Becoming Tapestry: A Multimodal Ethnographic Podcast Exploring

Storytelling and Belonging in a Faith-Adjacent Foster Youth Mentoring Network

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Abstract

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Against the backdrop of religious disaffiliation and social fragmentation in the United States, the future of both *practices* and *venues* for American religious education is uncertain. In this study of Tapestry, a church-run foster youth mentoring network, and St. Sebastian's Summer Camp, a predominantly Latinx church-run community day camp, I develop and document one promising pairing in response to this quandary: an adapted form of Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2012) as a communal spiritual *practice* appropriate to what I call *faith-adjacent spaces*. Such spaces are convened by modes of activity separate from formal institutional programs and rituals but still connected to religion in meaningful, visible ways.

In this participatory multimodal ethnography, I draw on socio-spatial and narrative analytic frameworks to reveal and explore (1) organizational practices of belonging that already exist at Tapestry, (2) the function of new collaboratively designed Digital Storytelling practices at Tapestry and St. Sebastian's, and (3) the role of my various researcher-facilitator identities in this work. I present these findings in the form of a four-part audio documentary that interweaves recordings from my ethnographic fieldwork, excerpts from the artifacts that participants and I co-created, audio engagements with academic and practitioner literature, and researcher narrative and analysis. The annotated production scripts for *Becoming Tapestry* comprise both the bulk of this manuscript and, together with the four podcast episodes themselves, the dissertation proper.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many individuals and communities who supported this effort:

Dedication

To Fiona, with prayers for the hope and trust to make meaning of a highly ambiguous world.

Preface: How to 'Read' this Dissertation

The best way to "read" this dissertation is to listen to it. Everything in the sections following this one is recorded[1] except the footnotes, italicized production notes, and references. Moreover, I wrote the scripts to be listened to rather than read. You can find *Becoming Tapestry* wherever you get your podcasts or listen at becomingtapestry.net/playlist. I encourage you to engage the way so many of us do with other on-demand audio: from the car or public transit, or while doing chores, or perhaps even as an accompaniment to exercise (NPR & Edison Research, 2021). Although I plan to do some short formal "audiencings" (Luttrell, 2010) at the clip, scene, or even act level, I do *not* recommend you host a listening party (Sharon & John, 2019) or otherwise try to listen in one sitting. While I have done my best in the time available to streamline and simplify my writing and also to keep the narrative moving minute-to-minute (Blumberg, 2014a), you will probably need to take breaks—just as you would when reading a more traditionally presented dissertation.

Of course, there are plenty of good reasons to literally *read* this document, either in parallel with or before, after, or in lieu of listening to the *Becoming Tapestry* podcast. Foremost among these is the fact that many people cannot hear, or cannot hear well.[2] Moreover, I know that still more people would *much* rather read than listen. I live with someone who falls into this

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[1] The scripts are not, however, strict verbatims. For example, I have largely removed verbal ticks, such as "um," from transcriptions of field audio. The studio recording process also frequently led me to identify places where my sentence construction was especially problematic for listenability. I often attempted to "revise aloud" these sentences as I recorded various takes. I continue to find (and address) places in the scripts where I did not subsequently update the written sentences during the audio editing process.

[2] As a preacher I am keenly aware of this limitation of the sermon genre and am grateful that real-time transcription is starting to make it more accessible (e.g., Jarmulak, 2020).

latter category, and I confess that the resulting regular awareness of the limitations of podcast reception originally worried me with respect to composing my dissertation in this format. I later realized that I myself have a similarly strong preference, just with the opposite polarity. Indeed, I digested a lot of very dense academic material via the VoiceDream screen-reading app and even the Kindle app's read-aloud capabilities (Oliver, 2019a), and I would be thrilled if more scholars and publishers would begin to develop audio-first dissemination and engagement strategies.

All this to say: I recognize that for those whose "reading" choice is not determined primarily by accessibility concerns, we are in the realm here of personal preference and/or scholarly habitus, perhaps very firmly ingrained. Consequently, I offer the remaining advice and notes of this section in a spirit of expectation-setting rather than forceful prescription:

Listen to the four main episodes in order. One reason I have retained the word "chapter" in addition to "episode" is that the former emphasizes the serial rather than episodic development of the documentary. Although I occasionally reintroduce characters and frequently make callbacks to previous material, I do not intend for the chapters to make sense in a standalone way. Each builds on the previous one(s).

Do **expect material that will present all the traditional "work" of a dissertation. *Do not* expect the same level of detail or the traditional order of presentation.** As I say in Episode 4's final methodological discourse, I believe everything that needs to be present in an educational ethnography is indeed represented somewhere across the four main episodes. However, two affordances of documentary podcasting shape how I parcel out this material: (1) *Podcasting is a (largely) open publishing medium with a bias toward popular accessibility.* Indeed, the possibility of developing a larger and more diverse audience than dissertations

typically do motivated many of my choices. These choices often included how much detail to offer, especially technical detail.[3] In some cases, I have elaborated in footnotes or via interstitial bonus episodes. In other cases, I share (or hope to share) further detail via the project website or in subsequent specialist publications. (2) *You can't (yet) skim an audio recording, at least not in the same precise way you can skim a written text.* If a podcast gets boring or confusing—say, in the midst of a highly technical epistemological or methodological discursus—it's impossible to "skip ahead" and land somewhere intentional—say, the end of such a discursus. Given my choice of format and genre, I had to let *narrative* concerns drive the development of the "text," rather than the traditional ordering of sections in a written dissertation. With respect to theoretical and methodological material in particular, I took a "just-in-time and just-enough" approach; I try to give you the information you need at the point in the story when you need it.

Do **expect enough signposting and commentary to keep you oriented. *Do not* expect the level of explicitness and repetition common to many academic forms and genres.** I try to follow the storyteller's dictum of "show, don't tell" as faithfully as possible, trusting the listener "to comprehend the story and make sense of it without an expert [always] pointing out the significance of everything going on in the room" (Makagon & Neumann, 2008a, p. 13). In other words, I have answered my research questions in the form of *stories* more so than in the form of *arguments*. Thus, I suspect this "text" will land quite differently from how a traditional written dissertation would, though I hope no less satisfyingly or convincingly.

Let your curiosity guide your engagement choices with respect to the interstitial bonus episodes. I have placed them in between main chapters at the points where they are most

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[3] To be blunt: Audio production requires a tremendous amount of labor. Something had to give, and often that something was the level of detail, either breadth or depth, that written dissertations frequently offer.

relevant, but I don't think you necessarily need to listen to them in that order or at all. For what it's worth, I consider the four main script-chapters and the four corresponding episode recordings to comprise the dissertation proper; these are what my committee received at evaluation time.

Remember that the citations will still be there in the script when you're finished listening. At least one beta listener noted the frequently high cognitive load of the listening experience, and my subsequent edits have not entirely eliminated this challenge. If you are *listening* rather than reading, I suggest you not add to the load through frequent reference searches. Save them for afterward and follow up with ones you're still curious about by the end.

Refer to the project website (becomingtapestry.net) for more information and artifacts. In an early phase of my design and analysis, I identified that an interactive, rhizomatic, and visual presentation of research data would complement the very linear, word- and sound-heavy medium in which I have chosen primarily to work. For example, I created a densely cross-referenced timeline of fieldwork outings; the timeline entries are annotated to reflect my exploratory analysis of field notes and other ethnographic data. I was not able by the time of podcast publication to systematically complete these playful forms of data sharing. Still, I make them available with the goal of someday finishing—and of inspiring others' experimentation.

I hope these notes give you what you need to engage with this somewhat idiosyncratic project in a satisfying way. I also hope I convince you in the process that ethnographic podcasting and other forms of audio scholarship have significant potential to foster popular awareness, practitioner impact, methodological innovation, and epistemological and sensorial richness. Or perhaps, by the time you are reading this preface, projects like this one will not seem quite so idiosyncratic. A podcaster-researcher can dream.

Chapter 1: No Group, Only Group Formation

The audio version of this chapter is available at becomingtapestry.net/chapter1.

In the scripts that follow, I have hybridized the conventions for dissertations formatted according to APA Style and Teachers College guidelines with conventions for writing usable radio scripts.[4] Lightly adapting conventions from Klivans (2019) and MacAdam (2015) for readability, I will use typography as follows:
- author's narration (radio shorthand: "tracks") in roman typeface,
- **excerpts from audio data or quotations from recorded sources (radio shorthand: "actualities" or "acts") in bold typeface,**
- *ambient sound descriptions (radio shorthand: "ambi") and other production-oriented commentary in italic typeface, and*
- when significant, scholarly commentary in footnotes.[5]

1.1 Cold Open: A Church that Doesn't Look Like Church

Kyle (field recording, October 17, 2019): I guess the question for me first is sort of, like, when and how did you decide that you weren't planting a church?

Sam: Wow. It's sort of a complicated question because it's, I mean, it was a journey, right?

It's October 17, 2019. I'm sitting in a downtown cafe speaking to two participants in a research project.

Sam: And in that journey that began with the thought that we would plant something that looked traditionally churched only to just to come to the conclusion we weren't going to plant anything that looked traditionally church only to discover that we've planted a church that doesn't look like church.

Sam is a pastor, as you've probably figured out. Pastors who start new churches are sometimes called church "planters." That's why he and I are both using that word.

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[4] My most significant change to the Teachers College guidelines is that I am single spacing the script-chapters. A script has to be read aloud from a screen or page with as little manipulation as possible. Noiseless reading gets more difficult in formats with low word density. I am using block-style rather than indented paragraphs for the same reason.

[5] I do my best to let the narration itself do the necessary scholarly work over the course of the entire series, adding "off-air" comments sparingly.

Sam: I mean, it was definitely at the end of the first year we sat … and thought about, what year did he say, no, I don't think it's going to look like a traditional or it's not, you're not going to plant a church.

The "he" that Sam mentioned is the regional church authority in their denomination—sort of their boss.

Hannah: It maybe had been even later than that, may have been more like a couple of years in.

That second voice is Hannah, also a pastor. Hannah and Sam had come to this West Coast metropolitan area more than five years earlier. They are somewhat peculiar church planters.

Sam: Yeah, a couple years in … And we had come to him and said, we don't think we can collect a traditional … congregation because most of our mentors are people of … no faith or a nominal faith.

Sam just mentioned "mentors," and that's the first big hint about why the organization they *did* plant is, in his words, "a church that doesn't look like [a] church." Sam and Hannah used to lead a much more typical congregation in a different coastal city. And through some of that church's outreach work, they started to learn a lot about their state's foster care system.

Here's Sam telling the story of their organization's founding to a group of new volunteers. I call this group Tapestry, though that's not its real name. We'll get into this later, but almost all the proper nouns in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I made this field recording just two days after our chat in that noisy coffee shop, at a training Sam and Hannah offer each month to begin incorporating new volunteers. The co-directors are sitting at the head of a conference table at a Tapestry partner agency's headquarters (field notes, October 19, 2019).

Sam tells them that as Hannah learned more about the foster system, she came to him in shock about what she was finding. For example, about one in five foster youth become "instantly homeless" when they turn 18, and only half are gainfully employed by the age of 24 (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). So they decided to take action but were brought up short again when they started researching how.

Sam (field recording, October 19, 2019): We're both, uh, clergy … and we started looking for ways for the our church to get plugged into being a support … We stuck with our, you know, what we call our denomination, … and couldn't find any, where to plug in and felt

more and more that we'd wanted to do more than just them write a check. We wanted to be involved somehow and to be as much of a support … as we could.

As I listened to this story for what was now for me the third time, I noticed both similarities and differences to other church planting narratives. For example, Sam has just said, in a typically understated way, that they had heard a call from God. Sam and Hannah couldn't believe some of what they were learning about the statistically likely experiences and outcomes for people in foster care. Their religious impulse to accompany and care for marginalized and vulnerable people—well that voice started speaking. It grew louder and louder until it changed their lives in incredibly significant ways.

And [we] were invited by a family foundation … to look at starting something … What we heard over and over again was the need for mentors. And in our own research … learned something that we all sort of intuitively know but doesn't get named very often: that everybody needs someone who loves them. And if you can have the presence of a caring adult in your life, for just one hour a week, the trajectory of your life improves … What we're going to share with you today is that concept of community, a team of mentors building community around a youth for one hour a week. And bringing that care and love and concern and compassion to that young person we believe makes all the difference in their life.

Now, I'm a pastor like Sam and Hannah. In fact, Hannah and I went to seminary together. But I'm also an educational media researcher. I study how telling stories and making media weaves people together. This podcast, and the heavily annotated script I'm reading from—it's part of my dissertation.

I've been hanging out with Tapestry for close to three years now: asking questions, taking notes, making recordings, saving emails, and sometimes being welcomed into the lives of those mentor teams to invite them to share stories and make meaning.

Along the way, the Covid-19 pandemic set in, which shook up my research process and many of Tapestry's own ways of being together. But the adaptations that followed—they've been instructive too.

During my extended immersion, I've learned at least as much about forming community as I did in three years of seminary. And the community I've studied—and kinda joined—"doesn't look like" the ones Hannah, Sam, and I were trained to lead. Not at first anyway.

This is a story for people interested in stories. In the broadest sense, I hope it can be a story for people interested in the future of American religion and spirituality. Tapestry is flourishing at a time when so many communities, religious and otherwise, are deflating and floundering (Putnam, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2019). It's always been important to me that my dissertation mean something to my colleagues in religious leadership. I wanna both challenge and inspire them with what I've learned about what makes Tapestry tick (research question 1).

More specifically, I set out to understand the role storytelling itself currently plays in Tapestry and to explore ways the organization might expand on those practices and incorporate methods from the Digital Storytelling movement (research question 2).

These professional motivations underscore that the project is also, inevitably, a story about me. It's a story about the competing priorities I try to balance as I participate in the life of this organization: as a researcher, a storyteller, and a minister (research question 3).

Each of the four main episodes has a two-act structure. Those acts are sandwiched between a cold open, the kind of introductory segment I'm finishing up right now, and a coda, intended to summarize each episode and bring the big ideas together. And we need to divide the main narrative up still further, which podcasting experts insist is essential to holding listeners' attention (e.g., Blumberg, 2014a). So I include a couple breaks after each of the main acts. These will help connect the show to existing scholarship and give us additional tools for understanding the unfolding story.

Slowly fade in theme music.

In this first episode, Act 1 is a brief audio autobiography, to give you more context for what I'm up to here. Act 2 is a deeper introduction to the organization. We'll explore the scene that first confirmed for me that my colleagues and the network they're building are up to something pretty special.

So welcome, dear listener. I'm really glad you're here. This is *Becoming Tapestry,* a dissertation podcast.

Fade up theme music then slowly fade out.

1.2 Act 1: Why We're Here

Chapter 1: No Group, Only Group Formation. Act 1: Why We're Here.

We started things off in this episode in the middle of the action: five years into Tapestry's story, ten months into my research. That's a common move in storytelling of all sorts, and one that documentary podcasters especially love.

Hopefully by now I have you a bit intrigued. Hannah and Sam are two of the central characters in this story, and I find them endlessly fascinating. You may be wondering how I came to partner with them for my research. That means telling you a little bit more about me.

In academic circles, we say that this info *positions* the researcher. Me being honest about my perspective helps you and I evaluate my credibility. We have to be able to assess my claims about what I notice and how I interpret it (Geertz, 1973; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sousanis, 2015).

As I said, I'm a pastor, but I have a somewhat unusual backstory of my own.

When I graduated from seminary, I was hired to be the "digital missioner" for the school's teaching and learning resource center. My first job was to bring our work online.

Our center had always curated resources and trained leaders for Christian education. So if you've ever heard a story about a Sunday school teacher, chances are that person got some training from a center like ours.

Anyway, in the past that meant physical resources like printed curriculum and in-person events like Sunday school teacher training. When I was hired in 2012, we knew the work would increasingly shift to writing blog posts, recording YouTube videos, and convening online and hybrid models of professional development.

But the other part of my job was thinking about how technology was actually changing religious leadership itself. As we practiced our way into being a *resource center* that could thrive on the Internet, we slowly gathered a network of colleagues learning how to lead *churches* that could thrive on the Internet. Ministers talk a lot about "reading" their congregations and surrounding communities, and what we found in this "text," as it were, was a social landscape increasingly shaped by the new media ecology (Lytle, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Zomorodi (Lifelong Learning at VTS, 2016, 3:45–4:40): As Kyle said, I host a show, it's a podcast. Any podcast listeners here? If you don't know how to podcast, I know someone who will show you how to podcast. [laughter]

Duck recording under narration.

If you recognize this speaker's voice, you won't be surprised to hear that this moment was pretty much my proudest professional achievement.

And the reason why I love podcasting so much is this deep intimacy that I am able to have with my listener. It is a very different medium … I've been a TV reporter, I've been a radio broadcaster. But being a podcast host … has made me feel close to my audience in a way that I have never felt before … So as Kyle said, what we do is it'a tech show about being human. But to me, it's really about telling stories ...

That's Manoush Zomorodi, who was then the host of a WNYC technology podcast called *Note to Self.* You may know her as the current host of NPR's TED Radio Hour. Zomorodi agreed to speak to the 2016 gathering of the e-Formation Learning Community, that network of technology-curious church leaders I'd led the assembly of over the last four years. She gave a really media-rich talk about the many ways our technology is changing us.

But she also talked a lot about how she grows her audience by forming them into a community learning how to claim their power in a digital world. Her favorite way to do this was by soliciting voice memos from listeners as we participated in little projects and challenges. Her show kicked off a shift in my thinking about media making. Increasingly, I recognized it as a radically collaborative endeavor, a team sport. And not just the team making the show in the studio.

Anyway, this moment on stage with Manoush was also one of my last in that job. By now I was living in New York City as the seminary's first telecommuting employee. My *wife's* first pastor job had brought us to New York the year before, and the change in scenery had prompted some soul-searching for me. About ten weeks after running my final e-Formation Conference, I walked into the school of education at Columbia University. It was my first semester as a full-time doctoral student in educational media. I wanted to get out of my church leader bubble and engage with more fresh ideas about what it means to make meaning by making media.

What I found at Columbia was a community of teachers and researchers steeped in current theory, connected across many communities of practice, and boldly committed to trying new things. I didn't know a lot about my new advisor, educational anthropologist Dr. Lalitha Vasudevan. I knew the research group she co-directed was called the Media and Social Change Lab, or MASCLab. And I knew what intrigued her about taking on a techie pastor as an advisee was my interest in participatory, media-based storytelling.

Fade in MASCLab podcast theme music.

Announcers: MASCLab is a hub for multimodal and digital scholarship that explores the relationship between media and our changing society. We support, curate and create media intended to spark dialog and social change, and the development of pedagogy that uses media to foster civic engagement …

Fade out podcast intro.

Helping launch the MASCLab podcast got me hooked on exploring scholarly ideas in audio stories. Sometimes we produced interviews with research partners that explored important themes and challenges in the work (Oliver & Vasudevan, 2017). Other times we summarized and unpacked the substance of more traditionally disseminated research projects in what we hoped was a more accessible way (Devoe & Literat, 2017).

The project was a joy, and I was learning a lot about both educational research and media production. But I confess I sometimes wondered if it was the best use of a bunch of grad students' time in an academic system that rewards people who write things: books, journal articles, and, at least once in a scholar's career, a dissertation.

But that was also the most exciting part: Our little corner of the academic world was asking some questions that resist the status quo. And in this pursuit we had some excellent role models.

Jackson (Teachers College, Columbia University, 2021, 8:36–9:44): I thought I would start with what for me is maybe one of the driving questions in my own, at least, intellectual pursuits. And it's a version of the question of what actually doesn't count as scholarship.

This is Dr. John Jackson Jr., dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. This clip is from his Sachs Lecture at Teachers College, which was called "What Scholarship Looks and Sounds Like."

What forms of legitimate intellectual activity do and do not get understood in the context of what we've been calling at Penn, at least, multimodal research? And this question of what counts and what doesn't as an intellectual activity, as forms of scholarship, are important not just I think for academics in higher ed or for people at TC who are trying to understand the changing terrain of education in the contemporary moment.

I'm going to come back to Jackson's specific argument about non-textual forms of scholarship in Episode 3. For now let it suffice to say that he started his talk with the story of his career as a researcher and filmmaker. When he was a grad student at Columbia, he wrote traditional kinds of anthropology but also made movies, *at first literally in secret*. It was a substantive part of his

intellectual inquiry, but lots of people told him that his academic colleagues wouldn't take him seriously if he focused too much on film as his primary scholarly medium. He did it anyway, thank God, and toward the end of his lecture's introduction, my ears perked up when Dean Jackson said this:

Jackson (32:41–33:07): One of the things that's made me proudest, of the ten years we've spent trying to work on this at Penn, is that—in a sea shift from what I experienced as a graduate student—over five years ago now, one of our PhD students here in the Annenberg School actually was the first student in the history of the University of Pennsylvania to graduate with an all-film, all-visual dissertation.

Not for the first time, I got excited by the challenge and opportunity of making my whole dissertation a podcast. Could it be an all-audio presentation of the audio-rich engagements I was having with my participants? It seemed to make sense given that a big part of what I was going to be doing was analyzing all that audio.

I have to admit, I have resisted this path as much as I've followed it. It's energizing, but also scary. I've edited hundreds of hours of audio in my career, and it is painfully slow work. Like, it's the one thing I do even more slowly than writing. And as you've probably already figured out, I am not a voice actor, and I have not done a lot of script writing for audio. It's a totally different medium, and I've had to learn how to write very differently: sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Still, I tried producing a pilot episode (Oliver, 2019d) about my dissertation's pilot study—I'll have more to say about that later on—and it received a good reception at an important education conference at Penn. Most importantly, when my commitment wavered in the course of presenting my proposal, one of my committee members called me out:

Ioana: What I was, what I want to hear more about is the podcasting element. I was expecting it to be in the proposal more because I know it's so close to your heart.

This is Dr. Ioana Literat. She's the associate director of MASCLab and another important thought partner for me in the idea of podcasting *as research*.

