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THE POOREST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD: CRITIQUING U.S. CULTURE THROUGH RELATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY AND THE SAINTS.

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ABSTRACT

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THE POOREST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD: CRITIQUING U.S. CULTURE THROUGH RELATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY AND THE SAINTS.

Advisor's Name: Dr. Linda Land-Closson
Reader's Name: Dr. Anandita Mukherji

In this thesis I critique the American socioeconomic system and culture through a multidisciplinary lens. Using the works of philosopher Karl Marx, economist Robin Kimmerer, and forensic psychologist Christopher Williams, I argue that there are three interconnected characteristics of our socioeconomic system that disincentivize us from creating growth-fostering relationships. These characteristics are the encouragement of overconsumption, the prevalence of hyperindividualism, and that people are valued for what they produce, not who they are. To counteract these characteristics, we must fight to create a Culture of Encounter, which is a culture with a radical dedication to seeing, hearing, and loving individual people without condition, expectation, or a specific goal. The works of St. Teresa of Calcutta and St. Therese of Lisieux, combined with the tenets of Relational Cultural Theory provide an argument for why creating a Culture of Encounter is necessary. Finally, I provide a concrete four step plan that helps people implement a Culture of Encounter into their everyday lives.

Admit something:

Everyone you see, you say to them,

"Love me."

Of course you do not do this out loud;

Otherwise,

Someone would call the cops.

Still though, think about this,

This great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one

Who lives with a full moon in each eye

That is always saying

With that sweet moon

Language

What every other eye in this world

Is dying to

Hear.

–*Hafez* (Boyle 17)

Chapter 1: Drunken Fish//Connection

The morning sun streamed into my eyes as I slowly peered down Champa Street, analyzing the people walking by me, trying to identify someone I would label as "homeless." It was hard for me to approach my unconfirmed suspects, for fear of offending them and, more selfishly, for fear of being turned away. Finally, an indistinguishable bundle of blankets caught my eye. I marched across the street, firmly resolved to get this person to accept the coffee I was carrying. "Hello!" I chirped breezily, "I am Molly!" Two small, watery blue eyes met mine, and I was shocked to realize the bundle of rags was a woman old enough to be my grandmother. I struck up a conversation with her as I offered my goods: socks, hats, gloves, coffee, and sandwiches. She accepted the coffee, and while I poured it into her bright pink thermos I chattered aimlessly, asking about her morning, where she had lived before, how long she had been in Denver, etc. The woman stared at me warily, as if she were waiting for the other shoe to drop. I smiled and handed her thermos back to her. "Are you a cop?" she croaked, sounding exhausted and angry. After assuring her I was not, she relaxed, and introduced herself as Drunken Fish. She offered me a newspaper she was selling, insistent that I accept it, even though I had no money to give her.

This woman changed my life and will never know it. Every time I go to 16th street, I think of her. It was in this experience with Drunken Fish that I was taken out of my privileged state of life and thrust into a world that didn't revolve around me. I saw Drunken Fish, really saw her, and felt that she saw me. I saw how similar we were, despite being separated by social classes and generations. Her eyes, my eyes, her heart, my heart; we met that day.

I started to notice people in a way I had not before. I started pursuing something deeper in every relationship I had; they became the most important thing in my life. For all people,

relationships are subconsciously the absolute pinnacle of existence (Jordan n.p.). We are born seeking relationships; we can only survive to adulthood if we have them (Reis & Collins 233). This is not just because we gain material things, like food and shelter, from them but also there appears to be an intangible aspect to relationships that keep us alive as well (Reis & Collins 233). One of the central teachings of the Catholic Church is that every human being was made to be in a relationship with our creator. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it like this:

> God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. (CCC, prologue)

We are created for relationship, not just with God, but with others, with the Earth, and with ourselves, because God is in All and is All. Relationships are a vital part of the human experience (Miller 83). The first place I truly came to know and realize this was on the streets of Denver, forming relationships with people experiencing homelessness. I fell in love with the people I encountered on the streets. I found Christ crucified in them, battered and bloody, ostracized and unwelcomed at the table. I found God in their acceptance of me as I was, in their ability to look at me with their hearts, to share themselves with me, and shower me with gifts I did not deserve. I longed to reciprocate their vulnerability and honesty. I went to the streets to help people, but found myself irreversibly changed; I no longer desired to go to the streets, carrying socks and coffee (although these things are still very necessary). I came carrying a heart that desired to connect with people, to hear their stories and share mine. The streets of Denver became sacred to me. I became passionate about spending time with people on the streets and

building growth-fostering relationships with them. I saw it as a crucial part of ending the housing crisis in Denver.

Because of this, when I initially began my thesis, I wanted to make the assertion that a root cause of homelessness is relational. Broken relationships can send people to the streets; if you have a strong enough support system you can, and most likely will, receive some sort of help for substance abuse, mental illnesses, and loss of jobs/housing (all commonly cited factors contributing to for homelessness) before you are forced onto the streets (Batterham 7). I had the plan to dive into this issue by conducting a small Community Based Research Project with the Native American Inclusive Safe Outdoor Space (NAI-SOS). My plan was to conduct informal, conversational interviews with residents at the NAI-SOS surrounding the topic of experiences with relationships on and off the streets. The project aimed to use the lens of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) to identify key aspects of relational connection and disconnection for people experiencing homelessness and show how vital healthy relationships are to the human experience. I remembered the overwhelming joy I felt as I had engaged with people on the streets, the sense of peace I had, knowing I was seeing them, and that they were seeing me. In the people I encountered on the streets I saw reflection of myself, begging to be seen and heard and loved in a meaningful way. I realized a part of my life's purpose in creating relationships.

To write this thesis, I submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This was a ridiculously long process that made me want to pull my hair out. I submitted my proposal, and it was returned to me with suggestions for revisions. I painstakingly revised my work, carefully answering every single one of their critiques, staying up until 3AM multiple times to perfect sentences and methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I resubmitted my proposal. Three weeks rolled around, and the dark, ferocious cloud of anxiety rolled into the

center of my thoughts. I was unsure what to think, until I sleepily read the first line of an email from my advisor on a Thursday morning: “Yesterday afternoon I ran into Dr. Schreier and she let me know she heard recently that your IRB revisions were not approved.”

The hardest part of this for me was trying to control the desire to scream and throw a fit. I wanted to storm around, claim that I was being treated unfairly and that the IRB had handled this whole situation terribly. Having had time to think about this experience and really mull it over, I want to say that I no longer feel as though I have been unfairly treated nor am I still trying to come up with reasons as to why the IRB is the most evil institution to ever exist. I am still mourning the loss of a project I put hours of work into, but I can see that there was no malice behind the decision to not approve my project. The IRB exists to keep both researchers and research participants safe, and ultimately that is what they were doing with my project.

Having said that, there are two things I feel are necessary to mention that have continually bothered me about this whole process. The first is something I was told when I met with a professor on the IRB to discuss why my project had been rejected. In an effort to comfort me, they admitted that this has happened before; in fact, it has happened every time a community based research project has been proposed to the board. Since this professor has been on the board, they had only seen one other project like mine, proposed by a professor who was shut down for the same reasons I was. “The IRB,” they said, “deals mostly with neuroscience projects.” These are the kinds of projects in which you have a person come into a lab, squeeze a ball, measure their brain waves while they do, and then they leave.

