**Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Elizabeth Martin April 8 2025

# Examining Identity (Re)construction After Departing from a High-Cost Upbringing: A Case Study of *Educated* by Tara Westover

By

Elizabeth Martin

Dr. Kim Loudermilk
Adviser

Interdisciplinary Studies

Dr. Kim Loudermilk

Adviser

Dr. Rose Deighton-Mohammed

Committee Member

Dr. Cathryn Johnson

Committee Member

Dr. Dan Sinykin

Committee Member

2025

# Examining Identity (Re)construction After Departing from a High-Cost Upbringing: A Case Study of *Educated* by Tara Westover

By

Elizabeth Martin

Dr. Kim Loudermilk
Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Interdisciplinary Studies

2025

Abstract

Examining Identity (Re)construction After Departing from a High-Cost Upbringing: A Case Study of *Educated* by Tara Westover

By Elizabeth Martin

This thesis explores identity reconstruction and belief negotiation in Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, focusing on her departure from a high-cost, survivalist, fundamentalist Mormon upbringing. My methodology combines close reading and thematic analysis of *Educated* with theoretical research across psychology, sociology, and religion. Alongside *Educated*, I reference other psychological, sociological, and anthropological studies that have studied various population groups, such as individuals leaving high-control religious groups, abuse survivors, and religious deconverts to strengthen the discussion on how processes like deconversion, rebuilding in the wake of trauma, negotiating long-held beliefs, and identity reconstruction play out across different contexts and share common psychological and sociocultural mechanisms. I rely on key thinkers such as developmental psychologist Robyn Fivush and psychologist Dan McAdams for insights into narrative identity theory. I utilize religious scholars John Barbour and Lori Fazzino to discuss deconversion. For discourse on fundamentalism, I reference philosopher and religious scholar Rik Peels. While existing literature documents the challenges of leaving high-cost groups through clinical studies and interviews, this research fills a gap by examining identity construction through literary narrative. Offering insights into the universal processes of belief negotiation and self-definition, this thesis demonstrates how education, exposure to alternative worldviews, critical reflection, and narrative autonomy enable individuals to depart from high-cost upbringings and reconstruct their identities.

# Examining Identity (Re)construction After Departing from a High-Cost Upbringing: A Case Study of *Educated* by Tara Westover

By

Elizabeth Martin

Dr. Kim Loudermilk
Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Interdisciplinary Studies

2025

# Table of Contents


INTRODUCTION ..... 1

CHAPTER 1 – DOMINANT BELIEFS IN CHILDHOOD ..... 8

SURVIVALISM ..... 9
FUNDAMENTALISM ..... 18
"WE DO NOT GO TO SCHOOL" ..... 25
CHAPTER 1 CONCLUSIONS ..... 29

CHAPTER 2: SELF-CONCEPT IN ADOLESCENCE ..... 31

DEFINING SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ..... 31
EMERGING SELF-CONCEPT IN ADOLESCENCE ..... 35
CHAPTER 2 CONCLUSIONS ..... 45

CHAPTER 3: DECONVERSION ..... 47

EARLY MOMENTS OF DOUBT & DISSENT ..... 48
CLINGING TO FAMILIARITY ..... 51
DECONVERSION ..... 54
CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSIONS ..... 71

CHAPTER 4: IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION ..... 73

INTRODUCTION ..... 73
DELIBERATE EXPERIMENTATION & RESCRIPTING THROUGH EDUCATION ..... 73
MIRAGE ..... 77
DISENCHANTMENT ..... 80
FIRST RUPTURE ..... 81
SECOND RUPTURE - FINAL RECONVERSION ATTEMPTS ..... 87
TARA'S REFUSAL TO DENY SELF-CREATION ..... 89
NARRATIVE RESOLUTION ..... 91

CONCLUSION ..... 97

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 103

# Introduction

> *"Everything I had worked for, all my years of study had been to purchase for myself this one privilege: to see and experience more truths than those given to me by my father."*
> -Tara Westover, *Educated*, 304.

A person's identity is shaped by a myriad of biological, social, and environmental factors. Growing up in fundamentalist environments often results in two major consequences: first, the imposition of a rigid and autocratic framework and, second, the development of a homogenized worldview that is isolatory and close-minded, restricting personal growth and the exploration of diverse perspectives (Fazzino, 2014). Therefore, for those raised in fundamentalist environments, the process of departing from such upbringings can be particularly complex, daunting, and emotionally exhaustive.

In the scholarly literature, the terms "high-demand" and "high-cost" are sometimes used interchangeably. They typically describe groups characterized by distinctive beliefs, high levels of adherence, behavioral and social restrictions, exclusivity, "strong levels of in-group attachment and socialization, extensive member time commitments, and stigmatized exits" (Gull, 2022, 100; Scheitle et al., 2010). Examples of high-cost religious environments include Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Haredi Judaism (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2017).

I use the term "high-cost" because it captures both the intense level of commitment required of participants and the significant personal, social, and emotional costs associated with leaving such groups. These costs often include ostracization from family and friends, loss of community, and the psychological toll of reconstructing one's worldview outside the group's belief framework. The term originates from the recognition that departing from these

environments comes at a high price; these individuals must navigate the profound disruptions to their sense of self and belonging as well as the practical challenges of attempting to assimilate into mainstream society. For many, these challenges include lacking the skillsets and knowledge that the general public often takes for granted, such as navigating educational systems, financial systems, government institutions, or professional environments.

