identity

In contrast to both Gail’s Pentecostalist and Rowan’s Pagan storyworlds, Leo’s Rosicrucianism is neither bounded nor fully self-constructed; it lies somewhere between the two.

Rosicrucianism is described by its adherents not as a religion but as a framework or philosophy that guides the adherent's search for knowledge and self-mastery. As Leo puts it: *"from ignorance, and ignorance alone, must humankind be freed"*. Within this framework, there are certain principles—such as service to the whole:

"I believe in the larger and higher aspects of what we do, and what I'm a part of, and the service that I provide to that allows me to provide service to my fellow humans, you know . . . And now I'm kind of finding the ability to do that, through helping, helping something bigger than myself and helping myself at the same time, it flows, it's all just a flow".

Rosicrucianism focuses on the betterment of humanity and sees the path to this through the perfection of individuals who are called on to *"think well, speak well, and act well"* (AMORC 2023b) to which the Rosicrucian *"Code of Life"* (AMORC 2023b) provides guidance.

The guidance that Rosicrucianism provides is structured but non-constraining. It is structured in that adherents are encouraged to engage in daily spiritual practices, the study of weekly monographs, and pursue knowledge of oneself. Further, Rosicrucianism is an initiate Order, with adherents progressing through levels of study which introduce them to higher levels of esoteric knowledge. Rituals mark the milestones of one's progression on the Rosicrucian path, a path that is seen as a lifelong journey.

This structure, however, is non-constraining in that there are no absolute requirements regarding the above:

"There is nothing that you have to do to be Rosicrucian, it is not, it is not a sect, it is not a religion, you know. So, if you are Muslim or Christian or Hindu, anything, if you are of any faith and you pray, we encourage you to pray more".

One progresses as one desires and at one's own pace:

"I dedicated myself to my studies. Life can get in the way, I've fallen behind, I'm probably about, so you're supposed to go weekly, and I'm probably close to 16 months behind".

Furthermore, members do not have to accept what is provided in the monographs or other studies:

"The first thing that it says in the studies is you do not have to accept anything that you hear here. And we encourage you to remain and grow more so into a walking question mark. Question all things".

Different from the Pentecostalist storyworld, Rosicrucianism does not provide direct teaching on what to do and what is right. Instead, it draws a path toward one's inner voice:

"the basis of the Rosicrucian path is establishing communication with the master within, your inner guide, your conscience if you will. . . . it never says anything is good or bad. It allows you to find your own way".

While there are guiding documents such as the three original Rosicrucian manifestos—the *Fama Fraternitas*, the *Confession Fraternitatis*, and the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*—and the more modern manifestos—the *Positio Fraternitatis*, the *Appellatio Fraternitatis*, and the *New Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*—the Rosicrucian storyworld is not dominated by these. Indeed, Leo (and other Rosicrucian participants in the study) made no reference to these when recounting their spiritual journeys. Unlike Gail, whose account was peppered with references to the Bible, these texts played little role in shaping Leo's identity.

However, Rosicrucianism does provide a framework for Leo within which to explore spirituality. Through attending the Council of Solace, the monthly Rosicrucian meeting in which people practice object meditation, listen to a discourse about the Order, and have open discussions, Leo made the decision to join the Order. Following several months of preparatory study and work, Leo was initiated into the Order. To become Rosicrucian, then, does not require the blessing or sanction of others but requires weekly study, regular rites, and gatherings which help shape an individual's Rosicrucian identity. Leo

devotes approximately an hour each week to reading the materials offered by AMORC with forethoughtfulness. Leo practices meditation on his own as well, going to or creating somewhere that *“is free from distractions”* such as the countryside.

Again, in contrast to Gail’s Pentecostalist storyworld but akin to that of Rowan’s Paganism, Leo’s Rosicrucian storyworld is porous and inclusive. Becoming a member of the Rosicrucian Order does not require an individual to give up other faiths—as indicated above. Indeed, Rosicrucianism is described on the AMORC website as “a spiritual family that has members from many different Wisdom Traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam who work together harmoniously to bring Light into the world” (AMORC 2023a).