Immediately that stuck out to me, but I couldn’t put a finger on why until I walked out of that meeting and realized what this actually meant. No one was doing this research at Regis University, a Jesuit institution with a long list of humanitarian values, one of them being “Men

and Women For and With Others." Nobody is being encouraged to do these projects because they are too messy, too dangerous, too complicated, too human. It is good and necessary to perform those neuroscience experiments so as to better understand the human body; but those experiments are lacking in something that is almost intangible. This intangible thing, I would argue, is the understanding of the human soul. This is where hard science falls short.

We gain more and more knowledge about the human body but the understanding of the human person as a fully integrated being, body and soul, has long been ignored. In fact, this understanding of humanity has long been seen as unnecessary. Many people seem to believe that if we can get to a place where we understand a sufficient amount about the body then that will tell us all we need to know about humans in general. While understanding things about the human body is vitally important, the body cannot tell us everything we need to know about a human experience. This is why we must work toward an integrated scientific field that considers both sides of humanity, physical and spiritual, tangible and intangible.

Of course, humanity is messy and irrational and hard to capture in a single data point. It is hard to reduce a person in their fullness down to quantifiable numbers. Science, and the IRB, likes hard, factual ideas and quantifiable information; you never get that when working with people outside of the lab because those things are not human. This was the other thing that bothered me about the IRB's response to my proposal. There was a consistent perpetuation of negative stereotypes about the population I wanted to work with in their revision letter. There were many comments in their letter that either implied or outright said that this was a population that would struggle to understand what was being asked of them. Not only that, but the letter also suggested that this population is potentially volatile, unstable, unsafe.

This is the mainstream narrative surrounding people experiencing homelessness; I want to acknowledge that these comments are grounded in reality. People experiencing homelessness are more vulnerable, and many people living on the streets do struggle with mental health illnesses and substance abuse. But this reality does not make them less worthy of love and relationships. Often in our society, we discount someone immediately when they do not fit the image of what we believe is a "good" person. Much like the IRB did in this situation, we reduce people to one aspect of their personality, one part of their humanity. It is hard to fight against these stereotypes because even when talking about this frustration out loud a lot of people look at me and say, "Yes that is true, you should be considering those things more seriously." Internally I feel myself actively resisting the urge to delete all of this, because part of me feels ridiculous even saying anything. These stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in my own psyche that part of me wonders why I ever even submitted this IRB proposal. Shouldn't I have expected their response? Shouldn't I have had the same response?

The ultimate reality is that there is a shared humanity that connects us, no matter the differences we have. In my time of encountering people experiencing homelessness, I came to see that there is a dignity that people have, whether they are Nobel Peace Prize winners or actively shooting up crack on the streets. It is a dignity that cannot not be taken away that should be acknowledged before all else. That is why I chose to name each chapter of this thesis after one (or two) of the people I encountered on the street who taught me about their dignity and mine through their actions and words. Added to the names at the beginnings of the chapters is one aspect of growth-fostering relationships that I was taught about through my relationships with each person. I hope the stories at the beginning of each chapter can give you a taste of the complicated, multi-layered reality and identities I encounter on the streets. I want to show that

we must stop reducing each other to the one aspect of reality or identity that is made most visible to us.

When we do reduce people to one aspect of their identity or reality, we choose to not acknowledge their dignity. I have done this over and over again, especially when it comes to people experiencing homelessness. It is hard when a preconceived notion based on an incomplete picture clouds your vision. That being said, we must actively fight against this instinct, step outside of ourselves and work to understand the full picture of a person. The only way I can explain why I feel this way is because I have had experiences that point to this truth. I learned this from the people on the streets, not because they actively sought to teach me in any tangible way, but because their humanity was on full display. On the streets I was able to see the brokenness and the beauty that humanity presents when it is in its fullness; to hold that tension in my heart and let it sit uncomfortably in my chest has become the most important work of my life. Our society demands comfort; we must push back and demand compassion for others within our hearts and through our actions.

Through the connection I made with Drunken Fish, I began to realize that what I am writing about applies to everyone, not just the homeless. I came to the conclusion that I should not just write about how the homeless are starved for meaningful relationships in our society, but how we all are. Relationships are vital to healthy human existence (Banks 83). It is time we start acting like it in our friendships, jobs, and in the research we do. There are three main aspects of the United States socioeconomic system that disallow us from creating growth-fostering relationships: the tendency to consume without stopping, the prevalence of individualism, and the fact that capitalism forces us to value people for what they produce, not who they are. People experiencing homelessness uniquely display the direct effects of these three negative aspects of

our culture, which is why in the next chapter homelessness is used as a case study to highlight the dark underbelly of capitalism. To counteract overconsumption, extreme individualism, and use of people, we must create a Culture of Encounter. Two women whose names I carry as my own and who have greatly inspired me throughout my life will help me prove this: St. Teresa of Calcutta and St. Therese of Lisieux. Using their world views along with the tenants of Relational Cultural Theory, I will argue that acknowledging the dignity of each person is of utmost importance and is at the center of reinventing our culture.

Chapter 2: Shorty//Authenticity

Around 5:30PM we walked to the SOS camp with the food; the community members welcomed us with open arms. They urged us to eat with them; we sat down and stayed for much longer than anticipated, playing Jenga with a resident named Shorty, who amused us by telling stories about his life. He was candid in a way I had never encountered, telling the good with the bad unflinchingly. Friendships, drug abuse, alcoholism, children, wives, school, music, he covered all the bases. Entranced by his easy countenance, attracted to the vulnerability of his words, I unintentionally stayed for three hours. I was used to people selling the version of themselves they thought I wanted to meet, and I usually reciprocated. With Shorty, there was no need. He boldly told me who he was and offered me an invitation to do the same.

Shorty pulled me out of myself. He was vulnerable and honest in a way I struggled to be. I wanted to present myself in a certain way to the world: Independent, strong, unafraid, perfect. This was a mindset drilled into me; I thought this was the me people wanted. I couldn't be honest with myself about who I was, let alone others. With Shorty, though, that changed. For the first time, I saw the fallacy in our capitalistic society. You know, the one that tells us that the more independent we are, the better?

Now, I'm not advocating for communism, or any other socioeconomic system, but I have started to dislike capitalism. Growing up in the United States, it is the air you breathe, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the music you listen to, the media you consume, etc. It all surrounds you and informs a part of you that you are unaware of. I did not know that the culture of the United States was so shaped by capitalism until I came to college. Before that, it seemed normal to buy clothes and toys and other material goods simply because there were new things to buy. Overflowing toy aisles, overstuffed department store shelves, constant new technology blinking

at you in the Walmart technology section: these things were all part and parcel of my American childhood. Bigger is better, more is best, cheaper is the way to go. Without meaning to, or knowing better, I bought into these mantras.