This definition of "high-cost" aligns closely with the unique environment Tara Westover, author of the memoir *Educated*, grew up in, where her family's survivalist and fundamentalist beliefs demanded unwavering adherence and imposed severe ramifications for dissent or departure. By using the term "high-cost," I aim to highlight the multifaceted challenges Tara faced—both internal and external—in leaving her family and reconstructing her identity while also drawing parallels to the broader experiences of individuals leaving similar environments.

Existing psychological and social scientific literature explores the process of leaving high-cost and/or fundamentalist religious communities and families, primarily through semi-structured interviews with small pools of participants. These studies have paid close attention to the high cost associated with leaving religions on identity negotiation in small sample sizes and short-form participant responses. However, little attention has been given to how identity construction unfolds in literary narratives, specifically memoirs, that detail individual experiences of leaving high-cost upbringings. Tara Westover's memoir *Educated* is particularly well-suited as a case study for exploring identity construction because it offers a detailed, personal account of Westover's journey from a fundamentalist Mormon survivalist upbringing to life in the secular world as an intellectual and scholar. *Educated* uses education as the central metaphor and mechanism for her transformation and the renegotiation of her worldview, relationships, and sense of self.

Through a literary analysis of *Educated* paired with research across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, religion, and anthropology, I will incorporate research from topics such as narrative identity, deconversion, fundamentalism, trauma coping mechanisms, belief negotiation, and cognitive dissonance to explore how Westover's upbringing impacts her evolving sense of self and examine what enabled her subsequent departure from her high-cost upbringing. This research demonstrates that as Westover gains a greater sense of agency, coherency, and mobility, through education and exposure to alternative ideas and worldviews, she is compelled to critically evaluate the beliefs instilled in her, as the glaring inconsistencies in the doctrines she grew up with become increasingly apparent and irreconcilable. These experiences catalyze her revaluation of reality — on individual, familial, interpersonal, and global levels— and enable her to construct an independent self-concept.

Although Westover's story is unique, the themes of identity (re)construction, self-discovery, belief negotiation, and intellectual autonomy resonate broadly. Many individuals, regardless of religious or cultural background, grapple with inherited beliefs that shape their perceptions of the world and themselves. The process of critically assessing ingrained ideologies is not exclusive to those leaving fundamentalist environments; it is a universal aspect of personal development that affects people navigating political, cultural, and social transformations in various contexts. By examining Westover's journey, this research provides a framework for understanding the psychological and social mechanisms involved in negotiating long-held beliefs and identity construction. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of *Educated*, this research demonstrates how education, exposure to alternative worldviews, critical reflection, and narrative autonomy, enable individuals to depart from high-cost upbringings and reconstruct their identities, offering insights into the universal processes of belief negotiation and self-definition.

## Methodology

My research question, which explores identity (re)construction through the case study, *Educated* by Tara Westover, calls for methods that encourage a nuanced understanding of the psychological and emotional processes involved in questioning one's upbringing, leaving such environments, and rebuilding one's sense of self afterward. Thus, I employ a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology. The primary methods include literary analysis paired with research across scholarship from the following disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religion. By drawing upon existing psychological and sociological literature, I contextualize Westover's experiences within broader theoretical frameworks of identity (re)construction, allowing for a richer understanding of how individuals navigate their experiences of religion, belief negotiation, autonomy, and personal agency. This integrative method enables me to discuss the complexities of identity (re)construction while simultaneously applying existing scholarly findings to Westover's memoir, all while also leaving room for alternative interpretations and insights not yet fully captured by existing scholarship, as few studies, if any, have examined the interdisciplinary concept of identity construction through the medium of memoir.

In my literary analysis of *Educated* by Tara Westover, conducted through iterative close readings of the text, I created and used a thematic coding system to organize significant aspects of the text. I read for the following themes related to my research questions: environment, place, and lifestyle descriptors, influential relationships between Tara and other characters, Tara's evaluations of herself, specifically descriptions or implied information related to Tara's beliefs about her identity and self-concept, Tara's evaluations of the world, and other narrative elements that provide context. Following this coding, I engaged in close textual analysis to identify and

extract specific quotes and passages that were particularly rich in meaning. This process involved detailed annotation and note-taking to interpret the nuances of language, narrative structure, and character and thematic development, ultimately, providing a detailed, organized, and systematic way of identifying key moments in Tara Westover's journey.

My second primary method includes research in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religion. My research scope on identity construction spans from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood, thus, I engage in a range of psychological and sociological literature. Given that I am not only analyzing identity construction but more specifically using Tara Westover's narrative as a case study to better understand the rigorous endeavor of departing a from high-cost upbringing, and undergoing identity reconstruction in the face of conflicting values, life adversities, and the devastating psychological toll of such transitions, this undertaking requires contextual research related to disenchantment, narrative identity, social identity, orthodox or fundamentalist upbringings, and deconversion. I will also reference other psychological, sociological, and anthropological research which studied various population groups, such as individuals leaving high-control religious groups, abuse survivors, and religious deconverts to strengthen the discussion on how processes like deconversion, rebuilding in the wake of trauma, negotiating long-held beliefs, and identity reconstruction play out across different contexts and share common psychological and sociocultural mechanisms. These studies will provide a broader framework for understanding Tara Westover’s experiences, as they reflect similar struggles of disentangling from high-cost environments and reconstructing a sense of self in their aftermath.