Leo expressed it thus:

“But I think every faith, every spiritual path, every religion, even ones that claim to serve darkness. I think that everything serves a bigger and higher purpose and that they are all valuable. And I think the world is a better place for them”.

This openness to the wisdom of other religions is evident in Leo’s account of his spiritual journey: *“[I] was always drawn to it, was always drawn to Christianity, the master Jesus, things like that”* and while mainstream Christianity was never really a fit for him, he sometimes framed his journey in Christian terms, describing himself as a follower of the Master Jesus and still reading the Bible. However, Leo’s understanding of Rosicrucianism as a spiritual identity is that it is flexible and able to blend with other beliefs. He had followed multiple pathways in his spiritual journey, such as atheism, nativism, Buddhism, and Christianity, demonstrating a diverse and adaptable spiritual identity.

As with Rowan, Leo saw his spirituality entwined with nature:

“With humans not only have we forgotten that we are nature and that nothing is supernatural for everything is within nature . . . You know, anything that exists in the universe is natural, including things that we don’t understand. With humans, not only do we forget that we’re part of nature, we, we have to find our role, our contribution”.

However, unlike Rowan, who saw her spirituality as inwardly focused, and paradoxically, given the Rosicrucian focus on self-mastery, Leo demonstrated an outward-looking spirituality through service and through concern for nature and the world around us:

“. . . it’s amazing because we have this opportunity to give so much to nature and to the world around us, the world Earth itself, not just to nature but to humans to, to evolution to everything, to the Divine, you know? And, but we have to find out how we’re going to do that”.

Also, in contrast to Gail’s “upward” spirituality, Leo’s spiritual orientation was far more horizontal in his belief that *“nothing is supernatural for everything is within nature. You know, well these supernatural things, well, it’s not super”*.

In Bamberg-ian terms, Leo’s spiritual identity can be seen as one that has gradually changed over time, through study and initiation. He began his spiritual journey at the age of 16, exploring multiple ways to learn about other spiritualities and practicing them by himself, including having discussions with people who embraced those spiritualities, going to church or group meetings, and reading eclectically, including books by Shirley McClaine, Eckhart Tolle, Drunvalo Melchizedek, and Dan Brown, all of which contributed to his understanding of spirituality and his values. When he was an atheist, he had a conversation with a Christian man who challenged his doubt in God’s existence; returning to agnosticism but attending church to understand mainstream Christianity. As a Buddhist, he also had discussions with people from Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism to inform his own path and in the US, he read *“The Alchemist”*. Rosicrucianism allowed Leo to incorporate this diversity into a coherent view of the world and thus identity.

Leo also emphasizes the similarity of Rosicrucians to others: *“For a long time, I thought everyone’s a Rosicrucian”*. Everyone is connected—*“everything serves a purpose, that everything serves the greater whole and everything is a part of everything else. We all rely on each other. . .”*—and thus Leo sees himself as one among humanity, doing the best he can with the tools he

has at hand. He is not prepared to judge others on the basis of their beliefs or actions. This may stem from his background which included addiction to hard drugs, marijuana, and alcohol and a spell in jail and the recognition that change was possible:

"I mean, I have tried so many different things in my life. I've been to rehab, I've been to AA, I've been to jail, I've gotten years of sobriety in and always gone back. I'd always tried to get rid of my anger, just you know, I was always trying to be this person that I envisioned myself as, and I always knew that I would get there I just never really knew how. Today I'm pretty close to that person, I don't drink or do drugs at all. . . . traffic can be pretty challenging, but I'm a pretty calm loving person. I wake up in joy almost every day".

Such change, for Leo, is a matter of agency, success being *"string[ing] together a lot of good decisions. It's just a series of constructive decisions, you know?"* Leo's path traversed multiple spiritual/religious traditions, such as monotheism, Christianity, and Rosicrucianism. Instead of being called by others or being pushed by the situation to take action, he thought people should actively figure out what to do—be walking question marks, *"go[ing] through the possibilities as much as possible and be considerate of the situation"*. Leo saw all human beings as creators, creating masterpieces such as Marvel movies, creating our own world, and also creating our own image of God:

"What it tried to convey was that we create our own reality, that you create your own universe, and I create my own universe. And this moment, right here is our two worlds interacting, but they are still each and of their own. Right, that we are the creators of our day-to-day, of our experience of all of it".