I often felt an innate desire in my little heart to reject the disgusting amount of material things the world was offering. As a child, I hated buying things, asking my mom for another toy. Saying I wanted a new Barbie or stuffed animal when I knew I had plenty at home did not sit well with my conscience, for reasons I could not explain. As I got older, the small voice convincing me there was something wrong with overconsumption was stamped out as I longed to fit in with my friends, who had the best, newest (fill in the blank). I started asking my mom to buy clothes in bulk, only to get new things four or five months later. I was swept up in the technological craze that wreaked havoc on my generation, begging for an iPod touch, and then an iPhone, and then an iPad. My consumption habits spread to social media, and I voraciously consumed every bit of media I could, from Facebook to Snapchat to Instagram.

I saw everything as a product, and did not see an issue with that. I would aggressively examine every picture of every friend and influencer on Instagram, wondering how I could look the most like them, wondering what I had to buy to be happy with myself the way everyone else seemed to be happy with themselves. Despite the lack of fulfillment that consumption was causing me, I reflected the ideas of my friends, selling an idea of myself on social media platforms that was happy because I had the clothes, the products, etc.

As I got older, I began to see myself and others as products to be sold and consumed. Capitalism had crept into every area of my life. Applying to scholarships, summer jobs and colleges, I presented the most beautiful, winningest side of myself, ashamed that there was another, deeper, darker unfilled part of me. This part of me didn’t feel seen no matter how many

pictures I posted on Instagram, didn't feel acknowledged no matter how many awards I won or job offers I received. It was this part of me that continued to consume and consume and consume, desperate for the one thing that would finally make me feel at peace. Over the years, my perception shifted from seeing products and material goods as a way to fit in to seeing myself and others as products to be used at whim.

I do not think my story is unique or special. It is a classic tale, threads of which can be seen in every American life. We are told we aren't enough, but if we want to be enough, we can just buy X product. Then, we may finally be who we want to be. Robin Kimmerer, author, scientist, professor and member of the Potawatomi Nation, speaks to this specific evil of capitalism in her book titled *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer explains that Native American people, specifically the Anishinaabe tribe, have a legendary monster, the Windigo, which is "the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else" (Kimmerer 305). Historically, the stories of the Windigo were originally told to ward off the possibility of cannibalism amongst hungry tribe members in the freezing cold of winter. However, the story of the Windigo has morphed into a critique of the average American, "whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point where satisfaction is no longer possible" (Kimmerer 306). The footprints of the Windigo, the marks of overconsumption without satisfaction, are everywhere.

Kimmerer sees them in the misuse and stealing of the natural resources of the world as well as in things like an overflowing closet. Every American citizen is guilty of allowing the Windigo into our lives. It has become second nature to allow "the 'market' to define what we value so that the redefined common good seems to depend on profligate lifestyles that enrich the sellers while impoverishing the soul and the earth" (Kimmerer 307). Through capitalism, our

souls are impoverished as we grow richer and buy more things. To continue Kimmerer's argument, I do not think the destruction of the soul stops at an overflowing closet. Capitalism has become so much a part of us that we now aim to sell ourselves to be consumed by others. We also consume others and see them as a means to an end, rather than an infinitely important soul with worlds behind their eyes.

The person who, in my opinion, most clearly saw and identified the main issues with capitalism was none other than the father of communism himself, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883). While I am skeptical of communism (as any good, indoctrinated American would be) I have to give it to Marx. The man knew what he was talking about when it came to the faults of capitalism. These faults are detailed in length in *The Communist Manifesto*, which Marx, along with his good friend and financier Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), wrote in 1847 and published in 1848. *The Communist Manifesto* begins with Marx discussing how society has been built around class struggles (Marx et al. 39). He presents examples of the slave and the master, the serf and the lord, the patrician and the plebian, among others (Marx et al. 40). Essentially, the story of humankind can be summed up like this: It is an ever continuing war between the oppressed and their oppressors (Marx et al. 40).

In Marx's mind, it is the bourgeoisie, a class that developed from the middle ages, which owns the means of production in a capitalist society and therefore reaps the rewards (the profit) that capitalism produces, versus the proletariats (Marx et al. 40). The proletariat class can be defined simply as the working class, which works using the means of production that are owned by the bourgeoisie, but does not reap the benefits (Marx et al. 40). Instead the proletariat class produces so that the bourgeoisie alone can benefit from them. It is the proletariats that are exploited and detrimentally harmed by the bourgeoisie. Marx sees the bourgeoisie as the

harbingers of the worst part of capitalism (Marx et al. 42). Any critiques Marx makes of the bourgeoisie are also critiques of capitalism and vice versa. They are one in the same, the creators of the created system. Early in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx states the following about the bourgeoisie, and subsequently, capitalism.

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. (Marx et al. 43)

There are many things that could be said about this particular quote; the first being that it seems to sum up two of the main issues Marx, and I, have with capitalism. First, Marx says that capitalism has broken all human ties and boiled human relationships to "naked self-interest" and "callous "cash payment"" (Marx et al. 43). Of course, Marx is putting this into context with the rest of history and saying that before capitalism, all other forms of government did this as well, but aimed to do so under the guise of certain people being naturally put above others. This could have been because of divine choosing or naturally occurring differences like a lighter skin color or gender. In modern day America, patriarchal systems plagued with institutionalized racism still exist. However, because of the prevalence of capitalism and its unique ability to exploit the ugliest parts of the human psyche, we are also plagued with radical individualism. This further prohibits our ability to feel compassion for others and build community with each other.

Throughout American history, capitalism systematically worked to sever all human relationships, not only reducing relationships between boss and employee to one of "naked self-interest" (Marx 43) but more seriously, relationships between employee and fellow employee to that of self service. Individualism is so deeply "embedded in everything from the philosophies and practices of our social institutions to the language we speak" (Williams 13) that we rarely stop to think about its effect on us and our communities. Individualism is "the antithesis of that which fosters human flourishing" (Williams 13). It leads to widespread exploitation and inane objectification of people. Many proponents of capitalism say that it allows for innovation because humans are encouraged to compete with each other to make the best product for the lowest price. This is true. Marx says that capitalism "has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former exoduses of nations and crusades" (Marx et al. 44). Capitalism pushes people to be maximally productive, as our worth is defined by our productivity. This has allowed for many great inventions and products, like life-saving vaccines and medications. However, with this constant competition and revolutionizing of technology comes a mindset of overconsumption and waste. This situation also encourages progress for the sake of progress, a concept that allows people to be used as products. The idea becomes, we always need better; not just better things, but better people who are more efficient, intelligent, attractive, etc.

Marx discusses how capitalism "...resolved personal worth into exchange value" (Marx et al. 43). This tendency to reduce and subvert other humans to a product allows us to view others as something to be used. In order to maximize profit, people under capitalism are incentivized to use and discard things as soon as the newer better thing comes along, and this tendency does not

stop with inventions and means of production. It bleeds into our everyday life. This cycle continues and grows worse; the more we over consume, the more we treat others as if they are a means to an end, an object without a soul. Subconsciously, we are taught to believe humans, just like products, are things that can be bought and thrown away when a newer model comes along.