To integrate these findings into my analysis, I ground my claims in the text of *Educated*, using Tara Westover’s memoir as a case study to explore identity (re)construction in individuals raised in high-cost, often religiously fundamentalist and rigid belief systems. Specifically, I

examine how belief formation, questioning, negotiation, and reconstruction unfold. I corroborate, critique, and expand upon Westover's narrative by aligning her experiences with relevant research from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. This approach allows for alternative interpretations and highlights areas where existing literature may or may not fully capture the complexities of her journey. By contextualizing her experiences of disenchantment and identity reconstruction within established theoretical frameworks, I connect insights from her memoir to broader academic discourse, enriching the understanding of belief formation and identity transformation.

No method provides more than a partial viewpoint. Although my methodology seeks to extrapolate as accurately as possible from Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, I acknowledge several potential vulnerabilities and epistemological challenges inherent in this approach. Memoirs, by their nature, are curated narratives that inevitably leave out certain experiences, meaning there are likely crucial moments related to identity construction in Westover's life that are not captured within the text. Likewise, as with any published work—particularly bestsellers—the final, published narrative is shaped by multiple voices, including editors, agents, and publishers, whose influence may subtly sculpt the author's experiences into a cohesive story. It is important to clarify that this analysis is not a review of Westover's personality or life experiences, but rather an exploration and explanation of her journey based on the curated narrative she published in memoir form. Similarly, memoirs are a form of reflexive self-reporting and meaning-making reliant upon personal memories and the memories of others. Thus, analyzing Westover's memoir provides an in-depth domain for exploring the role of education, narrative autonomy, and the ongoing process of self-definition leading us to better understand how the process of leaving high-cost environments is not always linear, but rather a gradual, often painful journey of rejecting old beliefs and actively constructing a new self.

Memory is not always reliable; it’s reconstructed and revised with each remembrance; these recollections, over time, potentially distort or omit certain details (Berger, 1963). In *Educated*, Westover builds credibility by footnoting sections where family members or other informants offer dissenting views, acknowledging the limitations of her own perspective. However, even with these footnotes, 'true' accuracy can never be fully guaranteed in memoirs, or in our personal life narratives, as they undergo ongoing, dynamic alterations shaped by conscious or subconscious subjective interpretation and emotional reframing (Berger, 1983). Given these challenges, I am mindful of the inherent limitations in interpreting a single, personal narrative and take steps to triangulate my analysis of identity construction by incorporating broader theoretical literature on identity construction, trauma, and religious disaffiliation.

Furthermore, the cultural biases present in psychology, sociology, and religious literature must be acknowledged, as concepts of identity are shaped by cultural context and are not universally applicable. This research does not intend to stake claims about identity formation that apply to all individuals but rather to explore one woman's experience within a specific religious and cultural context, which may be generalizable in some contexts to experiences of women departing high-cost upbringings. Additionally, relying on a single memoir raises concerns about generalizability. To address this, again, I incorporate broader literature – other memoirs and extensive academic research – on identity construction, religious disaffiliation, and trauma, contextualizing Westover's narrative within a larger academic framework and greater population sample.

# Chapter 1 – Dominant beliefs in childhood

To understand Tara Westover's journey of identity construction, we must first examine where she began and the forces that shaped her earliest sense of self. The opening chapters of *Educated* introduce the three foundational dimensions that defined her childhood: survivalism, fundamentalism, and the rejection of formal education systems. These forces worked in tandem to shape her thoughts, behaviors, and aspirations, serving as the foundation for her childhood identity and worldview.

The first component, survivalism, placed Tara and her family on the fringes of society, physically and ideologically. The Westover's commitment to self-reliance fostered a culture of isolation and mistrust, prioritizing independence over any form of external engagement or assistance. Second, the family's fundamentalist beliefs underscored a rigid moral order and worldview that demanded absolute loyalty to her father's authority and religious interpretation, which also included anti-government and anti-modern medicine stances. Third, the rejection of schooling severed Tara's connection to the outside world, depriving her of socialization beyond her family, access to knowledge, and exposure to alternative perspectives. While these three components are distinct, they are deeply interconnected, each reinforcing and amplifying the others. For example, her father's survivalism directly informs and reinforces his rejection of formal education. His distrust of external systems, including schools, stems from the same ideological framework that fuels his preparation for societal collapse. These three dimensions set the stage for Tara's early life, creating a reality where self-exploration and choice didn't exist; adherence to the beliefs and requests of family patriarch, Gene, was the only imaginable life course. The foundations of her upbringing – survivalism, fundamentalism, and the rejection of

formal education systems – are the primary barriers Tara will grapple with in her journey toward understanding and constructing her own identity.

## Survivalism

On the second page of the preface, Westover bluntly introduces the reader to her family, "four of my parents' seven children don't have birth certificates. We have no medical records because we were born at home and have never seen a doctor or nurse" (Westover, xii).[1] These opening lines demonstrate the parent's isolation from mainstream institutions like healthcare. The lack of birth certificates is emblematic and an early indicator of Gene's anti-government, survivalist beliefs. For most readers, the fact that half of the Westover children had no birth certificates or medical records is utterly foreign. The passage continues, "We have no school records because we've never set foot in a classroom… but at this moment, according to the state of Idaho and the federal government, I do not exist" (xii). This hook captivates the reader not only because of the stark contrast in upbringing but also lays the foundation for us to consider, alongside Westover, the bureaucratic, interpersonal, and personal tensions related to 'existence' and identity. Overall, Westover's preface serves as a powerful entry point to themes of survivalism and the rejection of institutional authority in her upbringing.