Ioana: What's the relationship between digital storytelling and podcasting? Yeah. That's another major contribution you're going to be making … podcasting is very now. Podcasting can circumvent a lot of the ethical issues that you bring up … You have a committee that is very open and encouraging. So I think you should take advantage of this

because I think you can make a really important contribution and do something that you love doing.

So the idea to produce my dissertation as a podcast evolved slowly through many conversations on mic and off. It was seeded by several years of wondering how the new media ecology is changing religious leadership and was watered by several more asking how possibilities for multimodal scholarship and media were actually changing how we might do academic research.

Now that I've brought you up to speed on who I am and how that identity shaped the form of this project, I need to tell you a bit more about one of its major themes. There's a moment from the MASCLab podcast that will help me do that. In a lot of ways, it helped me set my research agenda in religious education and social change. It also gave me an occasion to reconnect with another media pro I had once brought to the e-Formation Conference.

Sarah (Oliver, 2017): I'm Sarah Lefton and I founded and am now the creative director of BimBam, we used to be called G-dcast. We're an organization in Oakland, California that animates the Hebrew Bible.

The summer after my first year at Teachers College, Sarah and I did some teaching together at a writer's workshop for pastors and rabbis. She helped me see the connections between, on the one hand, what I was learning in my classes on communication theory, and, on the other hand, the day-to-day craft of using media tools to engage people with their faith.

Sarah: Time operates differently on YouTube than it does in a magazine … If you're going to capture somebody into watching your video, it has to be done in the first three seconds. The three seconds is the time at which people are most likely to bounce off of your video because they've decided that you're boring, or you're not getting to the subject they thought you were getting to.

And that's not the way people have traditionally written, right? Very often you get hundreds of words to bring someone in through a beautiful metaphor or to tell a story from your life before you get to the point. You can't do that on YouTube. And I don't know that that's for the better of humanity … It's wagging us, the medium is wagging us.

Thankfully, the medium of *podcasting* wags me a little differently, because I can't tell you what I had for lunch in three seconds. Still, let me take Sarah's good advice and cut to the chase: BimBam was such a hit because it met people where they are: in their homes, on their devices, in classrooms full of people accustomed to media-rich approaches to learning.

And while I can't speak for Sarah in her Jewish context, I can tell you that Mainline Protestant Christians like me have recently committed to "meeting people where they are" for one especially prominent reason: we are uncomfortably aware of where people are *not*. At an accelerating pace, Americans are opting *out* of traditional religious affiliation and participation—and they're opting out from churches like mine the fastest.

So now that you know a little more about me, why I chose to make a podcast for my dissertation, and some of the questions about religion and religious education that matter to me, let me take a break and introduce you to the Nones.

1.3 Break 1: Elizabeth Drescher and Robert Putnam

Fade in lit review music.[6]

Drescher (Humanist Community in Silicon Valley, 2019, 1:03–3:22): Several years ago … all this new data came … identifying this big leap in people who identified as religiously unaffiliated, people who answered "none" when asked with what religion they identified or were affiliated. Big drop.

This episode of *Becoming Tapestry* is made possible by the work of spirituality researcher Elizabeth Drescher. This isn't an advertisement, it's an engagement with her book—in academic lingo, a literature review. A great thing about audio scholarship is you can hear authors' big ideas in their own words *and* their own voices.

So for most of the previous fifty or sixty years, about maybe 7–9 percent of the U.S. population identified as religiously unaffiliated. In these early studies that jumped to about 15 percent. And people were like "What the what? Shut the door on that. That can't be. Right?"

This is Drescher speaking to the Silicon Valley chapter of the American Humanist Association in 2018.

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[6] *Here I'm appropriating a technique for distinguishing documentary podcast content from native advertising. The "special ad music" on Gimlet Media podcasts serves not only to pause the narrative and give the listener a break, as does any podcast advertisement, but also to mark a different authorial relationship between the show's primary content and the material in the ad (Blumberg, 2014b). There's a similar need in a literature review, especially in a spoken format where the annotations denoting quoted or paraphrased material get dropped. Thus, both the "ad music" and the use of the lit review authors' own voices set these breaks apart from the documentary proper.*

So people argued with the data. Religious people tended to say, "It's not a thing. Don't worry about it. They'll get married. They'll have kids. They'll come back." No. That wasn't happening. Non-religious people tended to say. "What? We knew. And maybe there's more." And that proved to be true.

Yes it did. Around the time Drescher was giving this talk, Pew (2019) was conducting another round of surveys that would put the number at 26%, which means this group that isn't a group is about the same size as Evangelicals and as Catholics in the U.S. (Jenkins, 2019). But the changes might not mean what you'd first assume.

We've seen religious unaffiliation grow substantially … probably not because people are becoming less religious but because they're articulating a certain sense of what we would call their spirituality more broadly—in ways that are no longer packaged in religious containers.

This is the heart of Drescher's message in her 2016 book *Choosing Our Religion*. Drawing on original and public survey data and extensive interviews, she shows that it's the traditional trappings of organized religion that most Nones—that's N-O-N-E-S—reject or simply ignore. "No labels except no labels" (p. 21) is Drescher's catchy slogan. Many people who answer None for their religious affiliation still pray, still sometimes attend religious services, still explore questions of meaning and purpose. But they're not especially interested in religious leaders' or communities' sanction of their choices.

The religious lives of Nones also tend to focus more on practices than beliefs.

Drescher (Humanist Community in Silicon Valley, 2019, 28:22–28:47): What we're finding now is that when people talk about things that are spiritually meaningful or religiously significant to them, they're talking about … what it feels like, what it tastes like, what it smells like.

Here's the other big finding from Drescher's research: their priorities aren't actually that different from people with more traditional religious affiliation. People like me, who check with gusto a particular denominational box on those surveys? She calls us "Somes." Get it? Nones and Somes? No religious affiliation and "some" affiliation. Well it turns out that Nones and Somes have a *lot* in common.

Drescher (Humanist Community in Silicon Valley, 2019, 22:46–24:01): The practices that people saw as spiritually significant between Nones and Somes, the affiliated and non-affiliated, were pretty consistently the same … spending time with family, spending

time with friends, sharing and preparing food, spending time with pets and other animals, were the same for both groups … [T]he things that are conventionally measured by Pew and Harris and Gallop and the General Social Survey, attending worship, reading sacred texts, and praying, only prayer made it to the top of the list … the other two … bottom of the list, attending worship, reading sacred texts. Bottom of the list for both groups.

Fade out lit review music.

So what does all this have to do with Tapestry? Why is this "ad that's not an ad" relevant to our story?

For starters, most members of Tapestry are Nones. Remember Sam's story from up top?

Sam: "we had come to him and said, we don't think we can collect a traditional … congregation because most of our mentors are people of … no faith or a nominal faith."

One thing I learned about Tapestry right away is that, intentionally or not, Hannah and Sam have chosen exactly the right approach for swimming with rather than against the growing current Drescher is describing. They built a "church that isn't [*labeled*] a church," made up of some Somes but mostly Nones, focusing on spiritual practices rather than religious beliefs. The practices and the life of the community together are the sources of meaning to guide their work and identity.

Before I continue, let me say that of course there is a legitimate critique of this approach. Many of my colleagues would say that prevailing demographic trends shouldn't dictate how religious leaders prioritize their mission. If anything, they would say, we need to double down on the traditionally religious side of things: Isn't focusing less on beliefs—and less on practices like worship attendance and bible reading, the stuff that actually brings people to church and to synagogues and to mosques—isn't that exactly why those communities are shrinking in the first place?!

Well, maybe. But that almost certainly isn't the whole picture.

Fade in lit review music.

Putnam (Conversations with Bill Kristol, 2016, 2:59–4:18): In many different ways in which we can measure these things, people are just less connected to other people.

It turns out faith communities aren't the only groups in decline. So are, well, basically all of them.

Putnam: In civic activities, within their own family … in terms of their ordinary everyday life

This episode is also made possible by the work of political scientist Robert Putnam. (After this one I'll stop saying so, but just remember: this different music means lit review, not advertisement, OK? Cool.)

This is Putnam speaking with journalist Bill Kristol in early 2016.

Kristol: So the argument wasn't so much a psychological one as a sociological one, if that's the right word … that in fact there's less community, not just that people vaguely felt how …

Putnam: People do feel it, and what the book says is "You're right" … They knew why they hadn't. They were busy. They couldn't do all that other stuff. But they also felt a little bit guilty that they weren't doing it. And then along comes this Harvard professor who says "It's not you, it's all of us. We're all disconnecting from one another."

The book Putnam is talking about is *Bowling Alone*, which he published in 2000. That's before the Internet was ubiquitous, he hastens to add, so you can't blame the core problem on kids these days with their phones and their TikToks and whatnot—which we are often tempted to do.

OK, so what's the deal with the title, *Bowling Alone*? Well,

Putnam (Conversations with Bill Kristol, 2016, 2:40–2:53): Although more Americans are bowling than ever—actually, more Americans bowl than vote—bowling in leagues, bowling in teams, is off by about 70 or 80 percent now from the peaks.

This book is *full* of graphs of those peaks, that is, of the rising and then falling prevalence of twentieth-century community activities. And yes, they all look like a hill: rising steeply on one side, representing the years immediately after World War II, and falling gradually on the other side, representing the years of declining connection since the end of the Baby Boom. Politics, and civics, workplace connections, socializing, volunteering, honesty and trust—all the graphs look basically the same.

That includes the religion graph (Putnam, 2000), which is important because perhaps as many as half of all Americans' memberships can be traced back to a faith community. And people who belong to religious groups are much more likely to belong to other groups as well.

Putnam (2000) says that what each picture shows is the rise and fall of "social capital" in the United States, the value of our reciprocal social connectedness. I think Putnam's big-picture empirical view is instructive for leaders of religious communities—*and* for youth-serving organizations like Tapestry. What we've lost has made a big difference for American society, Putnam says. And his follow-up work (2015) on how these changes have impacted children is pretty relevant to Tapestry's whole project:

Putnam (Matter of Fact, 2016, 6:36–7:18): When working class kids in my era were growing up … we were surrounded by lots of other caring adults outside the family, you know preachers or Sunday school teachers or coaches or other adults. They were all looking out for us. But that sort of social connectedness in the wider community has also collapsed, and that's especially bad for these working class kids who lack that support that working-class kids used to have.

As the old hymn goes, "Blessed be the ties that bind." Community connectedness has tremendous social value, especially for the most vulnerable members of those communities.

Fade out ad music.

So let's step back for another moment. We can think of Drescher's work as a kind of special case within Putnam's broader social picture. Religious disaffiliation looks a lot like the other trends in how Americans are relating—and not relating—with institutions and with each other.

Now it's possible that the causes of *religious* decline are entirely separate, that the graphs of religious participation are connected to completely different dynamics than participation in civic or political life, or bowling leagues. That seems very unlikely to me, and I think also to Putnam (2000, see pp. 78–79). Yes, social trends are complex. Yes, there are some specific *religious* reasons that some people leave or become relatively indifferent to faith communities (Drescher, 2016; Nagle, 2019; Putnam, 2000). But I think it's unwise for my colleagues and I to try to address the challenges of religious disconnection *purely* through retooling or intensifying our religious offerings. Problems of *community and connection* will need solutions aimed at fostering *community and connection*, and religion is only a part of what binds religious communities together.

Of course, none of this is an either-or proposition. I admire and learn a lot from Christian leaders who are sort of doubling down on some of the most ancient practices—and yes, beliefs.

Still, my research and this story comes at our current religious and social moment from the opposite end of this spectrum. From the first time Hannah told me about what she and Sam were doing, I've been fascinated and impressed by their laser focus on the *community* aspects of their organization. I think it's both faithful and savvy for them to treat the religious aspects of their work in a really flexible way—to be guided by it, but not to make it the focus of what their group is doing together.

If that all sounds a little vague, then allow me to put some meat on the bones of this idea. Let's return to that conference room and explore the moment I became convinced I could write a religious education dissertation while embedded in a "church that doesn't look like a church." It's time to hear the Tapestry initiation story.

1.4 Act 2: Godly Play, the Remix

Fade in some object-manipulation background noise.

Act 2: Godly Play, the Remix

Hannah (field recording, October 19, 2019): We wanna start with this because this is kind of zooming out to the big picture … and those guiding principles that will be framing your work as a volunteer. So I want to just start with this, which is really a double symbol.

Hannah holds up a hand-sized circular disk and begins to describe it. You can see all the objects in the story at becomingtapestry.net/figure1.

Figure 1

Tapestry Guiding Principles Story Objects in Their Final Configuration

You're probably familiar with the yin and yang symbol of balance. And superimposed over that is a picture of a labyrinth. … Some people describe a labyrinth as a maze, but it's really not a maze … You're kind of following this path that has been laid out … In the middle there's this open space and we really like to think of our time together … as holding that space … where you can be safe and open together. And then I think equally important is when you're getting ready to walk back out of the labyrinth to be … just as intentional about what you want to carry back with you from that space back into your everyday life.

So Hannah has begun the presentation with a symbol combining imagery from two very different religious and philosophical traditions. She's also framed Tapestry's work as both a spiritual practice and a strategy for managing the emotional energy of weekly mentoring.

Fade in trash bag audio.

OK, onto the next object.

So no young person chooses to be in foster care. It's something that we'll talk about more as we move ahead this morning, but it can be a really dark and a scary time. And so you will see this symbol of the black trash bag in the stories we hear today and know more about that symbolism.

The guiding principles themselves are displayed as single words written in block letters on little tent signs she places amid the objects. She just started to set the first one out, then remembered she had another object to place first. It's a palm-sized white box, from which she removes what looks like an egg.

[For] most youth who are in care, foster care feels like they are boxed in and trapped. And one reaction will probably be that for the rest of their lives, they're really testing boundaries, like all young people do, but trying to figure out where they're safe and where those limits are. And especially when they've been separated from their families and things and places and people that they love, they often feel that the things in their life that are most precious have been lost or [smash!] broken.

Turns out it was a *hollow* egg shell, now in pieces on the trash back. I'll add that Hannah is a quiet, steady person of small build—not the sort I expect to start dramatically smashing things.

The first guiding principle is that of hope.

OK here comes that first cardstock sign.

We really believe, and hope that you do too, that you can be a channel of hope to your youth. And if there's any one thing that you're showing up with in a week that you can bring that with you. We don't expect you to always be a bottomless well of hope. But there are things in your life that you can draw on that are bigger than yourself and be a channel of that and just be that little little spark in showing up and bringing that to them every week.

This first principle of Tapestry also introduces the *spiritual* dimension of this community. It's a nod to the mysteries of human resilience and its connection to this elusive phenomenon called hope. Hannah promises a journey of meaning and transformation for both the youth *and the mentors*. And the message here is "you have what you need."

There's a lot more to Hannah's presentation, including three other guiding principles: presence, recreation/re-creation, and communion. You can hear about all of them in the bonus episode that follows this one in the feed.

The first time I heard Hannah tell this story, she said at this point, "You'll help provide hope through your relationship and personal spirituality" (field notes, January 12, 2019). There's that flexible approach to the faith stuff that I keep talking about.

But ironically, by this point in the story the first time I heard it, what struck me more was their creative use of a *very particular* religious practice. Tapestry may be a "church that doesn't look like a church," but the form of this guiding principles story is directly out of the modern Sunday school playbook.

Religious educators will probably recognize in it the hallmark style of a *Godly Play* story (Berryman, 2009). Episcopal priest Jerome Berryman developed Godly Play as an embodied, experiential approach to teaching faith.

For clarity, I've reversed the order of the following two sentences from how they appear in the source video:

Minor (Stories of God at Home, 2018, 2:30–2:41, 2:21–2:30): We tell stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the New Testament, and stories about how the community gathers to make meaning in worship. It's based on Montessori principles, and so there are beautiful manipulatives that have been developed to support the telling of the stories.

This is Cheryl Minor, who directs the publishing unit of the Godly Play Foundation. Another alum of Hannah's and my seminary, she also holds a PhD in psychology and wrote her dissertation about the spiritual impact of Godly Play.

Minor (Stories of God at Home, 2018, 2:41–3:02): Research indicates that children have an innate sense of the presence of God even before they have the language to talk about it. In Godly Play, we seek to give them that language through story, so that they can deepen their experience of God through wonder and play.

Hannah tells the story of Tapestry's guiding principles through a kind of adapted Godly Play story.[7] This playful invitation to reflection may not have explicitly religious content, but it is very

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[7] Although Hannah tells the story, it was developed by a longtime Tapestry volunteer, facilitator, and fellow clergy person. When I met her at the October 2019 training, she was in town in part to investigate the possibility of starting a Tapestry community in the different West Coast metro area she had moved to.

much concerned with describing how *this* community gathers to make meaning. And part of Hannah's objective is to give volunteers the language to begin to be a part of the Tapestry community. In other words, the story serves as an important part of a day-long initiation ritual.

Sitting in that conference room watching Hannah tell the story, I marveled at the rich layers of remix at work in this organization. Here's a non-church planter telling a non-Godly Play story with mostly non-religious volunteers. And her purpose is to both nurture those volunteers' spirituality and to equip them for what is without a doubt Sam and Hannah's *religious* mission.

This is one of those moments you long for as a researcher and a storyteller. Here I was watching this stream of "data" and narrative unfolding around me and practically screaming out that something interesting and important is happening. Throughout the study, I have been energized and guided by this memory of that first experience: I sat there watching a Some-style ritual, that is, a fairly traditional religious education practice, adapted to a None-dominated audience, that is, a group of people who don't usually find themselves participating in religious settings.

But I still had a big problem—or at least I thought I did. Tapestry is sort of a church. It's sort of a nonprofit. It's definitely a community of some sort. But as we'll see, even that part is confusing. Because sometimes the community is two or three mentors sitting with a young person in a park or a coffee shop, and then other times it's much larger gatherings, sometimes just of mentors and sometimes with mentors and their youth all gathered together.

So I found myself wondering, how the hell was I going to understand this group if I couldn't even describe what kind of group it is? And then a preeminent scholar of groups taught me that I was asking the wrong question.

1.5 Break 2: Bruno Latour

Fade in lit review music.

Latour (USC Annenberg, 2010, 6:23–7:01): In its simplest but in its deepest sense, for me the notion of network is of use whenever action is to be redistributed.

This episode is also made possible by French social theorist Bruno Latour. In my view, his work holds key insights to help us understand Tapestry *and* the central challenge religious groups are facing today.

The role of team facilitator supports mentors and caregivers but doesn't have direct contact with youth (see Chapter 2 coda). Since it mostly involves connecting via telephone and Zoom calls, it can be a "remote volunteering" option for those who are well connected to the organization already.

Take any object. At first it looks contained unto itself, with well delineated edges and limit. Then something happens. A strike, an accident, a catastrophe. And suddenly you discover a swarm of entities that seem to be there all along, but were not visible before and that appear in retrospect necessary for its sustenance.

Here Latour is speaking to a seminar audience of network technologists at USC's Annenberg School of Communication. His field is Science and Technology Studies, so he's especially interested in how people, processes, materials, and ideas are interconnected. But don't get too caught up in the tech aspect of this. Latour's big idea is called actor-network-theory or ANT, and it applies just as well when the network connections are "analog." Thus, one scholar building on many other scholars' ideas is a kind of actor network (USC Annenberg, 2010). So is a team of construction workers building a lecture hall according to an architect's blueprints (Latour, 2005).

Latour's actor-network theory says it's a mistake to separate aggregate data about a group from the individual data about the members of that group. And I think that kinda makes sense, right? We rail about this all the time in our everyday lives. Like when a pollster on the news speaks as if they have intimate and specific knowledge of *my* beliefs and decisions because I fit into a particular demographic category. "Demographics aren't destiny," as the expression goes.

Latour would agree. In his view, that constant explanatory leaping from the macro to the micro is a major problem for the rigor of social theory. And so he advocates for what he calls a "sociology of associations." He wants researchers to focus on the careful tracing of the concrete ways human and non-human actors behave. He wants us to trace out those paths of interconnection.

So Latour says, don't go and try to make a bunch of generalizations about members of a particular, let's say, religious denomination. Instead, stick very close to the members, members you can observe, members you can start to make a kind of paper trail for, he says. Trace their dealings with each other and then recognize groups *only when we can see and describe the connections that* make *them a group*.

I listened to hours of Latour's talks, but I couldn't find an audio clip of him actually saying the phrase that encapsulates this principle. So I pulled it straight from his book, and I made it the title of this chapter: "no group, only group formation" (Latour, 2005, p. 27).

In other words,

Latour (USC Annenberg, 2010, 33:13–33:19): Every individual is part of a matrix whose lines and columns are made of the others as well.

Every individual is part of a matrix, like from math class, whose lines and columns are made up of the others as well. Groups don't have clean, obvious boundaries. Groups hang together if, and only if, the other people who make up those lines and columns in the matrix act in a way that is connected and is doing some kind of common work. That's what being a group means.

So what makes a group recognizable is not aggregate statistics about its members but the *practices* that allow the group to solidify those connections across time, to keep working in common for more than just a fleeting moment. No group, only group formation.

Fade out lit review music.

1.6 Coda: Tapestry *Is* the Weaving

Coda: Tapestry *Is* the Weaving

OK, so I said Latour's ideas solve a key conceptual problem for this study. That's true. But I believe the importance of his ANT insight about groups and practices goes well beyond the framing of my study. It speaks to the big picture of religious leadership, of any kind of leadership.

Remember, I found Latour as I was struggling with some basic questions about Tapestry: What kind of group is it? A church? An outreach or service ministry of a regional collective of churches? A nonprofit led by religious leaders and funded by various religious and non-religious people and entities? How do I know which literature to consult as I try to understand it? How do *you* know whether to believe my various interpretations of the data I collect?