It is the irony of our society; we believe ourselves to be in the most connected age, and yet our connections are self-serving, cheap, and expendable. How can we fix something that from the outside seems to fix itself every month with a new update or version? I began asking these questions after talking to people experiencing homelessness. My heart was broken open on the streets, and I saw the flaws in our society like never before. I truly believe I am called to create and engage in a Culture of Encounter wherever I go, but it is on the streets that I learned what it truly means to encounter people in their fullness. Additionally, people experiencing homelessness are uniquely excluded from our capitalist society because of their lack of private property. The homeless, in their overt physical dirtiness and brokenness, reflect what is going on inside the rest of us. The difference is, their situation is visible while the rest of us can hide behind the newest clothing trends and iPhone. By examining the situation of the homeless we can see the depth to which humanity is affected by the negative aspects of US culture. The reality is, housed or unhoused, we are not that different from each other. This makes it that much more imperative that we begin creating a culture that encourages loving someone for the sake of loving them, rather than for what they can give us.

Shorty taught me about the importance of presenting yourself as you truly are; the only way to form an authentic connection is to be authentic. This is hard in American society, because our capitalism has pervaded our culture and encourages reduction of the human being to what they produce and overconsumption. American culture is also extremely individualistic. People

experiencing homelessness reveal the depth to which these negative characteristics of capitalism affect us. The invisible burden is made visible through them; the next chapter is a case study on homelessness in America.

Chapter 3: Frank//Belonging

I felt something land on my shoulder; I turned my head, only to see the biggest, ugliest fake spider I have ever seen. I yelped and jumped up. Directly behind me, I heard a roaring laugh. I turned around, only to be met with the giddy, overjoyed smile of Frank, a man with slurred speech and a lazy eye. He clapped his grimy hands, cackling as he pronounced that he had got me. I laughed, agreed and sat back down, inviting him to join me. As we sat in the sunny weather, we talked about past jobs; Frank mimicked backing up a semi truck, making eerily good beeping noises. I told him I could never drive a semi; I hate driving, especially in giant vehicles. I then told Frank about my lifeguarding job, and he said the same about lifeguards, as he couldn't swim at all. We continued to talk about where I grew up and where he grew up. His grandparents lived two hours away from where I was raised, and so our conversation morphed into a discussion about the western slope of the state versus the front range. We meandered through myriad topics, never resting anywhere long. At the end of the convo, Frank walked away, bringing his ugly fake spider out of his pocket once again to start another conversation.

The conversation was the type you forget about. It was so simple, and nothing earth shattering was said by either party. And yet, what I felt in those moments with Frank was a deep utter sense of peace and belonging. Mother Teresa once said if there is no peace in the world, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other.

The goal of this thesis is to make this reality more visible, to remind first myself and then others that we all belong to each other. Relationships are a vital part of the human experience (Jordan 2); often what I found when building relationships with people on the streets is that their relationships are broken. In "Defining 'At-Risk of Homelessness': Re-Connecting Causes, Mechanisms and Risk," Batterham groups the causes of homelessness into seven broad

categories: housing markets, labor markets and economic capital, institutional (organizations), relationships, health and wellbeing, past experiences of homelessness, and social stratifications and inequalities (Batterham 7). Many of these causes do not exhibit a direct relationship with homelessness. As far back as the 1980s there has arisen an idea that if you are "a certain type of person" (e.g. prone to mental illness or substance abuse) you are more likely to become homeless (Koegel et al. 41). However, when examining the categories identified by Batterham, it is clear there is more going on. The causes of homelessness are multiple and intertwined; they overlap with each other and feed into each other.

Batterham cites many instances in which damaged, lost, absent, or changed relationships can be a cause of homelessness: separation, divorce, death of a spouse/parent, poor social networks, birth of a child, domestic abuse, child abuse, elder abuse (Batterham 10). These relational dynamics play into and can result from the other six causes of homelessness (e.g. a spouse leaving because of substance abuse, or a single mother experiencing discrimination when trying to gain access to housing). However, Batterham identifies a dimension of relationships that is very important and should not be ignored: the loss/limitation of a social network. She states that the lack of a social network "impact[s] capacity to maintain housing as well as health and well-being, through reduced support when times are tough or when things go wrong–be it emotional or material support" (Batterham 11). Many people feel as though they have exhausted their connections before their situation becomes as dire as living on the streets; many feel as though they cannot reach out due to a belief that they do not deserve help, that they are unworthy of any connection at all.

However, the effect of lost relationships is rarely considered when thinking about people experiencing homelessness. Most Americans believe that there are two reasons for homelessness:

individual fault and structural issues. Individual responsibility is often placed far above structural issues. In essence, the American majority perceives people experiencing homelessness not only as lazy but also as people who are fraught with "immorality, wanderlust, heavy drinking, and other character deficits as reasons for one's descent to the lowest rung of the stratification ladder" (Lee 254). However, when examining the fact that people experiencing homelessness feel things like a decreased sense of worth and thus begin to withdraw from all relationships, it is almost expected that they turn to adverse substances to take their mind off of the harsh realities of their situation (Dempsey 87). With this example in mind, it becomes clear that many of the reasons cited by the American public for why people become homeless are often offshoots of the fact that they have damaged and broken relationships.

Not only do people experiencing homelessness suffer from damaged and broken individual relationships, their relationships with their government and the general public are also skewed. Jeremy Waldron's "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom" explores the relationship between capitalism and homelessness. He argues that people who are homeless do not own property, and therefore do not matter to the government. However, even in capitalistic societies, there is also public property–parks, streets, and malls–that all people are *technically* allowed to access. These places are quickly becoming selectively public. Local governments have begun to create laws stating that homeless people are not allowed in public places. For example, it is illegal in the city of Denver to camp in a public park (Sealover 2020). This does not so much affect the outdoorsy folks coming to Denver to hike for the weekend; they can rent an AirBnB. The homeless person on the corner cannot. Many proponents of this law and others like it say that this will help people living on the street to get out of their situation, as they "encourage homeless people to move off the streets and into services, and thereby improve their quality of

life" (Robinson 1). There are many instances in which you will hear that people on the streets just need to take advantage of the opportunities given to them. This suggests that people living on the streets are simply lazy or desire to be homeless; they don't take advantage of the things laid out in front of them. This comes from our capitalist mindset. People believe that if they want something enough, if they work hard enough, they will get it. However, people living on the streets are primarily concerned with survival, constantly wondering where their next meal will come from, when and where they will sleep, etc. We cannot expect people who are struggling to survive to consciously pursue any level of needs beyond the first. Yet we do, and in placing that unrealistic expectation on people, we alienate them from the rest of society, and starve them of relationships and human connection, which are also vital for survival.

Our inability to realize how important relationships truly are is the result of the three negative characteristics of American culture discussed previously; in short, we see the world and others as something to conquer. In this chapter I discussed how this worldview affects those on the streets. My hope is to now make people realize that individuals with homes are not so different from those living on the streets. If loss of relationships can be categorized as a root cause of homelessness, I believe it can be categorized as a root cause of other human ailments. Our brains "register the pain of exclusion in the same way it registers physical pain or absence of water and oxygen" (Jordan n.p.). Humans have a need for "mutual empathy, resonance; we need to contribute to others. And we need to build community together" (Jordan n.p.). I learned the value of making someone feel as though they belong from Frank. For the housed and the unhoused, the rich and the poor, a sense of belonging is absolutely vital to a healthy human existence. We are built for more than consumption, and our lives are more than just what we own.