Even in the first pages of the memoir, survivalism emerges as a core identity marker in Tara Westover's upbringing. In the first paragraph of the first chapter Westover confesses, "My strongest memory is not a memory. It's something I imagined, then came to remember as if it had happened" (Westover, 3). She describes a vivid scene, "my family huddles in the kitchen, lights off, hiding from the Feds who've surrounded the house" (3). This line establishes a tense and adversarial relationship between their family and the government. Westover continues, the

[1] Throughout the rest of this paper, quotes from Westover will be cited using parentheticals with only page numbers included.

scene escalating, “A woman reaches for a glass of water and her silhouette is lighted by the moon. A shot echoes like the lash of a whip and she falls” (3). A non-violent, unthreatening action like reaching for a glass of water is followed by sudden violence. Westover explains that this impossible memory originates from a story Gene told so influential and detailed that Tara and her siblings “each conjured our own cinematic version” (Foley, 2015; Westover, 3). These details are critical, affirming the constructed nature of memory, while, revealing how foundational stories, especially those told by parents to young children, shape our understanding of the world (Fivush, 2019). By opening with this memory, Westover sets the tone for her family’s fraught relationship with the outside world.

Unbeknownst to Tara, the story Gene told to his children was not a product of his imagination or lived experience but a retelling of a famous incident, the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff. In Tara’s impossible memory, she recalls that, after the gunshot, “it’s always Mother who falls, and she has a baby in her arms” (Foley, 2015; Westover, 3). What Tara does not know is that she transposes her mother onto the fate of Vicki Weaver, the mother of the Weaver family, who was shot and killed by federal agents during the Ruby Ridge confrontation.

## Ruby Ridge

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, media coverage of radical, right-wing, anti-government extremist militia groups primarily settled in Northwest America surged. In response to public outcry demanding domestic safety, the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) sent agents into various parts of the country to determine the threat level and infiltrate potentially dangerous groups.

BATF Agent Herb Byerly, alias Kenneth Fadeley, befriended Randy Weaver, who was likely discovered and subsequently surveilled due to his accumulated social respect from the

anti-government and white supremacist groups that BATF and the FBI sought to infiltrate (Wagner & Lynch, 2015).

Agent Byerly as Kenneth Fadeley repeatedly pressured his "friend" Randy to sell him shotguns. Despite his initial refusals, Randy reluctantly agreed to sell him two shotguns which Byerly requested to be cut down to an illegal length (Wagner & Lynch, 2015). This transaction was a setup, and criminal charges for selling illegal weapons to a BATF informant were filed against Randy Weaver (USDOJ, 1994). The government offered to drop Weaver's charges so long as he agreed to become their informant to infiltrate militia groups. Despite the threat of prison, Weaver refused the deal, believing it was morally wrong that the agent conned and betrayed him under the guise of friendship (Wagner & Lynch, 2015).

Weaver's trial was set for February 19, 1991, but Weaver's parole supervisor miscommunicated the trial date, so Randy Weaver did not appear in court. Eighteen months elapsed without action, until August 21, 1992, when the Feds arrived at the Weaver's property on Ruby Ridge to "ambush a fugitive," who had failed to show up on his court date (Britannica, 2024; Wilson, 2017).

Who fired first, starting the deadly shootout which resulted in the deaths of Agent Degan, Sammy Weaver, the family dog, and Vicki Weaver, who had been holding her infant child in her arms, remains disputed by both sides (USDOJ & OIG, 2002; Wagner & Lynch, 2015; USDOJ, 1994). Nonetheless, the 11-day standoff became a highly publicized tragedy that triggered national outrage and criticism of government overreach. Ruby Ridge became a rallying cry for anti-government movements, symbolizing the persecution of an innocent family by federal authorities (Wilson, 2017).

Among the individuals emboldened by this utter government failure was Gene Westover. Although the extent of his knowledge about the details of the incident is unknowable, what

matters is not how much he knew, but rather how he interpreted and internalized Ruby Ridge. His understanding of the event played a key role in shaping his actions and beliefs in the years that followed as well as the kind of government hostility and paranoia he instilled in his children.

Although Gene Westover's understanding of Ruby Ridge likely played a significant role in strengthening his survivalist beliefs, the event itself did not occur in a vacuum. As a fundamentalist survivalist, Gene had long adhered to a narrative that framed the government as a threat to personal freedom. Now, he had a glaring example – one that was not only legitimized by far-right groups but increasingly accepted by wider American society—that confirmed his deeply held views (Morlin, 2012). Ruby Ridge became a touchstone in the Westover family, reinforcing the idea that the government could not be trusted, and it served as a foundation for the family's larger ideological framework.

Although Ruby Ridge is not a story about the Westover family, the story plays the role of what psychologists would call a 'family narrative.' Generally, the content of family narratives includes shared family past and past family history, for example where your grandparents were married, family immigration stories, or when your parents met (Fivush, 2019, 90). These stories offer children access to experiences beyond their own, contextualizing family history and origin (Fivush, 2019, 91). The Ruby Ridge story functions like a typical family narrative especially due to the ideological and geographic similarities between the Weaver and Westover families. Gene likely felt a sense of fraternité and parasocial identification with Randy because of their shared common distrust of government authority and off-the-grid lifestyle, a position not widely accepted or practiced. This ideological resonance between the two families made the Ruby Ridge story feel deeply personal and relevant, shaping how the Westover children understood their own family history. These narratives influence how children narrate their own experiences within the context of the family, and, eventually, the broader social world (Fivush, 2019). Gene's version of

the Ruby Ridge story fulfills this role, connecting Tara to a larger ideological tradition and teaching her position within a family that rejects mainstream society.