Like a tall French Yoda at the podium in tweed, Latour replies, "There is no group." Don't fall into the trap of assuming that classifying people automatically tells you something about how they relate. Just trace the associations, he says, and write an account of them. Help us see how meaning and influence and regard and objects and action all circulate through this particular network of connections. Help us see how all that action weaves the participants together. That's group formation. My research-based presence with Tapestry—my "hanging out," as my advisor calls it—has put me in the position to trace connections, to watch the weaving together, to pay attention to the practices of belonging that make this community possible.

OK, so those practices at Tapestry are connected to the corresponding larger point I'm trying to make here with Latour's help. "No group, only group formation" holds the key to why Tapestry is succeeding as a kind of small-batch spiritual start-up. Church plants of *all* kinds are forced to reckon with a reality that established congregations too easily forget: Your community is only as strong as your ability to recruit and incorporate new members.

Community practices do important stabilizing work, but in order to do that the group has to keep practicing them. So the leaders and members need to keep teaching these practices to new people and keep modeling their ongoing use.

And Tapestry's unique mission puts an even finer point on this need. Instability is a central part of the lives of foster youth. It's also a pretty constant theme in the lives of the young adult tech workers who mostly make up the group's corps of mentors. I spoke with a team reckoning with the fallout of losing touch entirely with their mentee due to instability at home (field notes, December 7, 2019). I traced the ongoing saga of one long-serving mentor's process of deciding to leave the area (field notes, March, 7, 2019; September 9, 2019; October 17, 2019; February 12, 2020; April 1, 2020), and I heard about the deliberations and missteps of a handful of other transitioning mentors (field notes, July 20, 2019; September 7, 2019; December 7, 2019; February 12, 2020). And, of course, I saw the Covid-19 pandemic throw a monkey wrench into all manner of Tapestry practices and policies regarding team outings and relationships.

So here's the point. Tapestry understands in a really powerful way something that every organization needs to understand. *Being* Tapestry requires a constant focus on *becoming* Tapestry. I'm convinced that group formation is one of the principle functions of religious education within faith and faith-adjacent communities. I'll say more about what I mean by "faith-adjacent" in the next episode.

So that brings us to my first research question, and the topic this podcast will turn to next, that is, Tapestry's group formation practices. I wanna look at those practices in more detail, and I wanna ask what they might tell us about the future of religious leadership. What can churches, nonprofits, schools, and other groups learn about this organization, this group that has grown so fast and had such a big impact despite their very challenging context and mission? Tune in next time to find out.

Fade in theme music.

You've made it to the end of Episode 1. If you're a church colleague still skeptical about whether Tapestry's project and this dissertation has anything to do with religious faith, trust me that I have a lot more to say about that. And trust me too, please, if you're an academic colleague and

expected to hear a whole lot more about things like methodology and theoretical frameworks. Remember what Sarah said earlier: the medium is wagging us. This is a storytelling podcast, and so we have to launch the narrative before we get too epistemological.

But whatever brought you here, thanks for giving this strange experiment a chance. And stay tuned after the credits for a preview of Episode 2.

Begin the Episode 1 credits.

Becoming Tapestry is an ethnographic podcast submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Special thanks to Lalitha Vasudevan, Ioana Literat, Detra Price-Dennis, Joe Riina-Ferrie, Katie Newhouse, Manoush Zomorodi, Sarah Lefton, John Jackson Jr., the whole MASCLab crew, the Cook Memorial Public Library where I'm recording this, and especially to Sam, Hannah, and everyone at Tapestry who participated in my study.

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Begin the Episode 2 teaser.

Next time on *Becoming Tapestry*, we meet Team Z:

Zoe: We just like went out for coffee and got ice cream and sushi. And it was more just like a fun friend thing, like going out, having fun than sitting down, talk about your feelings or whatever. It was more like relaxed and less, I don't know, less of like a session, you know?

Chapter 2: Space is a Social Practice

The audio version of this chapter is available at becomingtapestry.net/chapter2.

2.1 Cold Open: Non-Retail Non-Therapy

Fade in tape of Kyle's lead-up to the question below under the first line of narration.

Welcome back to the show. Once again, we're going to start in the middle of the action.

Kyle (field recording, June 6, 2020): What's the story of this team? Like what would you want to share with the world about what you guys do and what you're about?

In Episode 1 you met Hannah and Sam. They're the founders and co-directors of Tapestry. Now let me introduce the story's other protagonists. The adults are Liz, Ellie, and Victoria. They serve as mentors to Zoe. Together, they're Team Z.

Zoe answered my question by saying that meetings with her team are

Zoe: … not like something you have to like plan about, like, look forward to it like a bad thing … it's just something that helps people who aren't so like social or have that many friends or is in a certain position, like they got out of foster care or whatever, and it helps them just, I don't know, be more social with people.

I'm on a Zoom call with Team Z in June of 2020. It's been about nine months since my first informal meeting with the group. It's been about three months since the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in the U.S.

We're going to spend most of Episode 4 with Team Z, listening in on the storytelling project we did eventually do together. But *this* episode is all about exploring Tapestry and its existing practices. So I want to start with this snapshot of how a particular team understands this wider network they belong to.

Ellie: I'm curious if you remember what you thought [snip effect: Tapestry] would be like when you started and was it like that? Were you surprised or maybe it felt different?

The effect you just heard was the sound of scissors. Almost all the proper nouns in this study are pseudonyms, including *Zoe* and even *Tapestry* itself. The point of the pseudonyms and extra

editing is to protect participants' identities as much as possible. Whenever one of us mentions a real name in my field recordings and I can't edit around it, I'll just snip it out. In Ellie's question and my follow-up, the snipped word in question is the real name of Tapestry.

Ellie: Cuz you've been in the program for a long time. So you've grown up with [Tapestry], but was it what you expected?

Zoe: No, I actually expected it to be more like a therapy session where we would like meet in an office and like there would be stress balls or whatever, but we just went out for coffee and like got ice cream and sushi. It was more just like a fun friend thing, like going out, having fun than sitting down, talk about your feelings or whatever. It's … was more relaxed and less, I don't know, less of like a session, you know?

Liz: Yeah. I think fun is definitely a defining word for our group.

That's Liz, currently Zoe's longest-serving mentor.

Liz: Like I feel like we have fun, you know, we have certain things we do that are very fun. Like I think probably one of our favorite things to do is like back when we could still go out, like go to Macy's and choose different themes and dress up in those themes. And we actually did it last week over video and it worked pretty well … But then we have a lot of weeks where we're just like sitting in the park. We used to go to the rec center a lot, just like talking and, and like, whatever that evolves to.

Ellie: One of the things that I've appreciated most, I would say, is the variety of things that we get into.

And this is Ellie, another pretty long-serving mentor. Typically just two of the three mentors are present for each outing. This sense of being on a *team* and not having to carry the entire weight of mentorship alone is a major Tapestry selling point for volunteers (field recording, October 17, 2019). Hannah talks about designing that aspect into the model based on her challenging past experience as a mentor herself with another organization (field recording, October 17, 2019).

Ellie: Is there a parade going on or some kite festival or, you know, some new things and little witchy craft fair we can go to and just check it out. Different parts of the city.

Liz: Cooking's another one that we really like … We've been doing that for a long time and then we've been to like cooking at my apartment and have also baked cookies virtually …

We sent the recipe out and the ingredients and then we all like joined a video call and did it all together, which was fun.

Zoe: Yeah. It was really simple. It was basically just peanut butter and brown sugar.

Liz: Yeah. Can't go wrong. And chocolate chips. Yeah.

As I listen now, I recognize a couple of these and similar anecdotes from retellings Sam and Hannah share anonymously at mentor trainings. In this episode, I'll go deeper into why that shouldn't be a surprise. In short, Tapestry has a well-articulated and pretty consistently practiced group culture—at least that's my impression from lots of time spent observing teams and lots of listening to them describe themselves.

So let's follow the advice of Bruno Latour, the social theorist we met at the end of the last episode. We'll trace the network connections that help this mentoring community constantly form and reform that culture.

Fade in theme music.

In so doing, I'll be summarizing my answer to the first major research question of my project, RQ1 for short: How do Tapestry and its members negotiate and interweave spiritual, relational, and educational practices to construct shared meanings and spaces? [That's already a mouthful, I know, and because I couldn't resist, there's a part two:] and what do these processes tell us about the future of religious community and formation?

The challenge I've accepted for this dissertation is to answer each research question in the form of a story. *Today's* story is about the organization and its culture. Act 1 explores how new volunteers meet and decide to join Tapestry. In Act 2, we'll go deep into how Hannah and Sam make sense of this "church that isn't a church." The coda unpacks my own take on how to think about the group and its orientation to faith.

We're exploring what makes the community tick—and why other leaders might care about that—on this episode of *Becoming Tapestry*, a show about a foster youth mentoring network with a lot to teach us about faith and belonging.

Fade up theme music, then fade out.

2.2 Act 1: Community By Design

Chapter 2: Space Is a Social Practice. Act 1: Community By Design

There's a challenging contradiction at the heart of life in U.S. faith communities today. On the one hand, it seems obvious that religious educators need to embrace practices of handing down faith to the next generation, if communities want there to *be* a next generation (Foster, 2012). However, when the surrounding society is changing faster than it ever has, sticking doggedly to practices that were designed to *preserve* an organization's culture and traditions may end up *threatening* its very survival.[8]

One of the great allures of church planting is the opportunity to start from scratch. A new church gets to form a new collective culture *by design* (Mahadevan, 2018). They can gather around and through new formal rituals and new informal routines. They can build a way of being that is a better fit with our fast-changing society. One church plant I've followed over the years called themselves "The Slate Project" for this very reason. They mean slate as in a *clean* slate. Their website promises "Christianity without the crap" (Slate Project, n.d.; see also Oliver, 2019c).

As for Tapestry, we've already heard a little bit about the organizational culture Hannah and Sam have been building in their "church that isn't a church." They've chosen to orient their new community's life together around something other than prayer and worship.

Hannah (field recording, October 17, 2019): In five years, my concept of what church is has completely shifted … In ideal form, church should be where you go to get refueled … It's just a pit stop. You're getting charged up to go back out there into the mission field. My experience of being … in a traditional parish was that that was always a struggle. People thought that those two hours on Sunday morning was, was it. And so one of our original goals … was reversing that equation:

If you start with the work, then what happens? And … what coalesces around that and gathers around that?

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[8] For example, practices of recruitment that assume most people are conventionally religious and that they'll join a church on its own terms if they just find the right one … well, needless to say, those practices seem problematic when at least a quarter of the population doesn't think formal membership in a religious group is very important (Pew, 2019). There's an adaptive challenge here, to use the change theory language of Ronald Heifetz that has been taken up by lots of faith leaders (e.g., Foster, 2012; Hess, 2016; Roberto, 2012). How do we change our practices to orient people to faith in new ways, while hanging on to what's essential about religious community in the first place?

"The work," of course, is mentoring. That's the activity at the center of Tapestry's mission and culture. And unlike worship or Bible study or Christian education per se, mentoring foster youth is a pretty broadly accessible activity from the perspective of faith identity. People with a very diverse range of attitudes about religion can gather together and mentor with integrity and enthusiasm.

I want to spend some time on the specifics of *how* Tapestry has managed that. How do they recruit and train volunteers? How do both mentors and youth take up the invitation to grow together as tiny spiritual communities? Throughout, I'll try to remember Latour's advice: Don't zoom out and describe the group in the abstract. Follow the connections and show how the group is in a constant process of connected formation together.

I'm gonna start with the learning part of my research question. The *educational practices* at Tapestry are mostly about how the organization recruits, trains, and initiates people, how it gets them ready for the work of mentoring.

So picture yourself as a resident of a West Coast city. Maybe you're working for a technology company. Maybe, to borrow a detail from Ellie's story, you've been in town for a year or two but haven't really made any significant connections outside of work and roommates. You've decided it's time to "put down roots," time to give back to the community (field notes, January 12, 2019). Maybe you yourself have a connection to the foster care system (field notes, January 12, 2019). Or maybe the idea of mentoring a young person as part of a team just resonates with you in some deep way you haven't fully articulated.

Anway, if Tapestry wants you, the first step is obviously for them to make sure you know they exist. And then you'll need some sense of what they do.

Yesenia's story is pretty representative of a potential mentor's typical path. We'll be spending a lot more time with this Team Z alum and her story, but for now let's hear about how she got connected in the first place. I'll need to use those scissors a couple times to snip out some place names.

Yesenia (co-created research artifact): I am 28 years old. I live in [West Coast Metropolitan City] and have been here for the past five years. And about four years ago I was at yoga at [Church of the Resurrection] and I had just seen a very moving display.

That display was part of an exhibit by frequent Tapestry collaborators the Foster Youth Experience, FYE. The organization curates foster youth stories and artifacts in the style of a traveling museum exhibition. Hannah and Sam leveraged their connections at what I'm calling

Church of the Resurrection to get FYE connected there (field recording, March 10, 2021). The installation of the exhibit there coincided with the month or so each year when Tapestry is sort of the "guest host" at Resurrection's popular yoga night, so Hannah or Sam gives the agnostic-friendly welcome and spiritual sermonette before the instructor begins the class.

Back to Yesenia:

The Teddy bear was wearing a shirt that said, like, "for all the kids who are separated from their siblings." And I'm very close to my two little sisters. I felt like that really struck a nerve because I miss them. And I'd only been in the city for a little under a year and felt the need to find something that could be more meaningful other than my sales job. So everything just kind of fell into place, and I attended the orientation, I believe about a month later.

Hopefully you're already getting a sense of the dense web of connections at work in the space of Yesenia's coming to know Tapestry. The Foster Youth Experience has relationships with dozens of youth and adults who share their stories and their stuff. Sam and Hannah both have relationships with Joanne, FYE's director. Another alum of Hannah's and my seminary oversees the yoga program at Resurrection, which is a significant city landmark. So the Tapestry-Resurrection partnership in an organizational sense is carried in part by this relationship among school friends.

Once someone like Yesenia has made the initial connection with Tapestry, they attend the volunteer training to get oriented to the organization and its approach. We heard one element of that training in Episode 1, the initiation story. But before Hannah pulls out all those objects to introduce Tapestry's guiding principles, she kicks off the day with a more active introductory exercise.

Hannah (field recording, October 19, 2019): If there's one thing that you remember and walk away with today, um, it's, that probably the greatest gift you can give any person, but especially a young person, is really being present and listening to them fully.

To practice this skill, we broke into groups of three, and each person took turns telling the group about someone who has been a mentor to us. After listening carefully, the other two participants then drew a picture of the story and gave it to the storyteller …

… as a gift to take home or recycle or whatever they want to do with it.

This deceptively simple activity draws these new recruits into Tapestry's communal practice in lots of sophisticated ways. First, you heard Hannah say that the most important takeaway from the training is the importance of listening to youth.

Listening, for most of us, is hard. And that's not always a bad thing. When someone starts telling a story, we often resonate with it, and start thinking of our own stories, which we then want to tell. The design of this activity says: "You'll get your chance, each participant will. But for now, listen. Hold back. *Make space.*"

By the way, if you're thinking "Yes, but what does Hannah *mean* when she goes on about making space, holding space, etc.?" Well, we're going to get into that.

Still, another part of feeling heard is experiencing the evidence that your sharing has landed for someone, that they received your message and are willing to empathize. That's the point of the drawing part of the exercise.

If I had to put a fancy education-school name to the training approach in this and similar exercises, I would call it multimodal pedagogy. *Pedagogies* are enacted theories of teaching and learning. I'll have a lot more to say about *multimodality* in Episode 3. For now let's just say multimodality is about variety and flexibility: different *types* of learning, different *artifacts,* different *styles of engagement* (Jewitt et al., 2016). Multiple modes.

The Tapestry volunteer training is an intricately designed education in listening. You can check out becomingtapestry.net/table1 for an annotated agenda of a typical volunteer training. It should give you a sense for how listening and responding paired up in these interesting multimodal ways. It should also give you a pretty good overview of this process of immersion within Tapestry and within the world of foster youth that Sam and Hannah are trying to create.

Table 1

Multimodal Activities in the Tapestry Volunteer Training

Activity	Description	Modes
"World circle"	Participants write their name in the middle of a circle on a piece of construction paper and fill the rest of the sheet with words and phrases that describe each participant's world. This activity could inform participants' introduction of themselves to the group, round-robin style.	Solo writing; large-group sharing

Mentor story	In groups of two or three, participants take turns telling a story about an important mentor's role in their life, while other group members actively listen. Then listeners draw an interpretation of the story, describe it back to the group, and "gift" the drawing to the original storyteller.	Small-group sharing; listening; drawing
Guiding principles story	Hannah shares Godly Play-style "visual presentation" introducing Tapestry's faith-inspired guiding principles and concludes by asking open-ended "wondering questions" to which large group is invited to respond. Objects remain present throughout the day at the front of the room.	Listening to words; looking at objects; large-group sharing
Watching and responding to Digital Stories	Participants watch two first-person Digital Stories created by adults who were in foster care as youth. Participants share with a partner "what spoke to you," and then participants are invited to summarize their partner's response with the whole group.	Viewing video; listening; small- and large-group sharing
Watching and responding to film *Removed*, in conversation with revisiting the world circles activity	Participants watch film *Removed* and immediately afterward receive a sheet with their name cut out and placed within *someone else's* list of personal experiences from the earlier "World circles" activity. They are invited to share observations and responses with a partner and to summarize their partner's reflections during large-group sharing.	Viewing video; reading peers' writing; listening; small- and large-group sharing
Mentor qualities activity	Co-director leads large group in brainstorming activity to integrate learning from the day and construct a list of "qualities that you would want to take with you into this work."	Large-group cooperative conversation
Open, honest questions activity	Co-director tells a personal story of experiencing mentorship. Participants respond by asking open, honest questions about the story, and co-director gives feedback on whether the question felt open and honest. Co-director answers some of the questions.	Large-group practice session
Tapestry relationship structure diagram	Co-director draws and narrates a schematic diagram of how supportive relationships are structured within Tapestry, including where the organization's design discourages relationships and how the design is intended to promote health and processing (see Coda in this episode).	Looking at diagrams; listening to explanations; asking questions

In case you want to skip the table for now, let me highlight one of the other items you'll find there. This callout will serve a dual purpose of introducing you to the goal of my work with Tapestry in the long run.

A part of the mentor training is watching a couple videos that belong to a very specific multimedia genre, Digital Storytelling. Spell it in your head with a capital D and a capital S; it's a whole media-making movement popular in out-of-school learning, higher education, social services, and public health. The practice has come to be defined by an organization called Storycenter, and by its founder Joe Lambert (see Lambert, 2012).

In this tradition, Digital Stories are 2–4 minute first-person narratives told through recorded voiceover, photographs, and usually a simple soundtrack. Storytellers typically produce these videos as a part of formal facilitated programs, which include opportunities for giving and receiving feedback in a group setting. The experience is partly an arts workshop, and partly something that looks almost like lowkey group therapy (see GEECSwales, 2012).

Sometime before Sam and Hannah arrived in their new hometown, a group of area foster youth participated in a Storycenter workshop. Through some local connections, the co-directors eventually received copies of the final products. So part of Tapestry's volunteer training involves engaging with these Digital Stories. It's a great way to expose future mentors to personal accounts of the foster system without actually asking youth to show up and tell them at every single monthly training.

As our series unfolds, bear in mind that what re-connected Hannah and me when I moved to the area was Digital Storytelling. The possibility that I might work with some Tapestry participants to produce *new* Digital Stories is what set this whole dissertation project in motion.

But back to the training: This organizational *initiation* can't go on forever. No amount of listening exercises or video discussion will fully prepare volunteers for this rich but challenging work.

After the event, participants receive an email that basically says, "Do you want to move forward? Do you want to explore joining a team?" For those who say yes, and eventually get paired, an exciting and scary moment awaits (field notes, September 7, 2019): strangers, with different stories, meeting up for the first time. Their work is to start forming new webs of connections and interpersonal support. As we move toward trying to better understand the work of these teams, allow me now to weave in just a bit more social theory. Let's turn our attention to some ideas about *how teams form a space* for being together and making meaning.

2.3 Break 1: Doreen Massey

Fade in ad music.

Massey (Edmonds & Warburton, 2013, 2:21–3:04): A lot what I've been trying to do over the all too many years when I've been writing about space is to bring space alive … to emphasize how important space is in the lives in which we live and in the organization of the societies in which we live.

This episode of *Becoming Tapestry* is made possible by the work of geographer Doreen Massey. Massey gives us the title of this episode, "Space Is a Social Practice."

Most obviously, I would say space is not a flat surface across which we walk. Raymond Williams talked about this. You're taking a train across the landscape. You're not traveling across a dead, flat surface that is space. You're cutting across a myriad of stories going on. So instead of space being this flat surface, it's like a pin cushion of a million stories.

For Massey, space *unfolds* in a manner not so dissimilar from how many of us think of time unfolding. But the mechanism for that dynamism and change is relationships. It's differences rubbing up against each other. And so the unfolding is bushy or rhizomatic. We might say Latourian, right, a dense network? It doesn't happen in a straight line. It's branched and interconnected between various narrative points of departure as our train cuts through the countryside, or the city, and its many stories.

Space is a social practice, Massey says, a [quote] "simultaneity of stories-so-far" (2005, p. 9). Tapestry *is* the stories, plural. Like the subject of a cubist painting, you can't see the thing itself in its wholeness. You can only try to imagine the wholeness as you glimpse it from a series of simultaneous angles and narrative perspectives.

Pause.

Massey says the "dimension" of space has three characteristic aspects. First off, it's *relational*: [quote] "constituted through *interactions*, from the immensity of the global[] to the intimately tiny" (2005, p. 9). The Tapestry volunteer training is so *interactive* because it's trying to give participants practices for holding space *through interactions*.

Second, for Massey space is *hybrid*, a [quote] "sphere … of coexisting heterogeneity" (2005, p. 9) [unquote]. Space is particular, distinctive people, hanging out together. Joining Tapestry is all

about a willingness to be part of what we heard Massey call a "pin cushion" of stories, what Latour calls a network or work-net of connections and interactions.