Chapter 4: Dotty//Loneliness

A woman hobbled toward us on crutches; I studied her face as she came closer. The grim reality of the streets had worn her down. Her face was deeply lined and weathered, her thin, snarly gray hair spilled into her eyes from underneath a New York Rangers baseball cap that looked three sizes too big for her head. When she reached us, she immediately welled up as the Christ in the City missionary took her hands and said hello to her. The high, girlish voice that flowed out of her mouth juxtaposed her appearance; she choked out a hello and then started sobbing. Walking with her, we moved to the corner of the shelter, where Dotty immediately collapsed onto a bucket that had been left there. We knelt down, close enough to smell the stench of chronically unwashed body and sour perfume. Words and tears tumbled from the gaunt woman:"I don't want to be here anymore. I'm alone. My brother is dead. He been dead a while but he was my friend and now I don't have many friends anymore. I feel so alone." Her body shook as she wrenched the previously unspoken words into existence. Her tears lessened but she still shook. She looked straight at me and murmured the words once again in her high, girlish voice, "I'm alone."

This loneliness, this depression, this alone-ness. Dotty's words rang in my mind; I was reminded of countless encounters with friends, strangers, residents, and myself in which the words "I'm alone" were either whispered aloud or circled around in an attempt not to be so. "I'm alone"; why is it that we struggle so much with this? It is the cross of the human race, a fear so deep and underlying in our psychology that it drives our every waking moment without us even realizing it. We search for the cure, now more than ever, scouring the internet constantly, watching tik tok after tik tok. A twentieth century cloistered Carmelite nun, St. Therese of

Lisieux, identified this struggle and explained it gracefully and also simply, without ever leaving her little convent in France.

I have an interesting relationship with St. Therese of Lisieux. For most of my life, I had an understanding that she was a nun, and I assumed that because she was a saint she had done some pretty awesome and holy things. So, when it came time to pick a confirmation saint at the age of fourteen, I started doing more research, thinking she would be a great person to pick as my confirmation saint. My initial gut reaction upon reading about her life was that she lived the most boring, simplistic life a person ever had. I immediately was annoyed at the idea that this saint had even been on my mind as an option for my confirmation saint. I wanted someone who had done great, daring things for God and ended up dying a martyr's death. But *of course* I, the oldest, most level headed child in my parent's brood, would choose a saint who, at sixteen decided she wanted to enter a cloistered Carmelite convent in France. She would remain there until the day she died an early death at the age of twenty-three due to a TB infection.

Therese didn't do anything great by societal standards. Even her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, was heavily edited by her Mother Superior so as to make it a book she thought people would want to read. But somehow, I was still deeply attracted to her on a spiritual level. To my surprise, I found out in my research that she had been named a Doctor of the Church on October 19th, 1997 by Pope John Paul II. She is not only one of only four women Doctors of the Church, but also the youngest of both the men and women to receive this title. At the time of her canonization, John Paul II stated,

> During her life Therese discovered "new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings" and received from the divine Teacher that "science of love" which she then expressed with particular originality in her writings. This science is the luminous

> expression of her knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom and of her personal experience of grace. It can be considered a special charism of Gospel wisdom which Therese, like other saints and teachers of faith, attained in prayer. (St. John Paul II n.p.)

This was all fascinating to me, as I could not see why someone like Therese would receive this title. However, it was enough for me to want to pick her as my confirmation saint. I took her name and continued to ask her to pray for me almost daily, all the while still considering her to be one of the most boring saints to ever exist.

It was not until the summer of 2021, when I finally read her autobiography for myself, that I truly came to understand how revolutionary her words were, even in their utter simplicity. Therese details her small life from beginning to end; the book is not riveting but at the same time, it is. At the end of the book in particular, Therese says something that will stick with me for the rest of my life. It is a line that sums up her theory of a "science of love," for which she was given the title of Church Doctor. After lamenting the fact that she was not able to be a priest like St. Francis or a martyr like St. Cecelia, she goes on to explain that she was consoled in the fact that none of the great acts of the martyrs would have been possible without love. Therese came to understand that "Love comprises all vocations – that love is everything, and because it is eternal, embraces all times and places. My vocation is love…Love will descend into my nothingness and transform this nothingness into living fire" (St. Therese of Lisieux 163). In this quote, Therese suggests something revolutionary: the point of human life is not to work or have fun, but is instead to love. Love brings meaning to every action, provides reason for every motion of the heart.

This love, which proves itself by deeds, is central to every life, if we desire to live in the fullness of our human existence, according to Therese. The way in which she carried out this vocation to love was to serve every person she encountered with the most dignity and respect she could muster. There are places in her autobiography in which she recounts engaging with the crankiest, most unlikeable nuns in the convent and instead of ignoring them as many of the other sisters did, she worked to engage with them and build a relationship with them. This influenced the work of a little nun in the slums of India, who took St. Therese's statement about love being a vocation one step further.

That little nun was none other than Teresa of Calcutta, the greatest Saint of the twentieth century. I hesitated to write about her precisely because she is so well known. Everyone knows who she is; everyone knows she is a saint. Of course I would choose her, she is inspiring to everyone. I felt like people might roll their eyes at *another* Catholic person writing about this famous saint. However, the more I rejected the idea of putting her in my thesis, the more she came after me.

Mother Teresa was born on August 26, 1910 in Skopje, North Macedonia and christened Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. She was the youngest of three children, all of whom reported their childhood to be "ordinary" (Spink 23). Agnes herself is quoted saying, "Mine was a happy family" but did not divulge much else, as she insisted "upon the importance of the hidden and the ordinary life, pointing out that the carpenter's son from Nazareth had spent thirty years doing humble work in a carpenter's workshop before assuming his public role" (Spink 23). Her father, Nikola, was a successful trader and her mother, Drana, a housewife. Throughout her childhood, Agnes and her siblings witnessed her parents being very charitable and opening their arms and the doors of their house to many guests, ranging from the poorest of the poor to the archbishop of

Skopje. After losing her father at the age of eight, the family became quite poor, but remained happy, as Drana encouraged her children to be “only for God" (Spink 26). The family lived quietly as Agnes grew up; she became an active member of her community, excelling in school and engaging with her peers in numerous activities. It was at this time in her life that she discerned a call to religious life, and applied to join the “the Loreto Sisters, the Irish branch of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (Spink 31). Upon being accepted into the order, Agnes moved from Yugoslavia, where she had spent most of her life up to that point, to Dublin, where she received her postulancy cap and learned English. In the first few months as a postulant she also chose the name Sister Mary Teresa of the Child Jesus, after St. Therese of Lisieux.

From Dublin, the young nun was sent to Calcutta, where she was expected to teach, as that was one of the apostolates of the Loreto nuns. It was here that Sister Mary Teresa had her first encounter with physical poverty. She wrote in the November 1931 issue of *Catholic Missions* about a particularly intense moment in which she accepted a starving boy from his father:

> The man is afraid we will not take the child, and says, “If you do not want him, I will throw him into the grass. The jackals will not turn up their noses at him.” My heart freezes. The poor child! Weak, and blind—totally blind. With much pity and love I take the little one into my arms, and fold him in my apron. The child has found a second mother. (Spink 37)

Sister Mary Teresa remained in Calcutta for years, teaching at various institutions for the poor, and ultimately falling in love with the people she served. On May 24th, 1937 she took final vows and ultimately took the name that she became known for around the world: Mother Teresa.