To categorize the types of family stories and their predicted degree of influence on a child, from individual-level identity construction to worldview and cultural orientation, psychologists derived the 'Ecology of Family Narratives' model. At the most interior level of our narrative consciousness and psyche lies our autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory includes episodic memory, the "memory of the specific what, where, and when of an experience" and "the awareness of self having experienced the event in the past;" for example, while shadowing her midwife mother, Faye, Tara recalls listening to Faye instructing her how to evade the authorities in the case of birth complications (Fivush, 2011, 560). Tara recalled practicing the "art of shutting up" and examining her mother's anxious facial and body language as they approached the client's home (21). Autobiographical memory also includes semantic memory which is "explicit knowledge about the world" such as that Boston is the state capital of Massachusetts (Fivush, 2010, 560-561). Autobiographical memory integrates these sources of input as a "uniquely human form of memory that moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation, and evaluation across self, other, and time to create a personal history" (Fivush, 2010, 560). In essence, autobiographical memory is "memory of the self interacting with others in the service of both short-term and long-term goals that define our being and our purpose in the world" (Fivush, 2010, 560). Humans' uniquely autobiographical consciousness enables the aggregation and integration of all sources of information and memory to generate an understanding of self in the past, present, and future.

Returning to the Ecology of Family Narratives model, this theoretical framework argues that family stories are seen as part of a dynamic system, influenced by interactions within the family, as well as with the wider community and cultural influences, which collectively shape

the family's identity and self-understanding over time. Again, the most interior layer of this model is autobiographical memory.

The next layer beyond autobiographical memory is the micro-system. The “micro-system consists of shared family narratives, stories told about experiences that parents and children engaged in together” (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, 307). Both parent and child experience and narrate these stories. An example of a micro-system narrative is when a mother and daughter go to the library for an author signing. When the event concludes, they get into their car to return home, and the mother and daughter co-narrate and recapitulate their favorite parts of the signing. Because memoir is written from the perspective of the author, examples of micro-narratives in the text are less overt, simply because in a memoir, you are not going to write about a debrief between you and a parent after a shared experience, an author will simply write the lived experience. Additionally, because a person’s understanding of an event is formed and influenced by the micro-narrative, they are inherent, unacknowledged parts of a memoir since they influence the way a writer tells a story. Nonetheless, even if not abundant or intuitive in memoir writing, understanding each layer of the family narratives model gives insight into the scope and impact of different stratifications.

Next, intergenerational narratives, family narratives, and parent work-life narratives form an exo-system which, most notably, influences one’s identity (Fivush, 2019, 91). This stratification includes the “narratives that family members tell that have not been directly experienced by all members of the family” (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, 307). For example, in Chapter 3, Tara learns about her mother’s upbringing through her mother’s remembering of Grandma-over-in-town's parenting tendencies: her excessive hair preening, agonizing over cream versus white shoes, and obsession with dress styles that emulate elevated social status (35).

These stories fall within the exo-system because Faye passes this information down to Tara, who did not directly experience them.

Lastly, the macro-system functions as the "overarching social and cultural frameworks that shape our understanding of the world," including family history, cultural history, master narratives, and cultural myths (Fivush, 2019, 92). These shared stories construct one's life trajectory and cultural narrative, influencing "when prototypical experiences will occur (schooling, romantic partner, parenting, etc.) and include the myths and motifs that imbue our world view in ways that provide interpretive frameworks for lived experience" (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, 311). Importantly, although these narrative layers—autobiographical, micro-system, exo-system, and macro-system—are distinct, they dynamically interact. What we know from our own lived experiences, or the stories our parents tell us about their upbringing, cannot avoid superimposing itself onto other lived experiences and interpretations, shaping how we understand and narrate our lives.

Westover brilliantly orients her readers to the *mis-en-scene* of her life by opening her memoir with several of these stories at the macro-system level. For example, revealing cultural and family history speaking to their survivalism, "I had grown up preparing for the Days of Abomination…I spent my summers bottling peaches, and my winters rotating supplies. When the World of Men failed, my family would continue on, unaffected" (xii). Gene's story about Buck's Peak also fits into the macro-systems category, "My father called her the Indian Princess. She emerged each year when the snow began to melt, facing south, watching the buffalo return to the valley. Dad said the nomadic Indians had watched for her appearance as a sign of spring, a signal the mountain was thawing, winter was over, and it was time to come home" (xii). Further reinforcing the survivalist dimension of Tara's upbringing, her father's telling and retelling of these types of stories are forms of cultural narratives and myths that exemplify how the family's

survival and livelihood exist in tandem with nature's annual cycles and the rhythms of the natural world, not bound to a work week, corporation schedule, or Gregorian calendar.

Within the Ecology of Family Narratives model, the Ruby Ridge story uniquely permeates Tara Westover's autobiographical memory, micro-system, exo-system, and macro-systems. The Ruby Ridge narrative is autobiographical in that Westover recalls the story with such detail that "she comes to remember it as if it had happened," and part of the micro-system in that she, albeit falsely, recalls her family "huddle[d] in the kitchen, lights off, hiding from the Feds" (3). Even though the events of Ruby Ridge did not directly happen to Tara, the prevailing impact of imagining, remembering, and internalizing this incident alongside her family's history and ideology, cannot be negated. However, the more compelling, lasting impact of the Ruby Ridge story correlates with the exo- and macro-systems, orienting the reader to Tara's psyche growing up and her cultural landscape.