Finally, Massey's idea of space is *dynamic*, [quote] "always under construction" (2005, p. 9). Space is borne forth in each moment by [quote] "material practices which have to be carried out" (2005, p. 9). At their best, people "practicing space" together don't know where they're heading. Here again, remember Latour's mantra: no group, only group *formation*.

Fade out lit review music.

I hope that these layers of theory and these accounts of Tapestry's practice are starting to congeal a little bit in your head. Hannah and Sam and indeed all of the mentors and young people: they're architects of connection and relationality. Their job is *practicing* space.

Hannah (field recording, October 19, 2019): We really like to think of our time together … as holding that space and doing that very deliberately for our youth and for your teammates to really have a space where you can be safe and open together.

Pause.

So let me pause and sum up where we've been, using Massey's social/spatial lens. At the beginning of this episode, we heard Team Z describing the nuts and bolts of their weekly outings: basically hanging out and having fun. Tapestry calls that presence and recreation.

But it's interesting that the organization plays with the label re-creation as well. Massey would say that the fun things teams do when they're together are *interactions* that create and hold the space. These practices make the team a team, but they also position that team in distinctive ways across various neighborhoods, and with respect to other people they meet along the way. Like craft fair vendors and members of other Tapestry teams. And, eventually, me.

And then in Act I, we turned the clock back, and explored how a potential mentor like Yesenia once was might come to be a part of such a team. We explored her initial encounter and also Tapestry's elaborate, multimodal initiation rituals. These too are space-making processes: lots of interactions, lots of stories, lots of pins in that pin cushion. Lots of practice vulnerably dwelling in these pop-up pockets of interaction, practice for when they'll get matched with a young person and other mentors and set to work creating more durable social spaces.

So now I'd like to turn the lens, along with my microphone, back toward this regular practice of the initiated Tapestry participants. In what sense can we consider the work they do together to be

a shared spiritual practice? And does it make any sense at all to think of teams as forming spaces we would meaningfully label as religious?

The goal for the rest of this episode is for us to explore how the Tapestry co-directors understand and support the important work of their community.

Play transition music.

2.4 Act 2: Gratitude on Behalf of Whomever

Act 2: Gratitude on Behalf of Whomever

By October 2019, I'd been meeting with Hannah and Sam for months and attending every large-group Tapestry event they held. I was starting to get a pretty good sense for their work. I'd also sorted out my research ethics paperwork with the university, a process known to academics as the IRB. That meant I could finally break out my microphone when talking to my research participants. You've already heard a few minutes of the first conversation, in that noisy coffee shop with Hannah and Sam.

The questions I kept coming back to is what this organization is and how it holds together. Remember from Episode 1 that they consider Tapestry to be a sort of non-traditional church. And remember from Act I of this episode how Hannah elaborated on the *primary* connection that holds this church together. In her words, they "start with the work," gathering communities of mentors each week around the youth they support.

As you listen to where our chat went from there, try to put yourself in my shoes as the researcher. Be alert—as I was—for how the pair understands the spirituality[9] of this work: the sense of interconnectedness, the opportunities for making meaning, the trust that there exist ways of being in the world that support healing and human flourishing for all.

Hannah (field recording, October 17, 2019): If you start with the work, then what happens? And what coalesces around that and gathers around that? … It doesn't look a lot like what I knew to be church for the first 35 years of my life. But is it spiritual and is it, you know, gathered around God? Absolutely. …

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[9] I'm drawing here in particular on a [very helpful infographic](#) from the Spirituality Mind Body Institute at Teachers College (n.d.), a kind of operationalized definition of spirituality anchored in an accessible social science perspective.

Someone pointed it out to us too, someone who came … to observe … Driving him to the airport he said, … "We say this every day at morning prayer, 'wherever two or three are gathered' … Jesus said, 'I'll be in the midst of you.'" He's like, "That's exactly what you're doing. You literally have the three people. You know, can you see that child as Christ in the center?"

Sam: That's where it started. That was the point. That's the point where it shifted.

Hannah: Yeah.

Kyle: That moment in that conversation was a a-ha?

Sam: It's when we stopped trying to build a traditional church, trying to pull people back to the hub and just let it sort of start decentralizing. So the trick becomes how do you feed people when they're at a distance?

Now this idea that a church has a network structure and that those congregations are connected—you probably remember from Episode 1 that that's not on its own something that would be likely to sound strange to Hannah and Sam. Right, they report to a central authority figure who oversees a bunch of different churches? So if the decentralized or distributed structure is a part of what makes Tapestry seem non-traditional in their heads, it's important that we try to go deeper on what exactly they mean by that. So keep your ears peeled, as it were.

Kyle: My sense is that people seem fed a little bit ... How do you think they're getting fed? What are you doing? What are they doing for each other?

Hannah: I think the key piece is that they're not ever isolated, not ever alone in it. I mean, and we say that to people, you know, from minute one, you're going to be part of a team …

I think our teams that have really been together for a while, they've learned to name their own struggles and what they're running up against in their own souls and doing this work. And yeah, there's a lot of vulnerability …

So I think they're fed by each other in a lot of ways … It'll be interesting to see what you hear, but I think they really feel like that teamwork and that they are a network and a support for each other.

We literally feed them a lot … We order so much pizza for trainings, for the community events, for, you know, taking mentors to dinner to just sit and talk to each other and meet

people on other teams and know that they're a part of a much bigger team. So usually the literal feeding and the the spiritual feeding are connected as they so often are.

So teamwork and connectedness: check. Nourishment of body and soul: check.

Sam: We also remind them that constantly, first of all, we constantly thank them and express gratitude on behalf of whomever for their work … But we constantly invite them to know they're the gift … that they possess everything … that just being themselves is a gift to the universe and a gift to them, [a] gift to their team and a gift to the child.

And, and it's interesting how many of them begin wanting to fix, because we're a culture of fixing … But at some point, so many mentors will say to us, we get the gift of presence just being present to somebody, just listening to somebody.

Gratitude: check. Gifts given, gifts received, the *idea* of gift embodied through presence.

And notice here the … let's call it existential flexibility. Sam said the directors express gratitude "on behalf of whomever." The mentors are, in part, a "gift to the universe." Perhaps you're familar with the spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous. They have this open-ended invitation to rely each day on a "God of [one's] own understanding." So if that idea is familiar to you, perhaps you're nodding along at this exploration of Tapestry's practices.

Sam and Hannah are very skilled at holding space for participants' own individual understandings of the spiritual dimension of the work. And, remarkably, they do that while still trusting and gently insisting that that dimension is essential. To use Massey's categories: They accomplish this partly through many *individual interactions*. They constantly give folks permission to accept or reject their lowkey religious premises. And that leads to a *heterogenous* sense of belonging, right? There's different kinds of people, maybe religious, maybe not, and everyone's truly welcome and appreciated for who they are. And finally the co-directors are open to a truly *dynamic* trajectory. They're not trying to control what Tapestry becomes. It's unfolding co-creatively.

Back to Sam:

Allowing me to just be me allows them just to be them and to discover them … To me that's priestly work. And that's what these mentors do … to learn … they carry a presence that is powerful and transformative.

This is a really key point, I think. The corollary to their message "you are the gift" is a trust that "you have everything you need." In a pretty consistent way that I could observe concretely when I was out with teams, Tapestry's shared culture assumes an asset-based rather than deficit-based view of the work. Youth and adults alike are "at promise" more than "at risk" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995)—chaotic and disconnected though their lives may be.

In one case, I was so inspired by how I saw this value in action that I shared my observation at a volunteer training:

Kyle (field recording, October 19, 2019): So I was out on this outing and the youth said that … school was getting started again and that they had a couple A's and a couple Fs and the mentor said, "Ooh, tell me about the A's." … And I just thought, "Oh boy, I would have fallen right into that trap" and was so appreciative of the facility that that person had in that moment.

But back to the coffee shop. After chatting about gifts and the priestly work of mentors sharing their presence, we took a brief break. Sam took the lead as we reconvened; he wanted to revisit my question about turning points in their understanding of Tapestry's mission.

Sam (field recording, October 17, 2019): I just wanted to say the whole narrative around what is church has been really fascinating for us … We were on retreat and … a good friend said … you know … you all are using the wrong narrative. And if you just reframe … what you're doing. He was talking about how Karen Armstrong and others have been looking at those traits that connect the world's major traditions. I forget what Karen uses, maybe compassion that, you know, in all religious traditions you find compassion.

And he was saying, "But what you … are finding is actually, it's not a religious trait, it's a human trait … You have atheists who are showing compassion every week … By not excluding those who don't claim religion, you're actually embracing them … Religions have been exclusive. You've been allowing them to find ways to be religious."

I find Sam's understanding of belonging here very compelling. The co-directors have addressed an issue I've observed in every congregation I've served: How do you include in the community in a meaningful way people who want to participate in the work of a church's mission but maybe who *don't* necessarily claim the religious identity of that church? Think people who work in the soup kitchen on Saturday but don't come to church on Sunday.

Tapestry has chosen to center the work of mentoring. They understand membership in the community as being connected to engagement in that work. And all of it happens according to

very flexible values and guiding principles, as we've heard. They've chosen to make a space shaped by the organization's roots in Christian mission. But participants of any religious faith or none can, I think and I saw, feel authentically a part of that mission simply by being a part of one of the teams that embody it. They feel a part of it because they're part of one of the teams doing the work.

I also think they're on to something with that language about helping participants "find ways to be religious." My friend and colleague Dr. James Nagle has made that kind of seeking the focus of his research. Jimmy's really interested in the ongoing "religiousness" he calls it, of former Catholic high school students who go on to disaffiliate or "deconvert" (2019).

It's interesting and valuable, I think, that Tapestry provides an opportunity for mentors to have that experience: to feel at least spiritual, at least fed, and maybe even start to resonate with, for example, Sam's language about the sacred space.

And it may be our mentors would hate all of this language. They would hate to be saying they're priests, that they're religious … And yet … I can't think of anybody … that would not acknowledge that there was something profound and engaging and transformative happening … And I, and I, and I think your, your work is inviting Tapestry then to name, for those individual entities, to name that experience, right? So we're not collecting and writing a canon that they have to ascribe or follow.

When Sam says "canon" here, he's talking about, like, an official body of work. This lack of a canon, or this flexibility about what might be part of a canon or go into a canon, I think this is another really important part of what they're getting at when they talk about Tapestry as a decentralized non-traditional church.

We can only create the space and they're going to have the experience they're having. And you are going, it seems to me, Kyle, that you then perform the, give them … a place … to begin to name … that experience … whether it's on YouTube or Instagram … I don't know what happens with that team, right? I don't know. I just know that there's something, I trust that something can happen when people show up and want to be compassionate and be themselves.

So here we have, I think, a pretty complete picture of how Sam and Hannah understand Tapestry as a decentralized network of non-traditional churches that is radically open to the experiences and the priorities of the people who make up those churches. The teams gather for shared activities shaped by the values identified in Tapestry's guiding principles. But beyond the guidance to make space for presence, hope, recreation, and communion, the co-directors want

individual teams to have a lot of freedom to make their own meaning, to make their own decisions about what's important.

As all this got clearer and clearer to me, it seemed that this way of being church is maybe not without precedent. While I take Latour's point that we don't want to try to shove Tapestry into some kind of predetermined sociological box, I do think it's worth taking one more break and examining another form of decentralized church.

2.5 Break 2: Carla Roland Guzmán

Fade in lit review music.

Roland Guzmán (Forma, 2019, 2:03–2:51): We have leaders in our church … committed Christians having communion on Sunday, pledging, active in all the ways you can imagine, who do not have a sense of belonging in their church.

This episode is made possible by Episcopal priest and church historian the Rev. Dr. Carla Roland Guzmán.

When you give them an opportunity, somewhere, to share their faith story, you're amazed. Those of us who are clergy, that might happen sometimes when you're in the car with somebody, or when you have a little breather. But none of this belonging stuff is happening on Sunday morning, it's not.

This is a provocative claim, but I think Dr. Roland Guzmán is right. In my view, it's an increasingly open secret that community and belonging tend to happen in spite of, rather than because of, the design of most Sunday morning church experiences. Too often, members of the community don't have chances to make contributions to the shared work that are personal and specific. And it's even rarer that those contributions would be received in personal and specific ways by others.

Roland Guzmán (Forma, 2019, 3:06–3:21): If I don't know what they're thinking about at two o'clock in the morning, or what brings them joy, we're not in solidarity. And we're not creating belonging with one another. It's about relationships.[10]

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[10] Here an observation about participatory culture from media scholar Henry Jenkins is helpful in underscoring the point: "Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 7).

In this very partial review of Roland Guzmán's work, let me start with her point about the importance of centering marginalized communities' perspectives.[11] If churches want to do a better job of forming community, then they probably need to start by tuning into the insights of people who have too often felt excluded. In her book and especially in this talk, her focus is on Latinx people and their perspectives, and also LGBTQ+ people.

Roland Guzmán (Forma, 2019, 0:03–0:50): Anything I say … that's going to be Latinx related, or LGBTQ related, I need you to both understand that it's important to know these things for those communities in particular. But if you think these things are only appropriate for those communities, you are doing exactly what I'm asking you not to do. Latinx ministry or LGBTQ ministry—which in itself are bad terminology because they're hyphenated—are ministry. It is ministry, it is ministry, it is ministry. Anytime that we add a tag to it, we are saying that something else is normative ministry.

My primary purpose in citing Dr. Roland Guzmán's work is to bring this same integrative lens to bear on Tapestry's approach to foster youth ministry. I want to argue that the decisions Sam and Hannah have made are ultimately bound up with their desire for Tapestry not to be "hyphenated" in an analogous way. In this view, Tapestry isn't a service *of* the church, but a contextually appropriate *expression* of church.

Roland Guzmán surveys several models or approaches to moving beyond these questions of simply "who's in?" and "who's out?", getting beyond that binary. The one she finds most promising is usually known in English as base ecclesial communities, from the Spanish comunidades eclesiales de base. A base ecclesial community is a small, intimate group with something in common. The purpose of their work is to become [quote] "God's family." Each autonomous community is the nucleus of a church and nurtures [quote] "human development and advancement" (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamerico in Roland Guzmán, 2020, p. 30)

The analogy to Tapestry isn't perfect, but I'm sure you're hearing the resonances here. The essential similarity is that both comunidades de base and Tapestry seek to remove the hyphen by forming small communities that have a better chance of cultivating belonging with a particular group. And then those communities take action in ways that are relevant to their organic identity and priorities.

It's clear to me from our hours of conversation that Hannah and Sam truly see themselves as *partners* with each team. Partners, like, at most. At times, it's clear that they are very aware of

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[11] Big thanks to my colleague Pamela Stevens for putting me on to Dr. Roland Guzmán's recent book for a course Pam and I were teaching on Christian education.

how little control they have, and I think they see that as a feature, not a bug. They want to establish a maximally flexible framework of relationships rather than trying to control the vision of each team. And they've actually cycled through some decisions where they've had to say[12] "No, we're not going to have a curriculum" (field recording, February 12, 2020), "No, we're going to let go of some of these rigid procedures" (field recording, October 17, 2019; field recording, October 19, 2019), "No, we're not going to impose a Christian interpretive lens onto this work that we're all doing together" (field recording, October 17, 2019; field recording, October 19, 2019). They're very open to the idea that people who go to their church would say that it *isn't* one.

You can't hang out with Tapestry and especially Hannah and Sam and not have to try to make some sense of that contradiction, even if, like me, you think that that contradiction is really important and needs to stay in the model.

So let me close out this episode by sharing how I've been thinking about all this. Inspired by all the thinkers we've encountered in the series so far, I've developed my own language for trying to capture Tapestry's relationship with the church as it's traditionally understood. I don't think everybody's going to go for it. But to be honest, it's the contribution to the literature that I'm most excited about making.

2.6 Coda: Faith-Adjacent Spaces

Coda: Faith-Adjacent Spaces.

In the write-up of my dissertation pilot project (Oliver, 2018), which you'll hear more about in the next episode, I used a term I didn't take the time to define. A reviewer of a manuscript into which I adapted that write-up called me out on this omission. I've been thinking ever since about the definition I would offer.

So I invite you now to think about Tapestry, and the work of similar organizations and even the work of ambiguously affiliated religious people, as forming *faith-adjacent space*.

These spaces are convened by modes of activity that are separate from formal institutional programs and rituals but still somehow close to and even *connected* to religion in meaningful, visible ways.[13]

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[12] These are paraphrases, but the quotation marks are helpful in parsing my conversational sentence structure.

[13] This frequent, *explicit* presence, however ambiguously acknowledged by participants, is why I have chosen not to engage significantly with the "implicit religion" tradition in my analysis (see Bailey, 1990)

The social-spatial metaphor of adjacency captures a lot of what I find interesting about the organization. So let me start by connecting this conceptual framing to the ideas of the thinkers we've encountered so far in this dissertation.

With Latour and Massey, I want to redirect the desire to assign some sweeping identity to Tapestry as a whole. Remember, "no group, only group formation." That's Latour (2005). And following Massey (2005), I believe that formation happens through individuals convening space together, weaving those different layers of story into, well, a Tapestry. I didn't pick the pseudonym out of thin air.

Tapestry isn't the roster of its youth and adult members. It's the working out of a shared commitment to connection and healing, through the practices we've been exploring in this chapter: education forming the basis of initiation; spiritual practices drawn from religious traditions, even if they don't look traditionally religious; and, as I'm going to discuss below, the very clear and careful structuring of relationships.

So if we're relieved of the pressure to label Tapestry with some definitive group type—church, ministry, nonprofit, whatever—we're freed up to acknowledge what's essential from our reading of Drescher (2016) and of Roland Guzmán (2020): Binary understandings of membership and affiliation aren't actually that helpful. They mire us in all or nothing, us vs. them, inside/outside thinking. Increasingly, that kind of thinking fails to capture lots of people's religious experience (see also Nagle 2019; Putnam 2000).

So my proposal points out that in a world richly shaped by religion—no doubt about it, religious architecture, religious legal frameworks, religious charitable initiatives, and of course religious and anti-religious people themselves—in such a world *all of us* are constantly moving though and relating in faith-adjacent spaces.

Every time Sam nods to some religious concept or metaphor in a mentor training or thank-you dinner, we can recognize those gatherings as faith-adjacent. Every time Hannah draws on her training in Godly Play, we can recognize the story circle as faith-adjacent. Every time a church kitchen, a church basement, or even a church sanctuary hosts a yoga night or AA meeting or English class or Tapestry team cook-off, the resulting social space is recognizable as faith-adjacent. The religious "stuff" is somehow nearby, it's in the air, it's impacting the space

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and have developed instead an account that grapples with continuities to the formal religious structures. If nothing else, Hannah, Sam, and I are too entangled with those structures for them to be merely implicit—in Tapestry itself or in this study.

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itself. And because these spaces are faith-adjacent rather than outright religious, they are much more hospitable and authentic sites of belonging for people of many faiths and/or no faith.

To finish this episode about how Tapestry works, I want to tell you as briefly as I can about the most important thing I learned about the organization's relational practices. I had to wait until this point to share it with you, because I believe we needed this new language of faith-adjacency to fully appreciate what's happening.

Toward the end of the volunteer training, Sam or Hannah draw a picture. Latour would call it a network diagram. It's a picture of some very specific guidance Tapestry gives about who should and shouldn't form relationships in the midst of this work. I'll summarize by saying that each team—a young person plus three mentors—also has a facilitator. And the facilitator's first role is to be the go-between connecting the team to the young person's caregiver or caregiver system.

In short, the facilitators support the mentors and the foster parents, so the *mentors* can focus on supporting the youth.

But the facilitator plays another connective role, which I'll let Sam describe. He starts with an example of why this other role is needed.

Sam (field recording, October 19, 2019: I almost guarantee whatever team you're on, this is going to happen. You're going to realize that your young person is always hungry and that you're beginning to spend an inordinate amount of money on food … Every young person we've encountered, food is an issue for a whole host of reasons … Your facilitator can help process that … "Let me go to the larger group and see if other teams have had this issue and what they did about it."

So the reliational structure of Tapestry isn't just for logistical expediency. It's about compassion and support for everyone in the system. Ultimately, it's the mark of wise practices for trauma-informed care (Agosti et al., 2013; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). As Sam continues to unpack the structure, he talks about how the effects of trauma move through the system:

There's a trauma that is a part of life that none of us chose for a young person and they didn't choose … I want you to think of trauma as an energy and that energy … will begin to find its way to you … And if that energy of trauma begins to pile up on you … you feel weighted down. We don't want that to happen.

So in some ways, that circle of the facilitator is for that energy to be passed on to them. Now we don't want facilitators to be burned out facilitators … So that circle of larger

facilitators … your facilitator can bring that energy and put it in a larger group. And we don't want them to get burned out. So the idea is that we build a … circle around that group of facilitators. … Think of us as the larger community … What starts as a sort of a tight and, you know, intense ball of trauma, by the time it makes its way out here, it's easier to deal with, but you're not stuck with it … Like you wake up next Saturday and you think, I can't wait to go and see our young, my young person.

Now here's the faith-adjacent part. Sam went one step further when talking to *me* about trauma in that coffee shop conversation. In a sense, he frames it as part of the struggle between good and evil.

Sam (field recording, October 17, 2019): We believe, and what somebody has reflected to us … what we bring is holding that presence of God … And nobody else has to ascribe to that or believe it. But if we can hold that … it infects the entire system … The counter of that, of course, is the trauma … the demonic is the trauma. And so it's having that presence of God and the presence of the demonic and as that demon cycles back into the system it's being able to take it to the light and expose it to the light.

This is a moment of Sam making theological sense of the experience of trauma from the explicitly religious resources of his tradition. For Sam, a demon isn't a little red gremlin with horns and pitchfork. The demonic, writ large, is the manifestation of evil and suffering. And in particular here, it's the traumatic experiences that foster youth go through and that every mentor in their own way has to confront and make sense of. Like when young people who have experienced food insecurity sometimes want to spend entire outings eating.