Deep within her soul, Mother Teresa recognized that the Lord was calling her to more than the mission she had been serving under as a Loreto nun. The poverty she encountered in Calcutta broke her heart, yet through it, the Lord taught her "a lesson concerning the compensatory capacity for happiness. The mere act of placing her hand on each dirty little head occasioned, she discovered, extraordinary joy" (Spink 39). On September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa encountered a "call within a call" (Spink 45) to "leave the convent and help the poor while living among them." (Spink 46). With much courage, the little nun asked her superiors to allow her to leave the order of Loreto nuns and start a new order called the Missionaries of Charity. Her new order would "would work for the poorest of the poor in the slums in a spirit of poverty and cheerfulness. There would be a special vow of charity for the poor. There would be no institutions, hospitals or big dispensaries. The work was to be among the abandoned, those with nobody, the very poorest" (Spink 48). Many people dissuaded her from leaving, trying to explain that there were already many orders working in Calcutta, where she desired to plant her new order. Beyond that were many other reasons for concern, but Mother Teresa would not have it. She pushed on, convinced that she must return to Calcutta with haste. The archbishop pushed back, but ultimately allowed her to return to India to start what eventually would become a worldwide network of missionary houses located all over the world, dedicated to serving the poorest of the poor in every nation.

Mother Teresa herself would go on to win a Nobel Peace Prize, along with many other awards and honors. Despite a forty year long dark period in which she experienced depression, despair, and deep feelings of isolation, she worked to serve the poorest of the poor in countries around the world. Her legacy is one that she did not care to brag about, but in the grand scheme of things is quite remarkable. All of this is why I know and love Mother Teresa, but none of it is

why I chose to write about her in this thesis. I chose to write about her because of her theory that the United States was in fact the poorest country in the world, not because we do not have food or houses or money, but because we are lacking relationships. In her book, *The Simple Path*, Mother described the phenomena she observed in Westernized countries:

> The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty -- it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. (Mother Teresa 79)

For Mother Teresa, this spiritual poverty was worse than the physical poverty she knew so well in India. She was once quoted saying,

> In many ways, it is worse than our poverty in Calcutta. You, in the West, have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness. They feel unloved and unwanted. These people are not hungry in the physical sense, but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don't know what it is. (Palladino n.p.)

Following in Mother Teresa's wake, loneliness was "termed a pandemic" in the 1990s (Sagan n.p.). To this day, this pandemic has America in its grip and is manifesting itself in numerous ways. One fifth of American adults have reported experiencing one or more mental health illnesses in the last year; fifteen percent of American adults are experiencing some form of substance abuse. Ten percent of youth ages 12-17 self reported experiencing a mental health illness; six percent self reported experiencing some form of substance abuse (Mental Health

America n.p.). While mental health illnesses and substance abuse are multifaceted issues, loneliness has been directly linked to the development of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety (Sagan n.p.). In fact, studies are now being done that also link loneliness to "specific illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and high blood pressure… engagement with unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and alcohol consumption and…chronic loneliness is… said to decrease physical activity" (Sagan n.p.). Conversely, there is an overabundance of new research showing that having quality relationships impacts how people recover from coronary artery bypass surgeries, how their immune system functions, and how they respond to stress, among other things (Reis & Collins 233). Loneliness is not just an emotional issue; when humans are lonely, every part of us feels it. Ironically, when humans begin to feel lonely, we often collapse in on ourselves, and "activate an avoidance motive of self-preservation" (Fumagalli n.p.). Especially in the United States, where individualism is praised, any admittance of needing another person is shamed into silence. No one wants to admit they are lonely. To do so is a sign of weakness. A vicious cycle begins, as people begin to isolate themselves more to control the feelings of loneliness that pervade every part of their lives. This isolation encourages overconsumption, as discussed in the second chapter of the thesis.

Dotty's ability to reveal her loneliness spoke volumes to me. To St. Teresa, St. Therese, and I, loneliness is not seen as a sign of weakness but a sign of a disordered life. It is simply a sign of humans not living out the fulfillment of their vocation, which is to love (St. Therese of Lisieux 163). Loving requires relationships. Humans need relationships to be fulfilled. This is a belief that entered into the academic world relatively recently, in the 1970s through a theory called Relational Cultural Theory. I will be exploring this theory in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Angel//Empathy

We walked down the street, just looking for people to talk to. The Christ in the City missionary and I chatted about random things, before turning onto a street and finding Angel. She was sitting in a wheelchair, wrapped in rags, smoking a cigarette to stay warm. She gave us a gummy smile, and asked if we had any clean needles. We told her no, but that we had time to talk. She and I talked for the better part of an hour about life. She shared about her family, her mom and the dad she had never met. She said he had named her; that was why when she became homeless she changed her name. She didn't want to be tied to him *anymore. She said* him *like it was a bad word. She wanted to forget that he had any impact on her, but she couldn't. He was a part of her, she said. I thanked her for her story; she smiled her gummy smile and offered me a painting she had been carrying around. I took it, complementing its bright colors. Before I could hand it back, Angel shrugged modestly and wheeled off. Her abrupt exit spoke volumes; she hadn't given me the painting to gain or receive anything, but instead to be seen, to share a piece of herself that hadn't been seen in years.*

Angel wanted to be seen for who she was. This is all any human could want; we desire mutual empathy in relationships as much as we desire breath in our lungs and food in our bellies. This is the core tenant of Relational Cultural Theory. When I first found out about Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), it sounded too good to be true. Its tenants simultaneously felt both glaringly obvious and groundbreaking. It was mind-boggling, to see an idea I had been forming throughout my years at Regis written on paper, and connected to areas of study like psychology and neuroscience. RCT pushes back on a dominant belief about human nature, which is that we are "basically selfish, aggressive, and looking to get more from those around [us]. Self-interest [is] portrayed as the ultimate source of motivation; it [is] viewed as a biological imperative"

(Jordan 233). Instead, "RCT is a theory about our basic interconnectedness, about the inevitability of needing one another throughout our lives. We are wired to connect. We grow through and toward connection throughout our lives…There is not a cutoff on our need for connection—ever!" (Jordan 231). In the context of RCT, humans *are* relationship. We *never* stop needing others; it is through others that we come to know who we are.

One of the founders of RCT, Jean Baker Miller, published a best selling classic, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* in 1978 that discussed many aspects of relationships. In this book, Miller brings into focus a new way of approaching therapy for women; this therapeutic approach provided the tenets for what would become RCT. Miller states, "for everyone–men as well as women–individual development proceeds only by means of connection" (Miller 83) and that one must "place one's faith in others, in the context of being a social being related to other human beings." Essentially, RCT rests on the fact that we are composed of our relationships, past and present. We grow through positive relationships and they are the source of meaningfulness in our lives. Negative relationships, on the other hand, can wreak havoc on our mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. Through relationships we are empowered and pushed to greater heights; conversely, the opposite can happen if a relationship is not composed of the foundation of mutual empowerment.