One type of exo-system family narrative is an intergenerational narrative which typically refers to the stories older generations (parents and grandparents) transmit to younger generations (children and grandchildren). Often, they are stories that occurred before the child's lifetime. These stories "provide models of both narratives and selves for adolescents; they express ways of understanding what a life looks like, how experiences should be evaluated, and what it means to be an individual that is part of this family" (Fivush, 2019, 101-102). Returning to the text, Gene's retelling of the Ruby Ridge story could be viewed as both parts of the exo-system, specifically, intergenerational and macro-system family narrative because of the narrative information flow passed down from parent to child, and part of the macro-system because of the cultural underpinnings, in short. More saliently, this federal embarrassment and series of missteps handed Gene a real, highly publicized incident that legitimized his anti-government

ideology and reinforced his pre-existing fears about government corruption, intrusion, and control.

In memoirs, curation, anecdote selection, and plot sequence make or break a compelling narrative trajectory. So, Westover's opening deliberately signals the impact and entanglement of family narrative, storytelling, and identity. By beginning with this scene, Westover demonstrates the power of Gene's storytelling and worldview. The reader understands that the family lives in constant fear of being under siege by external forces—a narrative that perpetuates fear of the outside world and, by default, cements loyalty to the family unit. For Tara, this scene also reveals her vulnerability as a child indoctrinated into a belief system where fear and survival define identity. Thanks to Westover's excellent structural and content choices, based on the preface and first few pages alone, the reader generally understands the insular and precarious world in which Tara grew up. Especially after the preface, we see how their family's deep mistrust of government, medicine, and most other people leaves them entirely reliant on one another. Tara has been taught to trust only her family, a dynamic that underpins the immense difficulty of eventually breaking free from such a tightly knit and fear-driven system.

As Chapter 1 progresses, Westover further exposes the reader to her family's deeply survivalist way of life. Westover details typical preparations she or her family take to proactively prepare for the day they must flee or stand their ground: collecting exorbitant stashes of MREs (meals-ready-to-eat), weapons and canned peaches, sleeping with a small knife underneath her pillow, and possessing a fully packed 'head-for-the-hills' bag which Tara regularly practiced putting on and running with, simulating an emergency escape (9). Signaling a clear understanding of in-group and out-group identification, Westover uses collective pronounces when describing these potential encounters: "the mountain, I understood was our ally," "this would give us an advantage," "I imagined our escape" (9). Invoking collective pronouns

reinforces her family's isolated collective identity in which the family sees itself as a distinct, self-sufficient unit, prepared to defend against perceived external threats. The boundaries between "us" (the family) and "them" (the outside world) are rigidly defined, creating a sense of unity and purpose within the family, exemplified by young Tara's evident preparedness and grasp of what must happen when danger strikes, as it did at Ruby Ridge. This heightened group identity, reinforced by constant rehearsals of survival strategies, demonstrates that the survivalist mindset is a core element of their family identity.

In summation, these family narratives and Tara's early memories center around survivalism, fear, loyalty, and protection, perpetuating a belief that the world outside Buck's Peak is inherently dangerous, with only the family offering true safety and security. Through these stories, Tara internalizes that leaving her family is a perilous choice, fraught with risk.

## Fundamentalism

The second developmentally influential dimension of Tara's childhood is her dad's unique form of fundamentalism. The word fundamentalism usually presumes that the belief system is traditional and conservative. However, this assumption does not capture the broader spectrum of fundamentalist ideologies, which can manifest in unconventional ways. In Gene's case, his fundamentalism is deeply intertwined with his survivalist and anti-institutional ideologies, but what distinguishes it as fundamentalism is the extreme rigidity, compulsive adherence, and unwavering conviction with which he upholds these beliefs and practices. Gene's fundamentalism is an all-encompassing framework that dictates practically every aspect of his family's life. His uncompromising devotion to his ideology—whether living by strict biblical scripture interpretations or by rejecting modern medicine, formal education, and government authority—exemplifies the true nature of his fundamentalism.

Philosopher Rik Peels approaches the challenge of defining fundamentalism more broadly by crafting a definition that includes an array of movements with diverse ideological, political, and belief-systems spanning from neo-Nazism, Maoist communism, extreme environmentalism, Jihadism, Hindutva, Haredi Judaism, or the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) (Peels, 2022, 733).

Peels' definition of fundamentalism identifies three core dimensions. Not all criteria must be met for a movement or belief system to qualify, but most of them typically apply. First, fundamentalist movements are characterized by their reactive nature, often rejecting liberal ethics, science, and the technological exploitation of the natural world (Peels, 2022, 730). For instance, they may deny equal rights to marginalized groups such as women or individuals of other faiths, exhibit skepticism toward science, and oppose modernity's use of technology (Peels, 2022, 740). Second, these movements seek certainty and control, typically through literal and infallible interpretations of authoritative texts like the Bible, Talmud, or Qur'an. Such interpretations reject modern hermeneutics, which acknowledges textual complexity and historical inaccuracies (Peels, 2022, 741). Fundamentalist movements also assert this certainty and control by mandating specific actions and prescriptive rules, offering adherents a clear, rigid framework that structures daily existence according to uncompromising principles, from moral codes to social behavior, often under the belief that such strict adherence is essential for salvation or ultimate truth. Finally, fundamentalist movements construct grand historical narratives with universal claims, asserting that salvation or truth lies solely within their group, excluding alternative perspectives or ways of life (Peels, 2022, 741). Peels' multi-dimensional approach highlights the ideological rigidity and exclusivity underlying fundamentalism, providing a nuanced framework that is particularly useful in understanding Gene's form of fundamentalism. While Gene is not formally affiliated with a specific fundamentalist group, such as the FLDS, his

behaviors and beliefs reflect the core characteristics of fundamentalist thinking, mirroring the ideological rigidity and exclusivity seen across many religious and/or ideological fundamentalist groups.