Similarly, "holding the presence of God throughout the system" isn't about priests of any kind brandishing a crucifix shouting "the power of Christ compels you." It's about lifting up and nurturing the flexible, accessible religious ideals they believe can make all the difference for *everyone* at Tapestry, Nones and Somes alike.

Here's the point: I said earlier that Digital Storytelling is partly arts practice and partly *something like* group therapy. Lambert says that until you learn to tell your story, your story will tell you instead. In particular, a traumatic experience deprives you of your agency to make your own meaning from what happened to you. At least until, as Sam just said, you expose the story to the light of day. If you can do so in a safe and appropriate manner, you'll probably experience some measure of healing in the process.

I believe Sam's account of the demonic as it's faced and dealt with in the Tapestry community is basically a faith-adjacent remix of the principles of trauma-informed care. And in an analogous

way, I believe all the storytelling that takes place at Tapestry is another kind of faith-adjacent remix. A remix of the religious rituals for confronting evil—and perhaps especially for celebrating hope.

So they didn't use the term "faith-adjacent" as we were getting to know each other, because it's a term I invented. But I've got lots of evidence that Hannah and Sam brought with them to our partnership the hope that our version of Digital Storytelling would function in something like that way. A remixed ritual. A revealing ritual.

So to sum up: Space is a social practice, and Tapestry's practices are irreducibly faith-adjacent. And so that begged the question, what would that mean for co-creating Digital Storytelling spaces at Tapestry?

I came to believe that perhaps this activity could be much more than just a tool for team reflection that also periodically added media to their training playlist. Increasingly, we wondered together if it could help Tapestry become a fuller expression of what is good and powerful about church. Even a non-traditional church.

Fade in theme music.

So that's what we would try to find out. In the second half of this podcast, I'm going to share with you what we learned, starting with some of the challenges of doing this work. That's up next in Episode 3 of *Becoming Tapestry.* Stay tuned after the credits for a preview.

Begin Episode 2 credits.

Becoming Tapestry is an ethnographic podcast submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Special thanks to Lalitha Vasudevan, Ioana Literat, Detra Price-Dennis, Carla Roland Guzmán, Pamela Stevens, Yesenia, Team Z, Sam, Hannah, and everyone at Tapestry who participated in my study. Thanks also to James Nagle, whose work I cited a couple times in the chapter. Jimmy and I sat down after a recent Religious Education Association meeting to chat about where our work intersects. You'll find an edited version of that conversation as a bonus episode behind this one in your feed.

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script and reference list, or to explore a mountain of ethnographic data and analytic artifacts, visit becomingtapestry.net.

Begin Episode 3 teaser.

Next time on *Becoming Tapestry*, I 'fess up that I'm feeling a little stuck.

Kyle: I know you said in the email that you were sort of cognizant of knowing that I wasn't making a ton of, you know, forward progress on this for the research's sake. And obviously that's less important than than caring for the teams in the normal way … Given where we're at, how might we sort of brainstorm about ways we think that it is plausible to get young people hopefully with team members making some kind of media together in some way. And if we don't think … if we're starting to think maybe it's less likely to happen that way, what might be some, what might be some alternatives?

Chapter 3: Empathetic Engagement

The audio version of this chapter is available at becomingtapestry.net/chapter3.

3.1 Cold Open: (Lack of) Progress Report

Fade in tape of Kyle and co-directors checking in about the difficulties connected to Kyle's integration with Tapestry teams.

Kyle (field recording, February 12, 2020): I know you said in the email that you were sort of cognizant of knowing that I wasn't making a ton of, you know, forward progress on this for the research's sake.

I'm sitting in a downtown coworking space with Hannah and Sam, about fourteen months since I started hanging out with Tapestry. It's quiet, a little too quiet to be recording, so you can probably tell that we're trying to keep our voices down. You can probably *also* hear in my voice that I'm nervous.

I'm nervous because I'm more than a year into a study ostensibly about facilitating Digital Storytelling activities. But so far the closest I'd gotten was participating in one comically bad TikTok dance.

Kyle: And obviously that's less important than than caring for the teams in the normal way … Given where we're at, how might we sort of brainstorm about ways we think that it is plausible to get young people hopefully with team members making some kind of media together in some way.

By this time I'd been out on a dozen or so engagements with Tapestry, including most of their recent All Tapestry gatherings, a handful of planning conversations with Hannah and Sam, and outings with two individual teams.

It's tricky under any circumstances to build relationships and trust between an organization's members and an outside researcher. Three Tapestry volunteer trainings had firmly reinforced for me that this process would likely be even slower than usual. Why? Well, all the perfectly understandable reasons bound up with Tapestry youth's life experiences, particularly their entanglement with the foster system.

In my collaborative planning with Hannah and Sam, our main approach for addressing this challenge had been to set up the work in the context of *teams*. Gathering individual Tapestry youth or mentors, to tell individual stories, would have been a more typical approach from the official Digital Storytelling playbook. But for reasons we'll explore, having to do with *my story* as a researcher, I was well prepared to go "off script" in this way. Wanna tell team stories? Great, I've done that before.

Part of our purpose for this adaptation was for teams to be able to explore their experiences together. In the last episode, Sam compared this opportunity to each team forming their own "canon" of scripture or even participating in a faith-adjacent healing ritual (field notes, October 17, 2019).

But the other reason for having me work with teams was so the social capital within each of these tiny communities might rub off a bit on me (field notes, March 7, 2019). In Bruno Latour's language, I wanted to get caught up in the *teams'* network or work net, as he sometimes says. That's pretty different from trying to catch them in mine.

Here's what we hadn't really accounted for: First, Tapestry teams in their normal practice *don't really do projects*. Teams hang out. They go to the playground or coffee shop. They cook and play cards. There's almost no "homework" at Tapestry.

On the other hand, making media together kinda *is* homework, with a progressive trajectory. Hopefully it's fun, creative homework. Part of the knack of facilitation is to create a space that nurtures a sense of fun and ease and connection. But however you scaffold it, making a video *is* a project. You have to work at it semi-consistently. For much longer than the hour that a team convenes in a given week.[14]

The other issue we were encountering was some unexpected team transitions.

Hannah: Throwing you in there and trying to get you connected, all of a sudden, two out of the three, three out of the four teams are going through some kind of transition … It's an interesting reflection back on what we're doing and where are those teams finding anchors in their relationships and in their common stories. And how do we capture those in the midst of this kind of always churning water?

I told Sam and Hannah what my advisor, Lalitha Vasudevan, had told me: these delays were also *data*. So we reflected on the prevalence of disruption and transition in the lives of foster youth

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[14] See especially Pleasants (2008) for a discussion of the dynamics of informal, drop-in storytelling.

and their mostly tech worker mentors. What I was also learning, or rather re-learning, was to walk the tightrope inherent to my chosen approach to ethnographic research.

I am trained in, and fascinated by, the arts facilitation tradition of Digital Storytelling. But I also have a strong commitment to what ethnographer Sarah Pink (2011) calls "empathetic engagement" with research subjects (p. 271). Here empathy is an embodied choice, not just some sentimental rule of thumb for a researcher to keep in mind. Pink (2011) says our work should focus on [quote] "practices and places that are important to the people participating in the research. And by association it does *not* therefore principally involve the collection of data *about them* that can later be analyzed. Rather[, she writes,] it involves the production of meaning *in participation with them* through a shared activity in a shared place" [unquote] (p. 270, emphasis hers). That's a pretty high bar.

So far, I'd been erring on the side of empathy, trusting that relationships were the important thing to start with and that the chances to pitch a project would come. Still, all this was making me *really* nervous about whether I would ever finish this dissertation.

Thankfully, I hang out with other scholars who have a pretty clear sense of why this choice is worth it. Why err on the side of empathy? Here's how Lalitha puts it:

Lalitha (Oliver & Vasudevan, 2017, 5:44–5:49): putting young people in the role of knowledge makers, rather than constantly knowledge receivers.

That's it. That's the commitment at the core of all the highfalutin theory and methods we'll get into in this episode. Let young people—and here let's say participants more broadly—let them call more of the shots. We need to believe that research participants have plenty to teach the world, and not just after we've come along and, you know, "analyzed the data about them."

In a participatory study, our partners are co-creating the shared space with us, co-narrating the intersecting stories (recall Massey, 2005; see also Wissman et al., 2015). That shift in stance is how Lalitha and many on our team in the Media and Social Change Lab try to conduct ourselves. In my case, it meant letting Tapestry and their context truly guide the study.

In the end, we improvised and *negotiated* (see Pleasants 2008) our way to a couple takes on Digital Storytelling, approaches that fit the rhythms of Tapestry. In so doing, we prototyped a promising *ongoing ritual* that I believe could eventually find purchase across the organization as a whole.

So allow me, here in Episode 3, to lay out the methodological and ethical stakes of this style of research. I came to understand them, largely, by paying attention to my own identity and my interactions, in this project and its precursor.

It's gonna get a little meta on this episode of *Becoming Tapestry*, a show about what it's like to walk the tightrope of participatory research.

3.2 Act 1: The Obligatory Segment about Data and Research Methods

Chapter 3: Empathetic Engagement. Act 1: The Obligatory Segment about Data and Research Methods.

In the first episode, you briefly met dissertation committee member Dr. Ioana Literat. You may recall that she, uh, strongly prompted me to get the podcasting element back into my project. Thank you, Ioana, for the encouragement to be myself.

Relatedly, she's also the person who proposed adding the research question we're talking about in this episode.

Ioana: My big comment is really embrace the meta … You're clearly thinking about your multiple identities and how they overlap and how they shaped the process and how they're shaped by the process. I think there's … an auto- ethnographic element that's kind of bubbling under the surface. And I think it should come out more.

That's "auto-ethnographic" as in, turning my attention very deliberately to *myself* in the midst of this ethnography project. What's ethnography, you may ask? Here's the short version. It's field work conducted in particular communities to study people and culture: we hang out, we observe, we participate. Stay tuned for more in our first ad break slash lit review.

As I listen back to the recording of our chat after my dissertation proposal presentation, I'm struck that Ioana, Lalitha, and third member Dr. Detra Price-Dennis all focused a lot on where the *how* of this project intersected with the *who*—with me, as a storyteller, a researcher, and a pastor. Here's Dr. Price-Dennis, talking about one particular ethical quagmire I had described in my proposal, which you'll hear more about in Act 2:

Detra: Pay attention to these issues and document strategies you're using to address your concerns … We don't really have a lot of literature to help inform us … all of these people who might be playing on the periphery of storytelling with youth or with any vulnerable population. And you have a skill set … and some training and knowledge that I don't have

in preparation because of your own identity markers. And I just think you could really speak into that … We so desperately need this.

I especially appreciate Detra's point here about the need to beef up the scholarly literature on the *craft* of conducting participatory research. It's really messy to facilitate *any* open-ended creative project, and when you're doing that as research the questions just get even more complex. And in the literature of Digital Storytelling, the most illuminating studies attend both to the final products participants create and to the stories *of* the stories—that is, the processes by which learners explore and create meaning along the way (Davis, 2004; Davis & Weinshenker, 2012; Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008).[15] Unfortunately, there's just not that many of those kinds of studies.

Here's how I registered the committee members' comments in the revised version of my proposal: Research Question 3: As a researcher positioned at the intersection of religious education and media education, and a practitioner trained as a teacher, pastor, and media producer, how do my diverse roles, experiences, and orientations shape my engagement with participants?

You've already heard part of my answer. The pastor in me, the teacher, the MASCLab member, the part of me who wants to cultivate and celebrate participation: these aspects of my identity shaped my project, mostly, by slowing me down. They kept me committed to flexibility and kept me comfortable with ambiguity. Both those orientations proved essential.

My attention to Research Question 3 has led me to develop this chapter according to two major threads. In Act 2, I'll discuss how I learned to follow my participants' lead in the research and storytelling process. That thread emerges with a little help from a lit review and some difficult reflections on my own past mistakes. And then in the coda, I'll reflect on what I think it means to be a researcher who is also a media producer. Those lessons come via an assist from a scholar we met earlier in this series.

Before I get started developing these two threads and the self-directed inquiry that accompanied them, let me use the rest of Act 1 as a big-picture roadmap of my project. This is the kind of detailed procedural information you'd typically get in a section labeled something like "Methods

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[15] As Gubrium and colleagues' (2016) mixed-method study of Digital Story outcomes seems to suggest, we gain significant insight into the concrete workings of meaning-making processes through participation, observation, and other forms of detailed attention to qualitative tracings of storytellers' work together, rather than relying primarily on pre- and post-interviews and surveys, or simply on the artifacts themselves. In the words of Street, Pahl, and Rowsell (2014), "an ethnographic lens gives multimodal analysis a social map" (in Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 119).

& Data." I'm sharing it here because I don't think my auto-ethnographic questions will make sense without it.

Play transition music.

I started this project by pivoting between two primary ethnographic modes. From December 2018 until October 2020, I regularly attended Tapestry events as a light-touch participant-observer. This is sort of ethnography 101: "hanging out" is what Lalitha always calls it. Hanging out, but paying close attention.

These engagements included seven adult-oriented events like trainings and thank-you dinners, and five All Tapestry events, where every team is invited to come together for some fun group activity: mini-golf, picnics, holiday parties. I documented these outings primarily through field notes and voice memos.

All but two of these twelve outings were in-person events. The last couple adult events took place during Covid. Besides these two Zoom sessions, the rest of the "mode 1" outings took place all over our metropolitan area. Mentors and youth live in many different neighborhoods and even different cities in this region, and many of their activities involve them with particular locales: beaches, skating rinks, etc. So that's mode 1, hanging out.

My second mode of engagement took place first with the co-directors and then gradually with teams as well. This aspect of my work was more than just hanging out: here I took a quite active stance in shaping my time together with Tapestry members.

My objective, as you now know, was to invite them to co-design with me and try out some new creative practices, adapted as needed from the Digital Storytelling playbook.

From November 2018 through June 2021, I met the co-directors nine times, usually for at least two hours. Before Covid, these were meetups in coffee shops, hotel lobbies, and coworking spaces. But starting with our April 2020 meeting, the rest took place on Zoom. Again, because: Covid. I began recording and transcribing these meetings in October 2019, after the Teachers College Institutional Review Board had formally approved my research protocol and I could start documenting participants' informed consent. Anway, that's mode 2: figuring out *with* Tapestry how to design media making activities *for and by* Tapestry.

Let me pause and say that mode 1 is basically how I learned enough about Tapestry to answer my first research question, about the organization and its practices (see Episode 2). Mode 2 is how I pursued my second research question, which asks about how Digital Storytelling helped

participants reflect and make meaning. So you can appreciate why I was nervous about making it a year into this project without much to say about that.

This second more participatory and co-creative mode did eventually include work with individual teams, though not as much as I originally hoped. I went on two in-person coffee shop outings with two different Tapestry teams before Covid set in: Zoe's Team Z in September 2019 and another youth's team, pseudonyms Jasmine and Team J. That was in January 2020. I had also spent significant time with a third team in the context of a couple consecutive All Tapestry events, hoping to lay the relational groundwork for a storytelling project with them. This third collaboration was one we had to pause due to team disruption.

But interestingly, it was the sort of über-disruption of the pandemic itself that opened a door to actually completing a modified Digital Storytelling process. I said before that Tapestry teams don't really do projects. But you remember those first couple months of Covid, right? A lot of people had to find something to do to keep themselves busy. Including Team Z.

Zoe (co-created research artifact): I guess you're wondering what we're doing and how we got here.

Ellie: We used to do fashion shows in person.

Victoria: During Covid, we're doing them online.

Liz: And we're thinking back on all the stuff we've done together over the years.

This tape is from the narrative turn at the end of the cold open in Team Z's Digital Story. In early pandemic life, lots of teams were learning that *structure* really helped the transition to online outings (field notes, April 22, 2020). Here we recreated the structure of Team Z's Covid-safe fashion show game via Zoom screenshare and a virtual world where Zoe frequently hangs out.

So online games were one approach to staying connected during Covid. And for Team Z, Digital Storytelling would become another. We met eight times via Zoom in June, August, and September of 2020, for anywhere from 30 to 75 minutes.

At the first meeting, I reconnected with the team and re-pitched the project in this new Zoom-based format. At meeting 2, we reflected in a meandering, open-ended way about the team's history, guided by the content of a stack of photographs Yesenia gave Zoe before she transitioned off the team. Meetings 3 through 7 were for writing the script and choosing the

accompanying photos. And meeting 8 was our recording session. In Episode 4, I'll say a lot more about this collaboration, including a bit about how it wrapped up.

When we finished Team Z's video, I stopped trying to move forward on any new storytelling projects with other teams, at least for the time being. My remaining meetings with Sam and Hannah were focused on ending this phase of the research well, and planning for what might be possible going forward.

With Sam and Hannah's blessing—and, not for nothing, Lalitha's as well—I pressed forward with more analysis of all the data I'd been creating with Tapestry. And I started writing my own script, for my own story: the dissertation podcast you're listening to right now.

So that was the "what" of the methods and data for this project. It's time to step back and explore a bit more of the "how" and the "why," and to connect my approach to the broader literature. I'll do that with a little help from my friends.

3.3 Break 1: Kristine Rodriguez Kerr, Katherine Newhouse, Lalitha Vasudevan, and Carey Jewitt

This episode is made possible by the work of Drs. Kristine Rodriguez Kerr, Katherine Newhouse, and my advisor, Lalitha Vasudevan. All three are associated in various ways with our collective of researchers in the Media and Social Change Lab. And actually, saying my work is made possible by just them falls short in this context. First, more than a dozen others participated as facilitators and researchers on their projects I'm going to briefly introduce you to here. Second, those projects are part of a larger emerging research tradition called participatory multimodal ethnography. (We'll unpack that name in a minute.). And third, the most important contributors to projects like these are the *participants*. Like Eric.

Once again I have reordered the excerpts here.

Eric (EdLab Studios, 2012, 3:39–3:55; 1:25–1:39): We would sometimes walk into the rehearsal studio and just talk about what's happening, what we feel, what we think, what we have to offer for the actual writing of the play … Attending classes here at the program sort of changed my view on how schooling is. There was no explaining of what I'm doing, so I would just not participate.

Eric was a part of an out-of-school program, and accompanying research, that the authors wrote about recently in a chapter about *involving* youth in research *about* youth. (By the way, because

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they're my MASCLab colleagues, it feels weird to use their last names, so I'll call the authors Kristine, Katie, and Lalitha. Big thanks to Katie for agreeing to record some quotes from their piece for this show.)

As you might guess from Eric's comments about his evolving view of schooling, he and other participants in these programs don't always start their involvement willingly. In this project, participants had been ordered by a judge and were compelled to show up in order to avoid being sent to juvenile detention.

The subject of their chapter is Voices, one such alternative to incarceration program. Their engagement with Voices actually has quite a lot in common with the sort of tone of what it's like to be a part of Tapestry. Remember what Zoe said up top? That Tapestry is "pretty chill," "pretty flexible," something to look forward to with hope rather than dread? Voices and Tapestry accomplish this kind of engagement by privileging the interests, desires, and promise of young people who are generally spoken about as "at risk" (Swadener and Lubeck, 1995).

This is largely a *caring* decision (Kerr, Newhouse, & Vasduevan, 2020, p. 48): People like Eric, Emanuel, and Zoe consistently cite with gratitude the humanizing effects of normalcy and basic kindness they experience in their programs. Here's former foster youth and Digital Storyteller Jennifer putting a pretty fine point on this phenomenon in one of the videos Tapestry uses for training:

Jennifer (field recording, October 19, 2019): My most comforting memory when I was in foster care is sitting in the hallway of a mental hospital with a staff member. Our shoulders touching, their hand on mine, having a normal conversation about a boy I liked in my ward. What I remember most is how human I felt being touched and being listened to even though the environment was about as barren, institutional, and dehumanizing as they come. I was happiest in this placement.

In short, my MASCLab colleagues and I believe the learning and growth we're trying to catalyze in our research sites should be driven by caring, human relationships (see also Vasudevan et al., 2022), and they should reflect the interests and priorities of the learners themselves. We know from experience that this approach is *especially* important when working with people who—for perfectly good reasons—probably don't want to be there with us, especially at first.

So, as I said, our approach to these empathetic engagements in research and learning contexts is called participatory multimodal ethnography.

What does it mean to be an ethnographer who takes this type of stance? Well, we've already unpacked some of the *participatory* part, the value and power of co-creativity in the research. Kristine, Katie, and Lalitha add that this invitation is essential to the righting, in a small way, of some big historical wrongs. Too often, powerful researchers have extracted knowledge from vulnerable communities in ways that haven't given anything back. By contrast, my colleagues write that [quote] "recogni[zing] the unique and singular knowledge of participants who are underrepresented as knowers … necessitates humility and … with-ness" (Kerr, Newhouse, & Vasudevan, 2020, p. 42).

That's W-I-T-H-N-E-S-S. With-ness. When we register the knowledge that both participants and researchers carry, we don't just create more reliable, accessible scholarship. We also improve the likelihood that this scholarship will actually *benefit*, or at least matter to, the communities with whom we collaborate.

How about that other operative word in this emerging research tradition, "multimodal"? I'm going to let Dr. Carey Jewitt, an important voice in the development and teaching of multimodality, introduce this concept:

Jewitt (2014, 0:34–1:02): Multimodal research is a theoretical approach to looking at communication, which says that we need to really attend to all the different forms of communication and representation that people use. So it's pushing beyond looking at the language, writing, speech, and talking about gesture, body, space, the visual: bringing together all of the different ways that people make meaning.

Let me emphasize that phrase "bringing together." There's a real *holistic* or *integrative* perspective in multimodality. Here's why:

Jewitt (2014, 2:44–3:02): We've all had that experience where we know someone's saying something, and their body, their demeanor, their gaze, their gestures all suggest that something else is going on, that perhaps they're agreeing with you in what they're saying, and through all of their use of other forms of communication, they're violently disagreeing with you.

The conflicting messages are important multimodal data. We need to look at the whole picture to suss out more of the story.