Americans have been taught to believe that relationships detract from personal growth, and that as we grow we should move "toward increased separation and autonomy" (Banks 168). This makes sense; for many decades, psychology suggested that humans are "seen as being the most developed (i.e., healthy and good) when [we] demonstrated autonomy, independence, invulnerability, and agency…Self-enhancement, self-esteem, self-help, mobility, and freedom from binding ties [are] at a premium value" (Jordan 229). Of course, the idea of self cannot be

ignored, but it is not the end all be all. Self actualization in terms of being completely free from all other organisms on Earth should never be the actual goal. This idea of letting go of self and connecting with others is easier said than achieved.

We are creatures built to connect like we are built to breathe air, but it seems like we are being told to hold our breath in a sense, as we are encouraged to walk away from the thing that gives us life: connection. In the modern world, true, deep connection has no real value. It would seem that what is true in science holds true in life: Humans tend to pay attention to what we can quantify. It is easy to look at a number, whether it be in your bank account or on a social media page, and base your worth on it, thus making it harder to look at the real life relationships you have and explain why they are important when no numbers accompany them. Relationships are qualitative, not quantitative; we assign them little value, especially as they pertain to a person's perceived sense of worth and wellbeing.

This inability to assign importance to relationship and connection is changing, however, since Miller and her colleagues began developing RCT in the 1980s. In her work, Miller produced a list of "5 good things" she believed people experience in "growth-fostering" relationships: "1. a sense of zest [an energy that spontaneously comes from a mutual, healthy relationship]; 2. clarity about oneself, the other and the relationship; 3. a sense of personal worth; 4. the capacity to be creative and productive, and 5. the desire for more connection" (Jordan 2). Conversely, when people are experiencing relational dysfunction, whether that be engaging in a relationship that does not foster growth, or the loss of relationship due to disagreement, five things may happen that negate the "5 good things": "1. a drop in energy; 2. a decreased sense of worth; 3. less clarity and more confusion; 4. less productivity; 5. a withdrawal from all relationships" (Jordan 3). These five things can have a serious effect on a person's mental and

physical health. Amy Banks, a psychiatrist and advocate for RCT, writes extensively on the neurological effects of relational dysfunction, and often cites the fact that "social connections are so essential to the health and well-being of humans that they share a neurological pathway with physical pain" (Banks 171). Humans not only emotionally register when they are not experiencing the 5 good things in relationships, but physically *feel* it as well.

RCT paved the way for Banks' research surrounding the neurology of relationship, which provides a scientific basis for why relationships are so important to the human experience. RCT puts life into a new perspective, one that makes sense when observing the lived experience of people in all walks of life. Angel's gift of self and of her painting was a beautiful lesson in how each one of us simply wants to be seen by others. Angel taught me about empathy. This is a concept hinted at in the works of both St. Teresa of Calcutta and St. Therese of Lisieux, and it is one of the tenets of RCT. In the next chapter, the similarities between all three world views will be discussed. From the culmination of these three works, as well as other pieces used earlier in the thesis, I put together a plan of action to begin actively creating a Culture of Encounter.

Chapter 6: Tony//Realization and Fulfillment

Standing in a small group of people outside of Holy Ghost Catholic Church, I felt like an outsider. Everyone was talking, but I was just watching. That's when I noticed him; he seemed to be doing what I was. I felt a jolt of recognition as I realized we were wearing the same jacket. Albeit, mine was nicer, the newer version of his, which had holes in the elbows, gray dirt and food stains obscuring the light brown color I knew was underneath. Nevertheless, that was how I struck up a conversation. "Hey" I said, sidling up to him, "I like your jacket." He turned around to face me fully, and smiled, revealing three half rotted teeth. "Yours ain't so bad neither," he said, still smiling. After exchanging first names we talked about where Tony was going (Santa Fe, New Mexico), and where he had been (34 of the 50 state capitals). He quizzed me on state capitals and size, appalled that I didn't know that New Mexico was the fourth largest state in the continental US. As we talked, I learned that Tony suffered from debilitating, incurable medical conditions. After discussing this for a while, we both fell silent and simply stood together in the sharp morning air. After a while, he smirked, looked up at the sky and said, "Damn, but life's still good. I'm standing vertical, ain't I? That's enough for me. Means I get to be with my friends. If I'm vertical, I'm good."

Tony found a sense of purpose in the relationships around him. Despite struggling with a life altering medical condition, his friends gave him hope, got him standing up, and fulfilled him in a way nothing else could. This is exactly what St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Teresa of Calcutta, and RCT get at. All three of these world views, discussed in previous chapters, point to the human desire to love and be loved. St. Therese of Lisieux clearly influenced Mother Teresa, as Mother Teresa chose to take St. Therese's name when she took her formal vows. Mother Teresa's Poverty of Loneliness is built off of Therese's proclamation that "Love comprises all vocations"

as Mother Teresa boiled down that the poverty of loneliness can be explained by a deep feeling of being unloved. There is an overabundance of material items flowing from store fronts in Westernized countries. Speaking from personal experience, there is an unspoken belief that if citizens of these countries buy enough of the right things, happiness will be achieved. We buy and buy and buy, and yet, it is ultimately not enough.

If we listen to the three voices aforementioned in this thesis, we can see why. According to St. Therese, the ultimate human vocation is to love. We are made for love and to love others. To put this statement into conversation with RCT, I believe this overarching idea of being made for love points to the idea that we are built for intentional, growth-fostering relationships. These relationships inform who we are and who we will become. When we experience relational dysfunction, we experience poverty, in the form of loneliness, in which we feel as though we are not able to know ourselves as we relate to the world because we are not able to relate to others.

Throughout my research for this thesis, I have noticed that there are three important things that need to be done to continue fighting for relationships, and ultimately fighting for our humanity and creating a culture of encounter. First, we need to admit we have a problem. The bulk of America is like me, I think. We know something is wrong, but we are not sure what it is. We see the growing numbers of mental health illnesses and substance abuse, but have no idea how to combat those numbers, so we (I) fall back on spending more to make ourselves feel better, convinced (again) that this emptiness we feel can be fixed with material things. We give our friends gifts and money, rather than our time and full attention. All the while, at least in my own heart, I can feel the little girl inside of me screaming that there is something that is missing, something that cannot be explained away with the newest iPhone.

Second, we need to acknowledge what the issue is. In *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Kimmerer tells readers that "the old teachings recognized that Windigo nature is in all of us, so the monster was created in stories, that we might learn why we should recoil from the greedy part of ourselves…" and that we must always "acknowledge the two faces—the light and the dark side of life—in order to understand ourselves. See the dark, recognize its power, but do not feed it." (Kimmerer 306). We cannot fully embrace ourselves if we do not acknowledge the dark part of ourselves. I often feel that overconsumption is, in some way, not an acknowledgement of our dark, Windigo nature, but a twisted ignorance of it. We do not want to admit that it exists, but in avoiding it, it controls us and our decisions. Simply acknowledging the Windigo in each of our hearts will help us to find solutions and force it to relinquish our control over us.