Creating a distinct form of fundamentalism, Gene's worldview exists as an idiosyncratic blend of anti-government ideology, survivalism, and Mormonism. His unwavering certainty in his worldview drives him to enforce a strict, literal interpretation of religious and anti-establishment principles that dictate every aspect of the family's daily life. He assumes complete authoritarian control over others, and, for the most part, the family abides by his commands. Gene does attempt to proselytize his beliefs to less devout Mormons in their broader community, but ultimately, Gene is less preoccupied with converting others than with his own work and family survival. Yet, ironically, for someone obsessed with survival, the daily realities of adhering to such rigid principles repeatedly place his family in danger.

Gene's ploys for self-reliance are evident: the extensive stockpiling of food and weapons, encouraging his wife's midwifery, and believing in herbalism. Colloquially, herbalism, also known as phytotherapy or botanical medicine, is the practice of folk or traditional medicinal practices that incorporate plants, plant seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark, or flowers for medicinal and healing purposes (Mount Sinai, 2015). In many cultures, herbalism is a respected approach to healthcare, sometimes used alongside pharmaceutical medicine from hospitals. However, Gene takes this practice to an extreme, embracing it not as a complementary method but as an exclusive, dogmatic doctrine that further underscores his distrust of medical intervention and his obsession with self-reliance. Tara grows up with skullcap and lobelia as her de facto Advil.

For example, during a family trip to Arizona, where Gene's parents spend time in the winter, Gene cannot help but spur an argument with his mother when he overhears a voice message confirming her upcoming doctor's appointment "Herbalism, he said, was a spiritual

doctrine that separated the wheat from the tares, the faithful from the faithless" (33). The wheat and tares reference a parable from Mathew 13 (Matthew 13:24-30; New King James Version). In one interpretation, tares are a type of weed symbolic for non-believers, heretics or false Christians, while wheat, a life-sustaining grain, is a metaphor for true Christians (Blue Letter Bible). To Gene, the faithful practice herbalism exclusively. To not comply or to pursue another trajectory renders you a tare, faithless. Gene continues, "That's why the most hateful sinners were those who wouldn't make up their minds, who used herbs and medication both" (33). For Gene, one is either entirely faithful or faithless. He concludes that those people who may use both herbal remedies and typical American healthcare might as well "worship at the altar of God one day and offer a sacrifice to Satan the next" (33). Gene's all-or-nothing worldview implicitly condemns these individuals as faithless sinners, marking their ambivalence and inability to fully adhere to strict doctrines as akin to "offering a sacrifice to Satan." In Gene's view, using medication is abhorrent, but using both medication and herbalism signal a greater profound moral depravity and betrayal of faith. This uncompromising stance not only reveals the extreme rigidity of his anti-modern medicine worldview but also exemplifies his broader intolerance and black-and-white thinking. Then, after likening his mother's medication ingestion to offering sacrifices to Satan, Gene's outrage continues. "'Doctors and pills,' Dad said, nearly shouting. 'That's their god, and they whore after it" (33). Clearly overcome with emotion, "nearly shouting" to an audience of only his family and Grandma-down-the-hill, Gene asserts that those who use medication, or rely on the healthcare system, as "whor[ing] after it." By using such inflammatory, scandalous language, Gene effectively condemns any association with conventional medicine, again, as a betrayal of true faith, and more specifically as a form of spiritual promiscuity and blasphemy.

In mainstream Mormonism, attitudes relating to sex and sexuality emphasize purity and childbearing and strongly discourage sexual gratification. The Church characterizes masturbation and other forms of autoerotic activity as sins, and sexual contact outside the confines of marriage may result in church discipline that jeopardizes membership (Mackelprang, 1994, 50). Compared to men, women are particularly scrutinized and harshly evaluated with regard to modesty standards and sexual immorality, especially as the primary purpose of sex within marriage is viewed as procreation (Mackelprang, 1994, 50). In fact, lifelong Mormon scholar and professor Rodney Turner argued that even "marriage does not justify 'unrestrained sexual activity" and that a "couple's love for each other and their desire for sexual intimacy are inversely related" (quote in Mackelprang, 1994, 55). Given the weight of sexual taboo in Mormon culture, this cultural and religious context serves to highlight the severity of Gene's condemnation vis-a-vis using the verb "whore" to describe those who seek to use medication or rely on the healthcare system. These gendered behavioral and moral standards will also critically inform Tara's fraught process of identity formation.