Research sites like Voices and Tapestry tap deeply into the power of multiple forms of communication. Writing plays, sharing music, making media, playing basketball, even attending to body language and positioning within a workshop room or outing venue—all these modes

offer facilitators, mentors, and researchers insights about how to understand our participants. As Jewitt says more concisely in a co-authored handbook of multimodality (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016) the purpose of these methods is to "make visible the cultural and social practices of a particular community" (p. 132).

Cut the lit review music.

Let me pause a minute for a quick preview of Episode 4. I said "make visible" just now, but I think Jewitt and company mean visible in the broad metaphorical sense. Notice. Draw out. Clarify. We might just as well say "make audible." And that's a hint about the second sense of multimodal methods at work in my project.

To be sure, Digital Storytelling is a classic example of multimodality. A visual mode, a spoken mode, a musical mode all come together, in ways we talk about when we make the videos. And when we do that in a research setting, there's this wider mode of learning from those choices. We might call it ethnographic "noticing" of multimodal design decisions within the participatory project. This requires a kind of coordination between researcher identity and skills and teacher-facilitator identity and skills. So multimodal methods in this sense were a big part of how I worked with teams, how I did the research in the most straightforward sense.

But *podcasting* is also a multimodal form. You've heard me interweave and toggle between narrative modes, analytic modes, summative modes. I've even waxed theological from time to time. I'm interweaving data we created, like recordings of storytelling sessions, and also data I've sort of lived, like when I freak about something and have to spend time processing and documenting it, as Ioana and Detra told me to do.

So I hope that definition—"making visible, [or making audible,] the cultural and social practices of a particular community"—I hope that feels really familiar in light of what we've been up to in this podcast so far. How I chose to "write" my dissertation, how I'm telling you the story of the stories—that's *also*, in a very real sense, a multimodal method of this project.

OK, end of digression. Sorry, I told you things were gonna get a little meta.

Fade in lit review music.

Let's go back to my colleagues' chapter and zoom in on research participants: Kristine, Katie, and Lalitha point out that participants in settings like Voices and Tapestry are engaged in multimodal "reading" and "writing" in really poignant ways: "the … interlocking system of juvenile justice and schooling … impacted how workshop facilitators were read and responded

to *by youth*, either as allies or surveillants … often fluctuating somewhere in between and occasionally blooming into something different altogether" (Kerr, Newhouse, & Vasduevan, 2020, p. 48, emphasis mine).

I really can't stress enough the importance of this mutual dance of interpersonal interpretation. Researchers "read" participants, and *participants* "read" researchers. This awareness is just essential when you're trying to facilitate an activity where neither party is sure they're comfortable or even welcome. "Reading" the "texts" of our voices, or notebook doodling, or decisions to bury our heads in our phones—that's the bread and butter of multimodal ethnography as I've experienced it, and I think as Kristine, Katie, and Lalitha are describing it.

And as Lalitha pointed out regarding my experience of stuckness at the top of this episode: the entirety of this messy dance is *data*. When she said this, I heard parallel religious precepts: God wastes nothing. The Spirit of the Divine is always moving, always teaching. For me, this radical openness in this method, the invitation to constant observation and reflection, is part of what connects my training as a pastor to my new role as a participatory multimodal ethnographer.

And if I'm doing it right, I stay especially connected to my limitations. My colleagues close their chapter with praise for the value of *unknowing*, of [quote] "embracing and holding your own vulnerability alongside your sense of conviction" (Kerr, Newhouse, & Vasduevan, 2020, p. 57) [unquote].

That's where we're going next in this auto-ethnographic episode. We're going to explore some of my past mistakes, what I learned from them, and how they shaped my work with Tapestry. As St. Paul wrote, "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:11); when I am foolish, then am I close to true wisdom (1 Corinthians 3:19).

Fade out lit review music.

3.4 Act 2: Opting In, Blurring Out

Act 2. Opting In, Blurring Out

The people who design doctoral programs in education are pretty smart about how hard this work is to tackle. First, you've got to process an incomprehensible amount of information in the form of coursework and exams. Then you have to put that new knowledge and skill to work in order to design and implement an empirical project at a real-world learning site. And *then* you have to pick up the pieces of your shattered naivety and self-image when this second step helps you realize that, pardon my language, you actually don't know sh*#&^ [scissor effect].

Kyle (field recording, July 16, 2018): Okay so when when everyone left just now, the first thing you said was, "Well, that was awkward."

Penelope: I felt I felt bad for you … I know how hard it is to get kids to do stuff when you're a teacher and can just tell them what to do, let alone trying to convince them to do something that they don't actually have to do. I had this like very clear sense of like all of them sort of shifting, like not wanting to be the first one to say they didn't want to do it.

"They" were five potential research participants at a church-run day camp. This project was totally separate from my work with Tapestry, a precursor to what would become my primary dissertation focus. I know we're jumping around a lot in this episode, but embracing the meta means stories within stories.

What "they" didn't want to do, of course, was participate in the project I'd spent hours and hours planning. Even now, more than three years later, listening to this tape makes my skin crawl.

Kyle: I'm not surprised that the three kids who stuck around were the kids that I know a little bit and … have have some relationship with … [T]hat that for me was like a big reminder of why the idea of coming in and doing a project for a week … is, you know, like such a troubling idea.

Fade out field audio.

Dear listener, it was my troubling idea. But the whole purpose of this project was to work out the flaws in my research plan. That's why they call it a pilot study, which I had to complete before proposing my full dissertation.

More than any other experience, my pilot study taught me to do more ethical, more participant-driven, more empathetic research. So although it *is* a narrative departure from my journey with Tapestry, I'd like to try to show you the challenge and power of participatory multimodal ethnography by sharing some scenes from my first attempt at actually doing it.

The impromptu post-mortem you just heard part of took place on the first full day of my pilot study. Before my family's move out west, I had designed a week-long Digital Storytelling workshop in a different faith-adjacent space. St. Sebastian's in Woodfield—those are both pseudonyms—is a church that primarily serves a pan-Latin American immigrant community in a suburban county of a major East Coast metro area. Each year, the church runs a summer-long, non-religious day camp for children in Woodfield and other nearby towns. Most campers and

counselors at St. Sebastian's have Latinx heritage, and camp is conducted in both English and Spanish according to the needs of the moment and the skills and preferences of the people involved.

The young people adore this camp. Like, it's more than just the highlight of their summer. Here's Veronica and Lauren, more pseudonyms, the day after our harrowing false start. They're trying to sum up what this community means to them.

Veronica (field recording, July 17, 2018): [It's] really sad each year when summer camp ends because like we have friends here that don't live here … I get scared cuz like they've always been there with me, they grew up with me in this camp.

Lauren: Yeah, like what if this bond breaks?

Veronica: We have a group chat. Each year we text each other ... "Oh, are you going this year?" … And like that means a lot to me cuz like knowing that I have like my family, knowing that this is like another family towards me.

Lauren: It's like my second family.

Listening to them unpack the yearly cycle of longing and anticipation, I think back on the summer camp experiences of my youth. Like how camp wasn't quite the same when a close friend had a family vacation or got really sick and couldn't make the trip. Camp time is magical. Camp time is precious. Camp time gets you through the year.

And the day before we had this conversation, I had marched these three counselors, plus two counselors in training I didn't know at all, into a thoroughly un-campy space: a formal conference room. And I asked them, basically, to bail on an entire week's worth of afternoon camp activities. Instead, I wanted them to hang out with a semi-stranger, and make low-tech videos about their individual lives. Rhetorically unwise, right?

But here's the power and promise of this style of research. I arrived on Monday morning with a very naive research design. I left on Monday afternoon with a much better one. By Tuesday afternoon, we were having surprisingly deep conversations about meaning and purpose and belonging at camp. By *Friday* afternoon, Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica had become itinerant preachers with a laptop, traveling all through the camp to spread the good news of inclusion and belonging that was in their Digital Story. They wanted everyone to hear the message.

What it took to get there was a willingness by all parties to find a way to co-design our time together. It had to be rewarding for everyone, not just calibrated to my institutional needs and positional biases as a privileged academic researcher.

Problem one had been the timing, and I guess you'd say counter-programming, of our consent conversation. The weather had been lousy when I arrived that day to set up. Morning outdoor recreation time had been swapped with afternoon indoor activity time. So I hadn't taken them away from their counseling duties when they were supposed to be supervising, like, summer homework time. No, we were in the basement watching moody sample stories on YouTube while the rest of the camp was outside gleefully playing in the sprinkler. *Spielberg* would have struggled to keep the group's attention.

This problem was the easiest fix: how about whatever we decide to do, we start tomorrow so y'all can get outside? Just make sure to get some pictures.

Problem two was a mismatch between the genre of Digital Storytelling and the social setting of St. Sebastian's. As the storytelling trio emphasized the next day, more than anything else camp is about having fun with your friends who become family. And as you've heard, Digital Stories are typically a first person *singular* genre with lots of emotionally intense periods of solitary work in between (Lambert, 2012). The group members were NOT interested in taking on solo projects.

So now you know how I was able to be *relatively* patient in getting storytelling going at Tapestry. I'd learned the perils of trying to rush it, and of being too dogmatic about the form it should take.

Still, I was not done making mistakes, even ethical ones, even after my time at the camp had wrapped.

It's quite hard to photograph camp activities without introducing identifying details. Some of those details are the faces of the fellow campers who are so important to Veronica, Lauren, and Dylan, plus of course their own faces. In the midst of our hectic composition process, I quickly abandoned the idea of imposing a "no identifying details" rule for photos we would include in the video. That would have been too much of a barrier to what they wanted to do. On the other hand, I needed an artifact to show my advisor and people at conferences. And so my new plan for using their final story as a research artifact was to remix the final video using some combination of photo cropping and facial blurring.

In the process, though—that is, in the literal process of applying effects to photographs that obscured the identity of the people pictured—I could feel that something was wrong. It took me a while to come to full grips with it.

66

Kyle (proposal defense hearing, April 26, 2019): That was where I got some of this stuff on blurring and the sort of, um, media history of, of blurring faces and cop shows and all that kind of stuff. You know, that like when you blur the face of a person of color, you are like bringing them into a whole history of problematic media representation.

Facial blurring is a dehumanizing tool too often used to create media that co-opts the presence of non-consenting or ambiguously consenting people. Often those are Black and Brown people, and this is often done to them under the guise of protecting their rights and safety (see Berg & Schwenken, 2010).

Part of the point of this moment of auto-ethonographic vulnerability is to own that I should have known better. I erased the identities of Latinx and Black campers and counselors in a particularly crass and heavy-handed way. Facial blurring is a broken tool, and my privilege initially obscured for me this ultimately pretty obvious truth.

But remember what Detra said: Identify and document the strategies when you face tricky ethical quandaries. In Chapter 4 we'll go deep with other options for confronting the underlying problem of protecting identity in visual research artifacts. But one strategy, which I hadn't fully thought through before my pilot, is to bypass the problem by reporting on the visual media-making process through mostly audio means.

This strategy isn't perfect. But I'd rather describe some key photos and let you use your imagination about their contents. Because the other option is to show you photos from which the most precious and identity-carrying details have been removed or obscured.

So let me send you to the break, and back to the main narrative about Tapestry, with one last example, perhaps my favorite piece of "data" from the pilot study:

Picture a group of children, mostly elementary age, but some older, mostly with dark hair and brown skin.

The longer you look at the photo, the more you can see that the age distribution of the young people is not uniform throughout the yard. The younger kids are near the spraying center of the action. The teenagers, who look mostly high-school aged, are around the edges of the photo.

The counselors have a name for this formation. It's called the U. It's how they protect, with their bodies, the bodies of the campers in their charge. For me, hearing what I've heard from Dylan, Veronica, and Lauren, I think the U is the perfect symbol of their identity as counselors.

Yes, the *Euclidean* space formed by the arc of teenagers is significant. They form a zone of safety and protection. But the inward bend of the U connotes embrace as well, at least in my viewing. That's consistent with how the trio of storytellers understand the camp and their roles.

Dylan: At this camp there is something for everyone. You are cared for, respected and you won't be forgotten.

The U forms a social space as well in Doreen Massey's terminology. As I look at this photo and describe it to you, I'm especially aware that this community *makes camp together*. Camp emerges at the intersection of participants' full individual, collective, and relational humanity.

I don't love talking about my various blunders in this work. But like Detra said, I think in an auto-ethnographic discussion it's important to get into how I learned what I learned and how I would do it all differently in the future. And I did a lot of it differently in the experience with Tapestry, though of course I had new mistakes to make as well.

Please keep this picture of camp in your mind. We're going to need it for one more break, and then I'll bring the strands of this episode together and preview the final chapter. The one where we, you know, do the damn thing and create a Digital Story at Tapestry.

3.5 Break 2: John Jackson Jr.

Fade in singing from Making Sweet Tea trailer (0:16–0:26).

This episode is made possible by Dr. John Jackson Jr., dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication. You heard a bit from Dean Jackson in Episode 1.

Pause.

This is audio from his recent film *Making Sweet Tea* (NewFestNYC, 2020), co-directed and -produced with researcher and performer Dr. E. Patrick Johnson and others. In Episode 1, I mentioned Jackson's early commitment to film-based ethnographic research. He was told academics wouldn't take him seriously if he focused on film. He did anyway, and the result is scholarship that can *sound* like that.

Fade in lit review music.

It looks great too.

I get the impression that Jackson's journey was first and foremost bound up with his passion. He wanted to make films. He trusted that the medium had something to contribute to his scholarship. Articulating that something would be part of the project. One important discovery came from the French critic Roland Barthes.

Jackson (Teachers College, 2021, 23:34–24:46): He wanted to make a distinction between the aspects of a film image, a still photographic image, that are … the stuff of the cultural and social world that gets captured … by that image … Almost it's the ethnographic stuff. It's the aspects of what you see that really are an extension of the cultural universe that that film is a snapshot of … But then he makes a distinction between that and the sort of … more mystical, magical notion … that is different from the merely, maybe, ethnographic but it's the part of the image that really sticks with you, that actually punctures you, that moves you. It's the version of it maybe where the affect lies.

In other words, Jackson found in film and in communication theory some language for the something: the something that makes ethnographic film, and multimodal scholarship generally, so valuable and so *visceral*. You might lose this something if you blur out faces. You might lose it if you turn a heartfelt piece of audio into a written transcript.

I removed the Latin terms from Jackson's discussion of Barthes so they wouldn't be a distraction. Let me bring them back in here to make this discussion a bit more efficient and precise. That first aspect of what a camera captures, the stuff that's there that you can identify and explain in a straightforward way? That's what Barthes calls the "studium." As for the part that's more mystical, that sticks with you, punctures you? Well that, appropriately enough, is the "punctum."

What does this distinction mean for us? Well, Jackson goes right at the elephant in the room. The most famous *critique* of visual data in ethnographic theory comes from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. There's this famous passage (1973, pp. 6–7) where he goes on and on about the many different possible meanings of a *wink*. If the point of doing ethnography is unpacking hidden meaning, making the familiar strange, constructing (and here's the term we need) "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6 and following) then for Geertz visual data is a problem.

Jackson (Teachers College, 2021, 17:55–18:56) The idea behind what is often most easily dismissed about the film camera … is a version of what Geertz canonized in a sense as a thin description of the social world around us … That there's something about the inadequacy of merely looking at the physical world and in some automatic, self-evidential way, understanding it.

If you photograph someone winking, Geertz says, it's impossible to know whether it's a twitch of the eye, an earnest marker of playfulness, a creepy bit of solicitous innuendo, etc.

If I'm understanding Jackson right, the first problem with this analysis is that's it too myopic and too static. If the photographer is zoomed in too far on the eye of the person winking, the image might truly be a "thin" depiction. But if they zoom out and consider the context, we're likely to get *at least some clues* as to how to differentiate between the winking possibilities. And that's even more true if they've captured a moving image, better yet a moving image with sound, both of which will thicken the depiction even more, filling in details and connecting even more densely the moment of the wink to the surrounding context. Our resulting interpretation may not be an epistemological slam dunk, but there will be plenty of thickness to work with as we unpack the moment and construct an argument about what it means.

Ultimately, Jackson's analysis is connected to *the power of multimodality*: Our descriptions and representations—photos, sounds, videos, whatever—don't stay "thin" if they're connected, against an ethnographic backdrop, to other modes.

Still, even this interpretation falls short for Barthes via Jackson, because it stays in the realm of the studium. According to Jackson, multimodal data also gives us access to the power, and peril, of the punctum.

Jackson (Teachers College, 2021, 25:03–26:46): Clearly there's meaning there. Meaning is part of what gives you whatever movement you feel as a viewer looking at that image ... No matter what the photographer does, he / she / they can't simply *produce* a punctum for the viewer … because there's something very individual about it and it's produced in large part by the viewer him / her / themselves. And each person can be looking at the same image and see a different punctum in it. And the key is the punctum is somewhere in that image.

There's plenty of studium in my description of that photo of the St. Sebastian's campers and counselors. That whole thing about the U, the counselor's defensive formation, is like textbook "what ethnography is for." At first we see some kids *playing* around and some kids *standing* around. And then as we thicken the description through the connections between this moment and a handful of others, we start to see a safety strategy, a camp ritual, the embodied enactment of rules with purpose.

But without at least gesturing at the puncta, plural, in this photo—that is, each of the counselor's emotional connections to it, and also my own—this image can't help me make sense of the interwoven stories we've been exploring in the second part of this episode.

We've got to grapple with the affect and emotions of that scene and dozens like it. They might be mystical and unruly. We might not be positive about what we mean. But if we don't try to look at them, then we literally cannot see what is most important to participants in ethnographic engagements like this one.

The photos and recorded voiceover in the summer camp story are in some sense very ordinary. But they overflow with affective connections for the counselors, for me, and hopefully even in a small way, now, for you.

As we begin to look to Episode 4, when I'm finally going to describe in detail the storytelling work wtih Team Z, please remember this point: in my interpretation, the genre of Digital Storytelling has as its very purpose to dwell in, and perhaps come to partially understand, the storyteller's punctum.

Play transition music.

3.6 Coda: Revealing Ritual

Coda: Revealing Ritual.

OK, let me try to sum up this chapter.

We started, as usual, in the middle of the action, though here it was a kind of non-action. My research was stuck. Why? Because we hadn't yet identified a way to organically introduce Digital Storytelling into the tight-knit, somewhat chaotic lives of Tapestry teams.

As this episode has progressed, we've talked about the underlying method of studying communities by inviting participants to steer the very learning activities we're trying to study—a harrowing but valuable task. That's strand one, the autonomy strand, and we've traced it through my colleagues' work at Voices and my work with Tapestry and St. Sebastian's. I've also shared a bit about how I've attended to various ways my own identities have shaped that experience—including when they have led me to missteps born of privilege and other blinders.

Along the way, I've learned to let empathy be my guide as an ethnographer and media maker, in ways that parallel almost a decade and a half of learning to let it guide me as a pastor. And in this episode I've tried to show how ethnographers like my MASCLab colleagues, like Dean Jackson, and I hope like me, devise ways to help make that empathy matter, ways for it to truly register in our research.

So let's conclude, as it were, with the punctum.

Storycenter founder Joe Lambert says that the shortest distance between two people is a story. I think he'd agree that it's the storytellers' engagement with emotions and sense memories that endows stories with this power to connect. And when media artifacts become part of our storytelling, the narrative can draw out something expressible about the punctum contained within those artifacts. The story provides enough context to allow for the possibility of new and communicable meanings and connections. Here's how scholars Drs. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps put what I'm trying to get at here: "Communion with others, elusive and fleeting though it may be, constitutes the greatest potentiality of narrative." (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 31). *Stories make communion possible.*

Jackson's insight about the mystical potential of the punctum nods to why we should convene media-rich storytelling. If we give our participants room to compose, as true authors, we and they will be blessed by the stories they tell: Blessed with new understandings, yes, but also by what the pastor in me can't help but name as the *grace* of a kind of secular sacrament. We gather elements of participants' everyday material worlds, sanctify them with their and our mutual presence, break them open by our attention and sharing, and receive, well, whatever the universe provides in that holy moment.

I've tried to offer gifts in return. My contribution was mostly to hold the space as a curious listener and conversation partner, to say "I think this reflection process might be valuable for you, and I think you reflecting on your experience might be valuable for some others to hear."

So in Episode 4, the conclusion—for now—of this particular story of the stories, I'll tell you in detail how it all went down. How did we partake in this revealing ritual at Tapestry? What did we learned along the way? And we'll even speculate a bit about the difference the practice might make for the team and for the organization.

Begin Episode 3 credits.

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Begin Episode 4 teaser.

Next time on *Becoming Tapestry* ... the many stories of Team Z, including some that got very tender surprisingly fast.

Zoe (field recording, June 14, 2020) : They said, "Oh, you're going to a funeral." And I was like, "Well, whose funeral?" And then I got downstairs and I saw my mentors and I was like, "Oh right. She's not alive. And it, yeah, it's just, yeah, it was a lot to process."

Kyle: Hmm. Were you part of the group back then?

Ellie: Um, I was. So Peg … she knew she wasn't going to be able to mentor anymore. And so she kind of stepped back from the group while she was still alive. And so they started making that transition and invited me to be a part of the group. And then I was there for Peg's funeral … I never got to meet her, but I was there for the kind of healing and processing and was at least able to meet her through her memories and everything people were sharing about her at her funeral, which was beautiful.

Chapter 4: Conversations with Artifacts

The audio version of this chapter is available at becomingtapestry.net/chapter4.

4.1 Cold Open: Launching the 'Project Thingie'

Ellie (field recording, June 6, 2020): I think one of the other things that's characteristic of this group is how [Zoe] has been in the program for what, like almost 4 years, maybe more. And we've gone through like a complete cycle of mentors.

This tape is from June 6, 2020. About a year and a half since I started hanging out with Tapestry, we were officially putting the "p" in "participatory ethnography." As you listen, remember that the scissor sound is me snipping out a participant's real name.

Ellie: I think there's like a lot of love and care put into those transitions and the like number of people who are a part of [Z]'s support network and friendships … There's three mentors now, but there've been six and that's really a cool and unique thing about this group.