Third, in embracing our true nature, both light and dark, I believe we come to discover we are built for relationships. We use the innate desire for relationships to stand in the way of our societally born desire to use people for our own gain. Author and professor Linda Land-Closson suggests "that we take the risk of living with a presumption of relationship as a way to move through our divisions…" (Land-Closson 17). Land-Closson coins a term I find quite invigorating: Relationships as non-violent resistance (Land-Closson 16). Instead of running from deep, growth-fostering relationships, we must delve into them, and pour ourselves into others. I am not saying this will heal mental illnesses or substance abuse, but I do think it will help what I believe to be the root of the issue, which is the fact that we tend to use and exploit others for our own gain. This is a hallmark of capitalism; we must fight against it, because if we don't, we risk losing our souls. Kimmerer suggests that we must do this by becoming grateful, stating that "gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis. A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and of each other is medicine…" With a society and economy that will foster deep, true emotions

of gratitude and be structured around such gratitude, Kimmerer believes wealth will be understood as "having enough to share" and that riches will be "counted in mutually beneficial relationships" (Kimmerer 377). The idea of relationships as resistance seemingly has the emotion of gratitude at its core.

Through exercising gratitude and forming relationships as resistance, I think what will come about is a Culture of Encounter. I first encountered this term at Christ in the City, a non-profit organization that serves people experiencing homelessness through creating relationships with them. They talk about addressing poverty at its core, which they believe to be chiefly relational. Essentially, I believe the phrase Culture of Encounter can be summed up by the C. S. Lewis quote: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal… It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors" (Lewis 8). People are more than the here and now, they carry worlds behind their eyes and oceans of feelings in their hearts.

To encounter this and come to believe it is vitally important, despite most of our world telling us it is not. Tony was able to see this; encountering his friends every day gave him purpose and informed his sense of self. Humans are more than a means of production; we should always engage with each other in a way that acknowledges this reality. I believe a Culture of Encounter will come about if we do the first three steps mentioned above: Admit there is an issue, acknowledge what that issue is, and finally, use relationships as resistance with gratitude as the basis of these relationships. If we can do these three things, I believe the long term result will be a Culture of Encounter. In the conclusion I will discuss how I have seen a Culture of Encounter lived out in many different ways, in many different walks of life.

Chapter 7: John & Nancy//Relationships

As the freezing air bit at my exposed face, the cold winter sun glinted off the freshly fallen snow, bringing tears to my eyes. I sighed, wiped my tears away, and walked towards the back entrance of Stout Street Health Center. As a person brushed by me, I took a deep breath, and then immediately regretted it. The smell of chronically unwashed body overrode the smell of fresh snow, and I silently gagged. I looked up, recognized the person who had walked by me and smiled. John, a tall, curly haired man with a speech impediment and anger issues stumbled into the street."Be careful, John!" I called cheerfully, hoping he would get out of the street. He looked back at me, yelled something unintelligible yet clearly angry and motioned at his feet. I looked down and winced, realizing John was not wearing any shoes or socks. I could not imagine the pain he felt as he walked slowly across the snowy street; it was as if he were braving a bed of hot coals. I could only think that a street of frozen ice was not any better. I ran over to him and invited him to walk with me to Stout Street, where I knew socks and shoes would be waiting for John. I watched as the director of the eye clinic, Nancy, piled John's arms full of donated items he had not even asked for, the entire time, talking to him about his life. Not knowing anything more than the patient's name, Nancy was pouring things into his hands without question, and pouring herself into his heart, offering a relationship to someone in great need of one.

To me, this story shouts of the importance of relationships, even ones that are not long term or long lasting. Essentially, what I saw as I watched Nancy was a personal Culture of Encounter. John needed the shoes Nancy gave him, and also needed the love she showed him. This is something that can be exercised anywhere, in any socioeconomic structure. I say this because for a long time, I have been in search of a perfectly structured society. In my mind, this

would be one that values individual human life beyond a shadow of a doubt, not because of what humans can put into an economy but simply because they exist. This type of government would outlaw anything that exploits the human person, not because it has to, but instead because it wants to, and sees the intrinsic value in doing so. Through the classes I took at Regis that discussed one aspect of our economy or government, I often felt like I was spinning trying to find something, anything, that would be better than what capitalism seemed to be offering the citizens of the United States. I floundered through readings of socialism and communism, and debated back and forth with my father about the good aspects of the alternative economic and social structures. I wondered over and over again, what is the right way? Which one should I choose to support?

I asked a spiritual director this exact question as I again was faced with the darkest side of capitalism in my RCC 420H class. She said something that will stick with me, that gave me a lot of peace and made me feel as though there was a way forward in this mess called life. Essentially, she said there is nothing on this Earth that will constitute a perfectly structured society. We do what we can where we are placed. It seems slightly cliche now, but in the moment, those words struck me to the core; I swear proverbial scales fell from my eyes. That is why I am not advocating for a socioeconomic shift or complete revolution. I cannot find anything that will do exactly what I want it to, honestly. Instead, I want to focus on a cultural shift from within. We need to start looking at individual hearts and seeing people for who they are, good and bad, and loving them, being deeply, undyingly grateful for their existence and acknowledging them in their fullness. No amount of policy change will incite this necessary change; it is something that has to happen at an individual level first and then it will move outward and up. This is a paradoxical solution, to suggest solving individualism at the individual

level. Capitalism pervaded the human heart and exploited the darkest human tendencies to subvert and use others for individual gain. At this point, I do not believe those tendencies can be rightly ordered in another top down situation. It is seemingly contradictory, but I believe the only way to address the rampant individualism and lack of relationship that capitalism has encouraged us to create is to become aware of the fact that we as individuals need to start moving outside of ourselves and towards others.

It is important to recognize that this is a multifaceted issue. Capitalism does not just wound our relationships with other human beings, but with ourselves and with the outside world around us. Further studies of this complicated issue may include discussing how capitalism has encouraged humans to see the world as a product to be used rather than something to be reverenced and worked with. A Culture of Encounter should not start and stop with how we treat our fellow human beings, but instead extend from there into how we treat the world around us and ourselves. It would be interesting to explore how the tenets of a Culture of Encounter could be used in environmental practices.

This Culture of Encounter begins with others. Once we begin to love other human beings in the way we ought to, then we can take this way of life and spread it to other aspects of life. When I think of this term, Culture of Encounter, I think concretely about my parents, tirelessly working within the public school system to educate and empower students living in rural Colorado. I think of countless people in that same little town stopping to hug me at the grocery store when I come back for winter break, remembering our last encounter and asking me about my classes. I think of Trudy, the seventy-seven year old pilates aficionado who I met at the airport, telling me how she met, married and lost the love of her life all in the span of one year back in 1989. I think of the professors at Regis University taking time to make special

appointments with students outside of their office hours when needed. I think of my boyfriend developing deep, caring relationships with his coworkers at Allegion Corporation. And of course, I think of John and Nancy. To the world, many of these people and instances appear to be nothing special, yet they are everything. Creating a Culture of Encounter is easier said than done, but it is a worthwhile pursuit; the only one that truly matters. We must be the first ones to look at others with full moons in each eye and let our actions speak the words every heart longs to hear: You are loved, you are seen, you matter to me.

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