Leo's identity is thus not given or received from immersion in the Rosicrucian storyworld, as it is for Gail and her Pentecostal storyworld, as Leo's Rosicrucian storyworld is looser, more porous and inclusive, and less normative than that of Gail's Pentecostalism. On the other hand, unlike Rowan's storyworld in which everything is left in her hands, Leo's Rosicrucian storyworld provides guidance, resources, support, and community which help shape an individual's identity. It is in this sense that we refer to Leo's Rosicrucian identity as a *"guided identity"*.

4. Conclusions

Based on the participants' spiritual journeys, we outlined three religious or spiritual identity forms: received, bricolage, and guided. Our analysis of the case studies offers insight into fixed, unfixed, and flexible identities—with varying degrees of stability and connections to the storyworld. In this case, the storyworld relates to different world religions. While Gail's fixed identity flows from her set Pentecostal storyworld and Leo's flexible identity from a more negotiable Rosicrucian one, Rowan's fluidic Pagan storyworld is comparably more suitable to accommodating multiple pathways versus the normativity of more defined religions. Gail's Pentecostalism can also be considered a closed system compared to the more open, interactive Paganism and Rosicrucian identities of Rowan and Leo. The case studies suggest that the less dominant a big storyworld is, the more individualized stories can thrive.

While other studies use narrative data, here, we have deployed a more thorough-going narrative approach in order to understand how the participants' storyworlds shape their identities. The idea of received, guided, and bricolage identities has implications for conceptualizing agentic subjects (Bamberg 2011; Giddens 1991). Recognizing that pre-constraints of class, gender and ethnicity, economic means, and health status organize received, bricolage, and guided identity formations is crucial to notice how these intersecting social forces continue to shape the participants' lives. The participants' social locations likely impact how they construct their identities.

While we have focused, here, on spiritual identity, there is potential in our approach for other lines of narrative identity work. For instance, case studies concerning other Western and Eastern religions could help determine whether the three types of identity are

consistent with other religious/spiritual practitioners. Outside of religious studies, health researchers, whether or not concerned with spirituality, for example, could apply Bamberg's (2011) model to the studies of people living with acute, chronic, and episodic illnesses. It would be interesting to see how biographical disruption after serious illness (Bury 1982) influences engagement with the storyworlds for various everyday religious/spiritual practitioners. Likewise, identity construction among people with serious health issues and disabilities is fertile ground to apply this approach further. All three individuals in our case studies identified as heterosexual, which means there could be valuable research in the future that looks at the difference sexual identity has on Pentecostal, Pagan, and Rosicrucian practices. It would be fascinating to explore how sexual minority populations construct their identities in relation to spirituality and beyond, particularly because no world religions explicitly welcome sexual diversity beyond heterosexuality. Additionally, bricolage may have relevance to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, some of whom may improvise their spiritual lives, making it an intriguing avenue for further investigation.

Helping professions such as social work can draw on such representations to empower service users to understand themselves in social, cultural, and political contexts and become active agents in identity construction (Baldwin 2013). Individuals may increase their sense of agency by acknowledging how the stories with which they engage influence their lives. Bamberg's (2011) exploration of navigating the three dilemmatic spaces is directly relevant to social justice work as by understanding this, citizens and service users can more effectively identify power dynamics and oppression. For instance, our self-narratives are significantly shaped by cultural stories, interpersonal relationships, and the broader societal systems and movements in which we participate (Davis 2002, p. 21). Somers's (1992) characterization of cultural and institutional narrative subtypes (including family, work, religious worship, government, and nation) exemplifies these structurally influential narratives. Narratives we create about ourselves and others can promote social justice through empathy and understanding or perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases. It is fascinating to explore the formation of individual and collective interconnected identities, recognizing that while individuals develop their unique identities, they remain part of a broader humanity that shares a collective narrative. Additionally, stories that emphasize our interconnectedness with the planet and our collective responsibility can spur meaningful action and transformative responses to the pressing challenges of climate change (Macy and Johnstone 2012).

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