That's the voice of Team Z mentor Ellie. Ellie made this reflective turn, unprompted by me, immediately after we talked about their recent adventures in cookie baking. Liz followed her lead:

Liz: You were, how old, when you started this, like fourth grade?

Zoe: I don't know. I think it was … about like 10 …

Kyle: If I went back in time and met you four years ago, how would you, how would you describe yourself then? And now?

Zoe: I wasn't so confident and now I'm like more confident. And I also feel more confident in my abilities to do certain things …

Liz: … Just like being more present is something that I've worked on. … I think it's such a gift that we give each other … And just getting like being more like vulnerable. I think that's something [Zoe] does incredibly well of like, you know, really showing us fully who she is and sharing that with us. And that's definitely rubbed off on me and helping me to be able to like show up in that way too.

Ellie: Maybe I would say like open and honest communication. I think that I've grown a lot in my ability to do that. … There's moments when you're like toeing this line between mentor and friendship and … somebody who's a guiding force … hopefully in a good way and not a cautionary tale. I think that there's maybe some artful, some more and less artful communication at times that's involved in that.

This conversation was a far cry from the first one I had at St. Sebastian's. Check out Episode 3 if you missed it.

Kyle: Okay. So next time I come, let's talk about like … if you have, maybe if you have some photos, try to bring them and we could look at some photos together … You shared lots of ideas already about past stuff we could talk about, but sometimes the photos like bring it back in more detail.

Liz: Okay. That sounds great. I think this will be fun.

I've already talked you through the broad roadmap of those subsequent sessions. Basically we moved from reconnecting to remembering to composing to recording. Here in Episode 4, I want to *take* you there. In so doing, I'll answer my final research question: How do a variety of collaborative digital storytelling practices and their distinctive affordances help participants reflect on and make meaning about their experiences in and beyond the Tapestry community?

An affordance, by the way, is basically what a particular medium or activity makes possible. For example, an affordance of a photograph is you can show it to someone to prompt their reflections. Which we did, rather a lot.

In Act 1 of this episode, my goal is to give you a more concrete sense of what our time together "look[ed] and sound[ed] like" (Teachers College, 2021, presentation title). We'll survey some representative moments that illustrate adapted Digital Storytelling practices and how they function. We'll then hear from Storycenter founder Joe Lambert, who will help me tell you why I think this methodology is so effective.

Act 2 is a deep dive into perhaps the most interesting and powerful thread of Team Z's story, their reflections on the collective experience of mourning the death of a teammate.

Fade in theme music.

And then in the final lit review and coda, I'll zoom out a little to extend Lambert's ideas about self-reflection and story structure to the genre I've been experimenting with in this dissertation. I'll say more about my data analysis and explore the potentials of ethnographic podcasting. Here at the end, you'll be in a perfect position to decide whether I've accomplished what I set out to do in this project.

We're exploring co-creative spaces, the reflective work they make possible, and how I've tried to capture it all in this final episode of *Becoming Tapestry,* a show about making meaning by making media.

Fade up remaining theme music.

4.2 Act 1: Pseudonyms, Scripts, and Other Negotiations

Chapter IV: Conversions with Artifacts. Act I: Pseudonyms, Scripts, and Other Negotiations.

We continued our engagement with the intersecting stories of Team Z by flipping through a stack of photos. Former mentor Yesenia had given these to Zoe before transitioning off the team.

There are lots of theories and research methods about what it means to elicit participants' recall through this kind of exercise.[16] I'm interested in the kind of information researchers uncover when photo elicitation comes in the context of a *creative* activity. Educational psychologist Edith Ackermann (2007) writes about the learning that takes place in that context. When we *make* something, we have a very special kind of interaction with self and others.

"Learning [is] a conversation with artifacts," she writes. "People learn by switching roles from being producers to being critics, from being actors to being audiences, from holding the stage to moving into the background" (Ackermann, 2007, p. 252).

Basically, this chapter is an account of Team Z's conversations with artifacts—to step *out* of their team practices *in the midst of* those team practices and reflect on the *meanings* of those practices. Make sense? Our creative conversations in this "Ackermannian" perspective began with photo artifacts, then a video script draft, then with cuts of the video itself.

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[16] I'm especially intrigued by Harper's (2002) discussion of how our ancestors learned to understand visual information long before words, and so prompting reflection via photos accesses different parts of our brain than words would, and therefore "evokes a different *kind* of information" (p. 13, emphasis mine).

But to start, let's dive into that stack of photos with a peek at one that would make the final story. Zoe and Yesenia are seated outdoors, arms in an embrace, backs to the camera, on a foggy day.

Kyle (field recording, June 14, 2022): What else you got … ?

Zoe: This is like a horrible day … It's when we went to like [trail name]. And we walked all the way up. It was freezing. … One of the worst days of my life. And I've had a lot of bad days. And that's me and [Yesenia] at the top with her corgi butt.

Ellie: Her little backpack?

Zoe: It looks like a butt you know?

Kyle: Yeah. So you said that was like a really hard day.

Zoe: Yeah. I hated like the walk up there, and it was like horrible weather and like the air up there wasn't very good. Cuz it was like really high or something.

Ellie: I don't remember if I was there with you that day.

Zoe: I don't think you were.

Ellie: Phew, well I don't want to be involved in the worst day. That's for sure.

Kyle: Did it like, did it feel good once you were up at the top?

Zoe: No, no. I wanted to get down.

It's surprisingly easy to accidentally go fishing for themes and narrative devices when you're trying to help someone refine a story. But Zoe firmly resisted my half-conscious leading question searching for a redemption arc: Dude, it *wasn't* fun or rewarding even when we were finished. It sucked. End of story. Except Yesenia had a cool backpack I guess.

At the early stages of a formal Digital Storytelling *workshop*, individual participants would be telling impromptu spoken drafts of their experiences, often prompted by a photograph they brought with them. The process would unfold one story at a time, with no cross-talk until after each storyteller finished. You can't miss the space-making practices here, as an observer or a participant. The group is engaged in a deeply organic human activity, but the social script for that engagement is highly structured for maximum storyteller safety and agency.

This informal ethnographic and co-creative conversation, in service of *team-based* composition? It was by contrast much more rambly and interactive. But it had a similar purpose—and I hope created a similar space.

For me, it was a chance to show my interest in Team Z's experiences. To listen deeply. For Zoe and Ellie, this moment was a chance to explore and reconnect with those stories.

Where do the affordances of *images* come in? Well, Lambert writes about how photos work to spark memories of the original sensory experience (Lambert, 2012). We heard here with Zoe's visceral connection to the cold, the fatigue, the atmosphere of the hike. And since we had a *stack* of photos, the conversation had an unforced pace to it. If the teammates ran out of things to say about a photo, and I ran out of follow-ups, we moved on to the next one.

OK, in the last episode I promised more lessons for the would-be facilitator-researcher, so let me call out a few as I usher you through a few scenes of our creative process.

First, all these conversations with photos brought back the question I struggled with in my work with St. Sebastian's:

Liz (field recording, June 6, 2020): Kyle, what are the parameters around … I know [Tapestry] is like very careful about how they use photos. So what just so that we come up with ideas that we can actually use, like what are the things around that?

I was 100% clear from the start that we wouldn't be doing facial blurring in *any* mix of Team Z's stories. That was a big learning from my pilot study. But this choice meant we needed an alternative solution to the problem of showing, or rather *not* showing, the faces of young people.

Thankfully for me, Tapestry is subject to the same sorts of rules as my research, as you just heard Liz say. And so the teams have gotten really creative about how to share photos that capture their time together in authentic ways.[17] I've cataloged several standard approaches:
  ● You can have everyone in the photo face away from the camera, not just the youth.

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[17] As a hedge against the possibility that we would never get to the point of actually creating Digital Stories, I conducted in the early days of my time with Tapestry some exploratory analyses of the organization's online presence (Oliver, 2019b), including their rich and very active Instagram account. Although I have chosen not to pursue this line of multimodal inquiry as a formal part of this dissertation, this moment in my account shows the potential benefit of such false starts and abandoned analyses in a broad, flexible ethnographic project with an explicitly multimodal stance.

- You can compose the photo so it doesn't seem strange for the youth to be looking elsewhere.
- You can zoom in on a relevant material detail in a way that avoids begging the question of why someone's head has been cut off.
- You can obscure the youth's face in a way that is natural to the context. My favorite example of this technique was a photo of a young person looking into a microscope on a science center outing.
- Finally, you can share an alternative form of visual representation. There's a photo in Team Z's final story in which Zoe's face appears in the form of a very simple sketch of her.

Of course, there are high- and low-tech versions of alternative visual representation:.

Ellie: I wonder if it'd be possible to like somehow use face swap and like swap out [Zoe's] face for like Leonardo DiCaprio or like somebody else.

Zoe: Honestly, I would love to be Leonardo DiCaprio, but I'd love even more to be Johnny Depp. I'm just saying, it's just an idea.

We ended up going one layer deeper, virtually. The opening scene of the video features Zoe's avatar from her favorite online game, a Roblox world called Royale High. It ended up being an elegant way of "showing" Zoe's playful self-presentation (see Thomas, 2004) and also providing a glimpse into how Team Z's fashion-oriented outings had morphed during the pandemic.

So in summary, we handled the visual part of the representation problem through a variety of techniques, either using photos that already followed the guidelines, or applying those guidelines to promising existing photos the team had taken and shared with each other for their own purposes.

A related issue to these concerns of *visual* representation was how we handled using participants' *names*. Obviously we couldn't very easily explain my scissor-cutting sound effect approach in the middle of a 3–4 minute reflective video.

I'll explore this representation puzzle as I walk you through the broad outline of how we composed the rest of the story in the weeks that followed. We started with a pretty common move, which was for the participants to choose their own pseudonyms. So now we had an approach to referring to the people and the organization, Tapestry, in a way that wouldn't have to

be cut out from public versions of the story we would be creating. That brings us to how we assembled and used the script.[18]

Kyle (field recording, June 21, 2022): One way we could try to do this … this is always the question of … there's a chicken-and-egg thing here. Do you like start with some photos, and then, try to put some words to it? Or, do you start with some words, and try to put some photos to it? Do you have a thought on what's best?

Victoria: Maybe it would make sense to have small stories, and one photo as an example of it.

That's Victoria, the mentor coming onto the team in Yesenia's place. This was the first of our storytelling sessions she attended

Kyle: For each of the themes there's just one photo like, "Here's a photo,," and while that's up we talk about like that theme.

Victoria: Yes.

Kyle: That makes sense. Would it be helpful if I shared my screen, and we could type some notes?

Liz: Yes.

Zoe: Yeah.

Kyle: So we talked about … How did you put that? What did you say? "I guess you're wondering how we got here," or something?

Zoe: Yeah. "I guess you're wondering how we got in this position," or something, then, you go all the way back. We'd have to do something really weird, or wacky, something that's stereotypical for quarantine, like getting a really wacky haircut that is stupid, and is going to ruin us for a couple months. Not actually, we'll get a wig, or something. [laughs]

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[18] Research and practitioner experience (e.g., Lambert, 2012; Oliver, 2018; Pleasants, 2008) has shown that writing scripts for Digital Stories can be a sticking point for authors. For some storytellers, writing is the part of the process that feels the most like, say, a school project (e.g., pilot study field notes, July 20, 2018)—not ideal for a group founded on informal hangouts. The scripting process also privileges the written word in a genre that more generally seeks to tip the balance of creative practices in the direction of the spoken and the visual (Virtually-Connecting, 2015).

This would end up being how we wrote the script: Over Zoom and a Google Docs[19] screenshare. The team talking, me typing and asking questions.

The Storycenter people emphasize that facilitation is 90% listening and 10% cautiously sharing expertise about the craft. The important thing is helping the storyteller get the narration on the page in the way they really speak.[20]

We spent four sessions toggling our attention back and forth between photos, the script, their memories and experiences, and the overall story structure. In Act 2, we'll trace the most important thread of these reflective conversations. Then it came time to finally record their finished story. Here's a moment from our final rehearsal before laying down the narration for real. We'll pick up at the transition point between scenes:

Kyle (field recording, September 12, 2020): Scene two okay? Does that all sound doable?

Zoe: Seamless.

Victoria: Did y'all hear Bruno Mars in the background?

Ellie: Sure did. Is he making a surprise appearance?

Kyle: I think it's fine for now. I think we should have you turn it off when we record for real, just so we get a clean copy. Scene three.

Zoe: When I joined [Tapestry], I thought it was going to be like therapy. Tapestry.

Here Zoe gets slightly confused by a repeated line in the script, with and without the pseudonym.

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[19] Although beyond the scope of the analysis of this project, composing in Google Docs has the advantage of providing an edit-by-edit history that can be used to examine the evolution of script drafts, as in Davis and Weinshenker's (2012) significant ethnographic study of Digital Storytelling and identity development.

[20] The great thing about having a script is that it becomes what learning theorist Seymour Papert (2020) calls "an object-to-think-with" (Kindle loc. 337). It helped make our conversations with the photo artifacts and other design decisions very concrete. We could talk in a general way about what a photo or experience meant to the group. But ultimately we had to come back to the question of what they wanted to capture.

Kyle: Basically when we do it for real, I'll have you read both lines, because … we're creating one cut for the research project and one cut for [Tapestry] … You want to read the Tapestry line and then keep going?

Zoe: When I joined Tapestry, I thought it was going to be like therapy. Mentor sounded like another word for therapists, but they were normal people. It wasn't uptight. We just hang out.

You just heard me take advantage of an opportunity to remind the group about the multiple contexts of our project:

- First, we had to choose photos and write a script to tell the story at all.
- We also had to choose those photos *judiciously* and use *personal* pseudonyms in the script to create a version of the story that Tapestry can later use for training and other public purposes.
- And then we had to record *some* of those script lines twice so we could remove the mentions of Tapestry's real name and use this pseudonym that I'd assigned to the *organization*. That allowed us to create a version of the story that still works on its own terms but that I can also share at conferences and in this podcast, where I need to call them Tapestry.

So here's another finding: My facilitative failure at St. Sebastian's helped me be better prepared at Tapestry, helped me think about all these layers and how to marshal them in the course of leading media making.

To help participants make media that is as detailed as possible and also meets our ethical obligations, researchers need to be ready for some redundant effort. In this case, that primarily took the form of extra video editing. That's a good segue to the final point I need to make about our process before we take a break and hear from Storycenter founder Joe Lambert.

Kyle (field recording, September 12, 2020): I can be the line editor, and y'all can be the producers … Once we've got it recorded, I can put together a rough cut for you and share it … and you can make comments and we can talk back and forth … I know this, this process has taken a lot of your meeting time. We could do notes over Instagram about how it's going and then maybe we do one last meeting, that's like a watch party. [exclamations]

Liz: Yes, we can dress up, the red carpet wear … That would be so fun.

You can hear in this scene the final leg of our ongoing negotiation of this project. And that includes my acknowledgment of the backchannel feedback I'd been receiving from Team Z's facilitator. Basically, the team was ready to move on from this project. And that should be a part of any truly participatory research. If you're really engaging empathetically, then you've gotta give them a way to tell you that they're done.

So there you have a concrete big-picture view of the storytelling process for our project and how it worked. Lots of improvisation and negotiation. Lots of prompted recall and multimodal reflection.

Let's turn our attention now to some ideas about how and why all this conversing with artifacts is so valuable. I believe Digital Storytelling participants do some deep and significant spiritual and communal work in the midst of all this multimodal composing. And so does Joe Lambert.

4.3 Break 1: Joe Lambert

Lambert (GEECSwales, 2012, 15:05–16:09): I thought about the role that we have in listening and that kind of being able to hold something sacred in a space that allows, you know, stuff that we bury inside ourselves about our lives to just emerge.

Lambert is the founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling, or CDS, which a few years back changed its name simply to Storycenter. The organization grew up alongside the new media revolution. Still, Lambert tries to keep the focus on the millenia-old *human* technology that does the real heavy lifting in this practice.

It's been discussed that CDS's approach, you know, kinda borders on therapy … I think it's in a discussion of some spectrum of human behavior that's very old, about what it takes for different people sitting in the same room to trust each other at the deepest level … Any time a group of us are given the opportunity to listen and we hold space, with our hearts fully open, we can change ourselves and other people completely. We can change our lives.

I wanted to start here, with this big-picture and quite ambitious view, because I take it to be the core of the official practice. In this review of Lambert's ideas, I want to emphasize three additional issues relevant to the overall story of this project.

Here's the first: I believe Digital Storytelling "works" largely because of Edith Ackermann's insight that gives this chapter its name. The Digital Storytelling process is a multimodal "conversation with artifacts"[21]—complexly layered, but also vulnerable and heartfelt.

The photos in a Digital Story are often quite unremarkable: a posed family portrait, a Polaroid from a party, young people at camp running through a sprinkler. As I suggested at the end of Episode 3, I think Lambert and company have defined a practice for plumbing the mysterious depths of what Dean Jackson (Teachers College, 2021) calls the punctum. A good Digital Story draws out *the extraordinary subjective meaning*s from very *ordinary* visual artifacts. The psychological and spiritual impact of the underlying stories are what help participants see something different in such photos—and then at least partially *reveal* that something. At least that's the hope of this process.

And so receiving these stories as a facilitator? It's a tremendous privilege. That's the second point I want to make, another comment on ethical practice.

Lambert (GEECSwales, 2012, 7:22–7:46): Certainly the feeling of working with people closely … where you know something's locked up inside of somebody and they're being able to share it for the first time … and the sense of responsibility as well as the kind of joyful act of the mystery of it does feel like a miracle.

In the face of that miracle and the attendant vulnerability all around the circle, care for the storytellers is essential. That care is represented in lots of ways. The one I want to mention here might surprise you, and it shaped the decisions I made with Team Z.

At a Storycenter workshop, everybody "finishes" their creative project. That is, everyone heads into the final screening with *something* to share, some reasonably complete encapsulation of the story (Lambert, 2012). Sometimes it isn't very polished. But no story gets left behind.

Storycenter claims that to do otherwise would be deeply irresponsible. To do the work, you have to invite participants into some deep digging in past experiences. It's always personal and

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[21] If I'm composing a Digital Story, I converse metaphorically with my past self in my engagement with photographs. Then I converse literally with others in the circle as I try out bits of my story and discuss my insights, and receive feedback (Lambert, 2012). And then I put multiple pieces of media in "conversation," as it were, with each other, weaving together a composite multimodal artifact combining photos, voiceover, and maybe music. All the role-switching between character in the story and author of the story deepens my appreciation and understanding of the experiences and of storytelling itself.

sometimes painful. And so you have to work with them on an "exit plan."[22] You have to help the storytellers bring their pieces to some final form that can be received and appreciated.

That ethical principle is why I ultimately felt OK about my offer to serve as Team Z's dedicated video editor. When I got the feedback that the team wanted to be finished with this project soon, it was my job to find a way for that to happen without just cutting the project off.

Here's, last point, the big one:

Lambert (Future Histories Lab, 2021, 12:05–12:37): Usually as a listener we're waiting for a person to go back and reinterpret a given experience, a moment in time. We don't watch movies where someone tells us the big broad narrative. We watch 'em in scenes. And when we look at the scene in a given way, we demonstrate, we show, that insight.

That knack for scene selection is at the very center of storytelling and of facilitating this process. In the Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling mini-lecture that happens at every workshop, this step is called "finding the moment."

"Finding the moment" is Lambert's way of talking about perhaps *the* foundational concept in the narrative theory of personal storytelling.
- Narrative theorist Jerome Bruner (1994) calls these moments "turning points" (p. 50) and notes that they are the source of the storyteller's agency to make personal[23] meaning.
- French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1991), drawing on Aristotle, calls this storytelling process "emplotment" or "putting-into-the-form-of-a-plot" (p. 3).

Fade out lit review music.

Here I'll be so bold as to add my own turn of phrase. A story in this sense is *an embodied theory of change*. Once a storyteller has some kind of grip on their thematic and emotional insights, telling such a story represents a complex act of analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of their journey's stages.

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[22] To borrow the phrase Detra used during my proposal hearing when discussing the analogous issues in the project as a whole and my various relationships in the space.

[23] Preeminent scholar of African American religious education Dr. Anne Streaty Wimberly (1994) further adds that "story plots" are sources of possible connections to scripture and common faith heritage (recall Sam's discussion in Episode 2).

Finding the moment is the hardest part of the Digital Storytelling process. I'm not sure we ever really got there in the St. Sebastian's story. I think Team Z *did* find the moment, though, and not with much teaching or prompting from me.

Anne (co-created research artifact): We've gone through a lot of change together. One of the biggest changes was losing Peg.

It's time to explore the emotional center of the story work Team Z did together.

4.4 Act 2: Saying Goodbye to Peg

Act 2: Saying Goodbye to Peg

Zoe (field recording, June 14, 2020): And then there's this one picture. It was from … I think it's like an art museum … And there was this police officer and I was like, "Why is there a police officer?"

Duck Zoe's audio under a brief narrator interjection.

This tape is from that early conversation with the stack of photos.

Kyle: So those are two of your past mentors, right?

Zoe: Yeah … Peg … She's really sweet. She'd always get tuna sandwiches, which I never appreciated. I always thought they were gross … And she had the best stories … This one time I was talking about how I hated black coffee … And she said that she was the same way when she was younger and she made her boyfriend's mother bring out the milk and sugar because they, the whole family always drink their coffee black. And they had to like go down into this like deep cupboard to get it. And she was really embarrassed from that, and then they ended up spilling it.

Kyle: What made her stories good stories, do you think?

Zoe: It makes her seem so wise … I don't know, stories from older people, they just seem more, I dunno, like interesting or realistic. Cause it's like how life was before? …

Kyle: Am I remembering right that one of your past mentors, I'm assuming one of those two died … Is that right?

Zoe: Yeah, that was Peg.

Kyle: We don't have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable, but what was that, what was that experience like for your group?

Zoe: At first we didn't like believe it. We were really shocked. I'd always think like "Hmm, I wonder when Peg's coming back?" and then I'd remember and I'd be like, "Oh." … And it was really sad. And the funeral also came as a surprise to me because I didn't know that there was a funeral that day … And I was like, "Well, whose funeral?" And then I got downstairs and I saw my mentors and I was like, "Oh right, she's not alive." Yeah, it was a lot to process.

Kyle: Hmm. Were you part of the group back then?

Ellie: So Peg … knew that she wasn't going to be able to mentor anymore. And so she kind of stepped back from the group while she was still alive. And so they started making that transition and invited me to be a part of the group. And then I was there for Peg's funeral … and was at least able to meet her through her memories and everything people were sharing about her at her funeral, which was beautiful.

What I love about this scene is its indirectness. A prompted reflection process like this one lets a storyteller and a facilitator kind of … sidle up to a memory or experience. In this scene, the topic of Peg comes up naturally, prompted by the presence of these two past mentors in the photo. We talked for long enough that it was clear Peg was a relatively safe topic. And then I asked the more direct question, but with a clear off-ramp as an option too.

By the way, you've probably figured out that we elected to use Peg's real name. It didn't feel right to assign one for the team member who couldn't choose.

Pause a beat.

The following week, we sidled up to Peg again. We were starting to play with a structure for the story where we would begin with the cold open, the online fashion show to establish the strangeness of Covid. And then we would move into examples of some highlights of the group's time together—and some lowlights too.

Zoe (field recording, June 21, 2020): This one is also really good because it doesn't actually show my face, it's the back. That was a horrible day for me …

Liz: I think that's important to say in this.

Zoe: Yes, there were also not so good days.

Liz: Right, we've had ups and downs.

Zoe: We tried everything. There wasn't anything really depressing other than Peg's death … There's always been tiny little bumps on the road. There's not so good days, but we tried it at least. We try anything really …

Kyle: Okay, so there's a theme of like, "Not every day's perfect," and there's a picture from the end of the hike …

Liz: And I think that's maybe where we could talk about Peg passing away. That was something that we all experienced … and like all went to the funeral together. It was a really nice kind of healing process.

About this time Victoria chimed in to say that she was missing some backstory and didn't know who Peg was. Remember, she's new.

Zoe: Peg is my old mentor. Here I have a picture of her and her husband when they were young. They were at the beach.

Kyle: Oh neat!

Liz: My God, that is so cute.

Zoe: Mm hmm. I have it with all my other pictures. Then I also have this postcard. She wrote it when I was at one of the camps … She sent me a letter and it said, "Hope you're having the best old time at camp. Maybe they'll serve coffee cake as good as you make."

OK, so one of the great things about this dissertation-as-podcast genre is that I can just pause for a second and acknowledge the sweetness of this little human moment: the photo of Peg and her husband on the beach, the postcard, the coffee cake detail.

But this also isn't an extraneous point. I can't think of a better forty-five seconds or so to encapsulate the Tapestry ethos. I think we're hearing here the power of Tapestry's intergenerational model, the power that these adults can have in the lives of the youth. And vice versa too.

This is also a great Digital Storytelling moment. You'll hear some of Zoe's words from this scene almost verbatim in the team's final script, along with the major structural move that Liz suggested.

Team Z didn't need any help finding the emotional center of gravity in the story of their team. They just needed someone to hold the space with them.

The next time we talked about Peg in detail was a couple sessions later.

Kyle (field recording, August 8, 2020): And then we want to do something about the transition.

Liz: Kyle, can we add in a line here … before the "change has been a big part" and just say a line that's like "We have been through a lot together? Some of it has been hard." …

Kyle: Yeah, I like that. That sounds good. OK, so what should we say about Peg passing away? …

Liz: You knew her the longest … What would you say?

Zoe: … There was never really a dull moment with her. She'd always have something to talk about …

Liz: I would add that she always had so much wisdom to share.

Kyle: Am I remembering right that you said that going to the funeral was one of the first outings you went on? Am I remembering that right?

Ellie: It was like maybe two months or something. Still a relatively short period of time and it was pretty quick after my joining the team that Peg did pass. … It definitely was a fairly … There was trauma there that I was joining in to be a part of in a way.

Kyle: All three of you were at the funeral, right? What comes up when you think about that experience?

Ellie: It was really clear to me that she had a really big impact on the people around her … You could just tell that everybody was in love with her.

Liz: Yeah and there was … I remember there was a line in them talking about her at the funeral about how you'd see Peg zipping around [the neighborhood] in her wheelchair … which is such a funny image because she did … And I also remember the funeral was kind of a unifying and healing … there was just a lot of supporting each other that it was a really tough day. I remember … holding hands in the church and it was tough, but we were all there for each other.

Kyle: What comes up for you when you think about the funeral?

Zoe: I mostly just think of the songs. … It was a very aesthetically pleasing funeral, but it was very sad…

Kyle: Yeah, sad but beautiful. That's an interesting kind of image.

Zoe: Yeah.

As I listen to these different kinds of memories, I'm thinking not just of all Lambert's stuff about memory and sensory experience, but also Doreen Massey's notes on hybrid, heterogeneous social space. Different people shape the intersecting stories in distinctive ways. Ellie had some emotional distance and maybe partly because of that shares some more cognitive, interpretive reflections. For Liz and Zoe, it's more sensory: holding hands, getting caught up in the music. With all their input combined we get a rich and rounded account.

Liz: That was in the morning … We went back to work, [Zoe] went back to school, and then that night we all met up. We all came together and wrote letters to Peg …

Ellie: So sweet.

Liz: We all read them. They were a summary of our experience and memories of Peg and what we wanted to remember. That was again, a really tough but nice-feeling I guess observation / celebration of her life …

Kyle: Well we've got a lot here. What I'm going to recommend is maybe we let it sit a little … I tend to think about these stories as a series of connected moments and this one seems like one of the ones that really anchors the story. So I think it can be a little bit longer, but probably there's more here than we can use. Maybe next time we work, we can kinda look at it again and … try to just cull it down a little bit.

As I've explored these "moments about the moment," I hope you're starting to see the value of the Tapestry-esque way we went about this project. This was now the third or fourth time we had reflected discretely on memories of Peg—at different stages of the composition process, with different configurations of the team roster present during the different weekly gatherings. Each time we revisited the story of Peg's death, the account went deeper.

There's one more narrative point I want to make about this central scene. The group needed to find a way to finish it, and then to transition back to the more lighthearted material.

The answer came from Ellie. She made a connection between Peg leaving the team in obviously a tragic and dramatic way, and the fact that other mentors have moved on as well. During one of those other transitions, Zoe's mom had pointed out

Ellie (field recording, August 29,2020): That each time that one mentor moves on to like a different section of their lives or whatever and we bring in a new mentor it's like extending the love in this beautifully growing circle … I don't know if that's a line we would want to harness and use because I think it's pretty powerful but it does speak to the kind of regenerative nature of the loving environment in my opinion.

I'm actually not surprised it was Ellie who made this connection. Back in our second session, she and Zoe had reflected briefly on Ellie's own impending transition. She'd been participating in

our project from the East Coast, where she'd been living since early in the pandemic. She was in a new relationship and didn't plan to return. You'll hear at least one other quite playful way her awareness of this transition made it into the final cut.

All this to say: Telling a story isn't just a reflection on where you've been. It's about where you're at and where you're heading as well.

That, dear listener, is where *we're* heading as we wrap up *Becoming Tapestry* in this final episode's coda. What's the future of Digital Stories in this organization?

But first, we'll have one more word from our intellectual sponsors. And, more importantly, this partial world premiere of Team Z's story. I hope you enjoy it.

Play the research cut of Team Z's story (co-created research artifact):

> *Opening scene (in the middle of the action)*
>
> **Zoe: So first off, what season?**
>
> **Victoria: Summer**
>
> **Zoe: What's your favorite era?**
>
> **Victoria: Mmmm, '20s.**
>
> **Zoe: 1920s? OK. Choose a color.**
>
> **Victoria: Blue**
>
> **Zoe: OK, and now I'm done with the outfit and you get some good lighting.**
>
> **Liz: Ooooooooh.**
>
> **Victoria: Nice. So this is a blue long dress with flowy ruffles.**
>
> **Liz: Very cool.**
>
> **Zoe: I guess you're wondering what we're doing and how we got here.**
>
> **Ellie: We used to do fashion shows in person.**
>
> **Victoria: During Covid, we're doing them online.**
>
> **Liz: And we're thinking back on all the stuff we've done together over the years.**
>
> *Begin section about the early days.*

Zoe: When I joined Tapestry I thought it was going to be like therapy. "Mentor" sounded like another word for therapist. But they were normal people, it wasn't uptight. We just hang out.

Liz: When we started, the Rec Center was our home base. We would meet there, and there was always something to do. When we wanted some time to ourselves, we'd go up to the rooftop garden.

Begin section about hard days.

Ellie: We have been through a lot together, and some of it has been hard.

Zoe: What we try isn't always fun. I don't like hiking!

Victoria: But you tried at least. We will try anything.

Liz: We've experienced a lot of change together. One of the biggest changes was losing Peg.

Zoe: There was never a dull moment with Peg, she always had the best stories and so much wisdom to share.

Liz: We were at her funeral and at the reception we were looking at books that Peg had written and illustrated.

Zoe: Her husband Bill came and told us how much she talked about us, how much we meant to her. It made me feel important.

Liz: The night of the funeral we all met up and wrote letters to Peg. We read them to each other and celebrated all the things that we wanted to remember about her.

Ellie: It was good that we could grieve together. We still write to Bill a couple times a year, and it helps us keep her memory alive.

Victoria: He always says how vividly he remembers her excitement about going to our meetings.

Ellie: Our mentor team has evolved, but that means the circle of support just keeps growing.

Begin the section on fun days.

Liz: But still, the main theme of our team is fun.

Victoria: Sometimes we go to events with the other Tapestry teams.

Ellie: The best was when we made pizza.

Zoe: My pizza was really good because I put a lot of olive oil, mozzarella, and pepperoni. The dough was round and perfect.

Ellie: I can still taste it.

Liz: And like we said, there were fashion shows.

Zoe: We went to Macy's and picked different categories: skater boy, goth girl, princess. We voted on each other's looks.

Victoria: For birthdays, we usually keep it small.

Zoe: But for my fourteenth, we went to a fancy Italian place.

Liz: We couldn't decide what to order, so we got all the desserts.

Begin section about the future

Victoria: Going forward, we want to be able to return to some of our favorite activities.

Zoe: Cooking

Ellie: Swimming

Liz: And always the best pizza.

Victoria: We hope to branch out for new adventures.

Zoe: Like a trip to Great America.

Ellie: Who knows, maybe even a past mentor meet-up on the East Coast?

Liz: But really most of all, we're most excited to hug again.

To watch the full story with images, credits, soundtrack by Lizzo, and even a short blooper reel, go to becomingtapestry.net/video.

4.5 Break 2: Daniel Makagon and Mark Neumann

Fade in lit review music one last time.

Morgan (Kitchen Sisters, 2012, 0:13–1:02): New Orleans, great pool town. Man, I could go there in the morning and play at night and it's the talk of the town, a big thing.

This excerpt is from the introduction to an electrifying piece of immersive audio by production duo The Kitchen Sisters. You might have guessed it would be a snooze to listen to a radio documentary of a pool shark demonstrating his craft. You would be wrong.

I never touch the rail. Shoot the game up in the mid-air. That's what they don't believe, how you can do it without a wrist. I can't believe it myself, but I'll show you then you'll know. I'll try to cut the ball in that pocket one-handed, jacked up. Probably the best shot there are, one handed, and it's a very hard shot with two hands. [pool sounds] Alright, alright!

In the late 1970s, Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson of Santa Cruz heard a local dive bar would be hosting Ernest Morgan. He was a pool legend who due to amputation played with just one arm. So they grabbed their audio gear and hit the scene.

I learned about their rejected NPR piece, "The Legend of Ernest Morgan" in the introduction to *Recording Culture: Audio Documentary and the Ethnographic Experience*.[24]

In this 2008 monograph, Daniel Makagon and Mark Neumann trace[25] a popular, journalistic, and scholarly conversation. The long and short of Makagon and Neumann's (2008a) claim is that ethnographers have a lot to learn from popular and journalistic efforts to "record culture." Recording, they say, is a form of immersive inquiry.

The show you're listening to is my hearty "Amen" from the back pews, my attempt to contribute to that conversation. I've presented a sort of operationalized definition of audio ethnography by *creating* one, in the form of a longform podcast presenting the findings of my ethnographic project. Engagement with literature, grounding in theory, discussion of methodology, presentation and analysis of data: It's all here, reordered and parceled out differently from how it would appear in a traditional write-up. But that's what I concluded needed to happen in order to make an ethnographic account work as audio.

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[24] I was only able to secure this volume via chapter-by-chapter PDF downloads from Sage, which do not preserve the print edition's pagination. Thus, quotations refer to the PDF pagination in the respective digital documents.

[25] It begins with folk music recordists like John Lomax in the 1930s; it runs through the heady controversies of Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, Joan Didion and the so-called New Journalism of the '60s and '70s; and it continues into the flowering of academics' interest in participatory media movements like StoryCorps (Pozzi-Thanner, 2005) and Youth Radio (Chávez & Soep, 2005).

The purpose of the project as a whole is to immerse you in the research sites more sensorily. I've tried to portray participants especially vividly by foregrounding both their voices and the choices they make as the narratives move forward.

The process I facilitated with Team Z and the St. Sebastian's counselors was about finding just a couple of moments or scenes. Our goal was to understand their experiences in a new way, and then weave those scenes and understanding together. As I nodded to briefly in an Episode 3 lit review, that's the very same approach I then brought to bear on *my own experience* conducting this years-long research project. Find the moments, try to understand what they mean, weave them together into a composite artifact.

My "story of the stories," my audio ethnography, made use of the same "turning point analytic," if we wanna call it that, that Storycenter teaches for finding and composing scenes. In the context of an ethnographic research project, we can see that all the narrative theorists I quoted at the end of the last lit review effectively make this point:

Personal storytelling is an act of qualitative analysis.[26]

When we construct a narrative, we intentionally select experiential data according to patterns and criteria that emerge from systematic review. I coded and interpreted my field notes and transcripts by selecting and connecting excerpts that speak to the changes taking place throughout the projects.

Makagon and Neumann (2008a) explore the audio dimensions of this methodological alignment too. Ironically, I couldn't find any audio discussing these ideas. So, forgive me, I'll have to read from the conclusion of their argument:

"[R]ecording is itself a form of research … a mode of exploration and investigation in its own right. Recording people during an interview and obtaining a variety of relevant and interesting sounds … are all aspects of a research process that will take shape and form in writing and producing an audio documentary … *This means that the process of trying to find the story and telling the story are intimately tied to each other* … All of this provides for the possibility of a

---

[26] Makagon and Neumann (2008a) call it "implicit analysis" (p. 13). They say there's something powerful, and I would tentatively add participatory, about a genre form that allows a listener to "comprehend the story and make sense of it without an expert [always] pointing out the significance of everything going on in the room" (p. 13). Show, don't tell. I have done my best to do so. Just as Papert (1993) seeks not to eliminate instruction but rather to "produce the most learning [from] the least teaching" (p. 193), so does this audio-ethnographic approach seek to produce the most meaningful interpretation from the least narrator interruption—while still telling a story that it's possible to follow.

final work, and it is in the final work that the final test of knowledge, interest, and aesthetic appeal will come to rest" (p. 15, emphasis mine).

Ooph, that's a lot of pressure. I'll leave the final test to you, but let me make a couple of comments about the points of intellectual benefit I've discovered as I've seen this audio experiment through:

First, it is not just a personal joy but also an epistemological relief to be able to share with you the *many* voices, the real human voices, who contributed to this project. This literal polyvocality (Makagon & Neumann, 2008a) captures many of my convictions as an ethnographer and educator.

Second, remember that Dean Jackson pointed out ethnographic filmmakers have long been excited by the way you can add details and subjectivities when you share video representations of fieldwork. I hope by now you agree that that is true of *sonic* immersions as well. No amount of written description can reveal like audio can the playful repartee of Team Z or the quiet steadiness of Hannah and Sam's pastoral presence.

Third, allow me to point out that even very traditional scholars do not just *write* about their work. We all speak about it. Kind of a lot. The "in their own voices" lit reviews started as a way to break up the narration a little bit, but I quickly found that they breathed new life into my understanding of the scholars I've surveyed.

And finally, Makagon and Neumann (2008b) write, "There are really no rules when it comes to producing an audio documentary" (p. 19). I suppose that's true. I hope we'll develop at least a few as we continue to experiment.

But I did have a sort of twofold mantra during this project. "Trust the stories," I told myself over and over again. "And *earn the trust* of the people sharing them."

So let's end this episode, and this dissertation, on the topic of trust.

4.6 Coda: Closing the Story Circle(s)

Coda: Closing the Story Circle(s).

Hannah (field recording, March 10, 2021): It covered such a range. It felt really emotional about the Peg stuff, but they swung it back like that's not all that defines us, we also have a lot of fun.

Some months after sending Team Z the final revised cut of their story, I had the chance to screen it for Sam and Hannah.

Hannah: I like that balance, too, of their script, but also their casual interactions. That's where you can really hear the relationship.

Sam: I heard a lot of joy. They really like each other. It was playful.

My access to the co-directors in this project has always been much better than my access to the teams. So I started the closure process with them. After some initial first impressions about what they noticed when they watched the story, our conversation turned to how this piece of media might integrate with the rhythms and practices of their organization.

Hannah responded with another tale, a very recent one.

Hannah: We heard this amazing story from a facilitator this week, for a little boy that we matched with during the pandemic, who's just struggled, struggled, struggled because school was a really healthy outlet for him … His adoptive moms called in all three of the major agencies that we work with … This little boy was just resisting all of it … It took several weeks of sending him cards and then sending him videos, and then coming in and just standing outside the house and talking to each other until he got curious and poked his head out the door. It was a very slow build, but eventually, he was hanging out with them …

So at some point last week, the moms were having a meeting with somebody … who said, "What are these mentors doing?! [chuckles] Because we have tried everything. What is it they're doing that we don't get?" It was actually the little boy, poked his head in and he said, "They like me." [chuckles] Of course, all the therapists like him, but it's their job, and he knows that.

That's a thing that you don't convey … in an initial meeting, but I think that this video does convey that. I think that a child like that could see this and understand. They want to take me out for Italian food on my birthday and play the games I like.

In case you've forgotten, this episode's research question is about how Digital Storytelling's practices and affordances were able to find some purchase in the organization's life together. How can Digital Storytelling make a difference?

In this little scene Hannah and Sam gave perhaps the most direct and powerful answer: *Team Z's storytelling ritual revealed their relationships. With simple sound and images, they showed that they care about each other.* What makes Tapestry distinct among foster youth's many forms of institutional entanglement is that all these teams have to do is like each other.

And now the co-directors have at least one piece of media that captures this beautiful truth in the words and photos of participants themselves. So there's one bit of closure, a plan for using the story.

In the moments I have left, I'll first 'fess up that I haven't yet been able to close the circle with Team Z, at least not beyond delivering that final cut via an Instagram message. I can't really talk about why except to remind you that the lives of Tapestry teams are full of challenging disruptions and transitions. The possibility of holding that red carpet watch party and debrief session did recently seem to re-materialize. We shall see. As the scriptures say, and also the Tapestry guiding principles, for now I will live in hope.

Let's zoom out. This series has been my story of a meaningful research partnership. We started Episode 1 with me reflecting on Tapestry's mission with Sam and Hannah. So let's close the wider circle in like fashion.

The other piece of media I played for them that day was more like a podcast. You heard a bit of this tape in Episode 2. It's a distilled edit of mentor alum Yesenia's informal exit interview with Sam and Hannah. And you guessed it: it's the bonus episode following this one in your feed.

After we listened together, I asked the co-directors what they thought of this piece of media:

Sam: I think all the things that evolved, that became Tapestry, … that we began to hope that the ministry would be engaging and transformative and supportive, I've seen it in all three mediums this morning: reading, video, and listening to this individual talk about, "Hey, I started as a college grad and pretty immature. I've had life happen but … in all my chaos of life, … I've had this place I could always land."

What's affirming about that is … she sees that team is sacred. That's a sacred place for her to go and get grounded for the week. The three, four, including they've had two great facilitators five, six members of that team, now seven members of that team have created this space organically. We gave direction … but they brought their own needs and person to that.

And here's Hannah:

Hannah: I'm serious, we could play this at a training and in eight minutes, she has addressed almost all of the common questions that people have about mentoring and what to expect and what will it be like and what will it mean. It's simultaneously informative and inspirational.

This final scene was a moment of continuing co-creative design of our partnership. We've since revisited that plan, and we still want to create more ways that teams and individuals can make media together. And we hope that that will help me continue better understanding storytelling. And we hope that it will help *them* teach more effectively about the process of, yeah, becoming Tapestry.

But there was another function of this conversation. The fancy qualitative research term is "member checking." You share your conclusions with participants to make sure you're making authentic interpretations. As a researcher, I love that I have a recording of their affirmation that I'd captured something important. And as a pastor and as their colleague and friend, I'm grateful that this member check was affirming for them as well.

Sam: I also just want to say … I'm really … touched by Kyle's listening … how you've taken us serious to really get the kernel of Tapestry. So in eight minutes you knew what to grab out of that interview and put in place. Thank you for that. I think she told the stories, but you've encapsulated the heart of the ministry.

That was lovely to hear. That was really lovely to hear.

Significant pause.

Begin Episode 4 credits.

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Our theme music is "Intimate Moment" by MFYM and licensed for use on this podcast via Jamendo.com. Our lit review music is "Cloud Launching" by Little Glass Men, published under

Creative Commons Attribution License at freemusicarchive.org. To read my annotated episode script and reference list, or to explore a mountain of ethnographic data and analytic artifacts, visit becomingtapestry.net.

Pause.

Thank you for listening.

Fade out theme music.

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