The argument between Grandma and Gene concluded when Gene abruptly decides to drive back to Bucks Peak to avoid losing more workdays, despite concerns from Grandma and Faye. On the 12-hour overnight drive, Tara's older seventeen-year-old brother, Tyler, falls asleep at the wheel and crashes into telephone poles and a tractor (36). Gene had gutted the car's seatbelts, amplifying the severity of the injuries sustained by Tyler and Faye: Tyler's front teeth "jutted backward toward the roof of his mouth" and Faye suffered severe injuries, resulting in black rings around her eyes – a symptom of a serious brain injury – which the children unwittingly nicknamed 'Raccoon Eyes' (38,39). Had Gene not been so headstrong and authoritative in his decisions or oppositional toward car safety measures like seatbelts, the accident might have been avoided, or at least the injuries less severe. This tragic event illustrates

the dangerous consequences of Gene's beliefs and authoritative control over the family which prioritized his own compulsions over the safety, input, and well-being of his family.

By the time Tara is 10 years old, Gene ends up without a sufficient crew for building hay sheds, so he returns to working the scrap yard and recruits Tara. Tara assimilates into the harsh conditions and her father's logic, explaining "I had entered into the new reality. I saw the world through my father's eyes. I saw the angels, or at least I imagined I saw them" (63). Tara's imagining her father's angels represents a desperate act of internal reconciliation, an attempt to make her father's worldview her own. By envisioning divine protectors, she clings to the hope that their presence might be real, providing her with some semblance of safety in an otherwise dangerous and chaotic environment. Research on coping strategies conducted by psychologist and psychotrauma specialist, Mooli Lahad, highlights the role of belief systems as a critical coping mechanism, particularly for children in high-stress environments. According to Lahad, one of the six primary coping strategies involves turning to one's belief system, from which children rely on core values and meaning derived from influential adults in their lives (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). For Tara, this means adopting her father's faith in divine protection as a way to navigate the unpredictability and danger of the scrapyard.

This resignation deepens as Tara becomes fully immersed in her father's reality. Tara accepts that dodging metal projectiles and heavy automobile parts comes with the job, "I'd stopped shouting at Dad for throwing them. Instead, I prayed" (63). Tara's shift from protest to prayer signals her abandonment of the idea that her father's perilous behavior might change, leaving her to cope by adopting Gene's beliefs. Furthermore, this shift reflects her growing reliance on faith as a means of coping, a strategy that aligns with Lahad's findings on how children in traumatic environments often turn to parental belief systems for stability and comfort (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Her shift to prayer reflects not only the

psychological influence of her father's beliefs but also a coping strategy that emerged because of growing up in an environment where faith is conflated with absolute safety and an unchallengeable, omnipresent force. In this world, resistance or the prospect of Gene simply altering his behavior is futile, leaving adherence to divine faith and imagination as Tara's means of coping.

During another afternoon in the scrap yard, Tara follows her father's instructions to climb into a bin filled with jagged iron to maximize its capacity. As the bin is lifted, a sharp spike of iron pierces her leg, "sliding into the tissue like a knife into warm butter" (64). Trapped under the shifting weight, Tara shouts for help, but the industrial machinery drowns out her desperate cries. When she finally frees herself, she falls several feet onto the grass, injured and shaken. When her father finally approaches Tara, instead of expressing concern for his daughter or apologizing for the dangerous situation he had created, Gene remarks, "How'd you manage that?" (65). His tone, "sympathetic but disappointed," left Tara feeling ashamed. Rather than recognizing the impossibility of the task or the recklessness of her father's expectations, which could have left her impaled, dismembered, or dead, Tara internalizes his disappointment, believing her inability to meet his expectations was a personal failure.

Tara's mental and physical reactions to this incident reveal an embodied conflict between instinct and ideology. Despite the physical evidence of harm and her body's drastic response—shaking, gasping for breath, and crying—she rationalizes her surviving the bin through her father's belief in divine protection, thinking, "the angels had done their part" (65). Yet, she remains perplexed by her distressed emotional and physical reactions remarking, "I didn't understand why I was crying. I was alive. I would be fine" (65). This moment highlights the tension between her body's natural fear response and her attempt to integrate her father's worldview. Her physical response exposes an underlying conflict within her that her body cannot

suppress its natural response to danger, even as her mind tries to align with her father's doctrine. This tension highlights the struggle between her body's natural response to danger and her mind's attempt to conform to her father's doctrine, exposing the psychological toll of internalizing Gene's fundamentalism and the dissonance she experiences early on.

## "We do not go to school"

Gene's staunch rejection of formal education, the third formative component of Tara's upbringing emerges early in the memoir's first chapter. After a striking opening scene introducing the family's survivalist, remote background, Tara recounts an exchange between her and her paternal grandmother, Grandma-down-the-hill. Grandma-down-the-hill proposes that Tara, who is around age 7, ought to join her and her grandfather on their annual trip to Arizona, where Tara could enroll in school. A decision which, retrospectively, stands out as a profound crossroads in Tara's life—one that, had she chosen differently, might have entirely altered the trajectory of her story and perhaps even erased the impetus for this memoir.

In the opening part of the scene, Tara rejects her Grandma's suggestion to attend school. Tara's hasty response, "I wouldn't like it," suggests an early internalization that school is not even a possibility worth exploring, as her identity is already shaped by the boundaries her family has created: school is for others, not for them (6). Grandma-down-the-hill instructs Tara to rise early and join them. Never having attended school, Tara fails to imagine what school in Arizona would look like. She writes "instead, I pictured Sunday school, which I attended each week and which I hated. A boy named Aaron had told all the girls that I couldn't read because I didn't go to school, and now none of them would talk to me" (6). Tara's only frame of reference is Sunday school, which given the social ostracization she's already faced, does not make Grandma-down-the-hill's proposition any more persuasive. Furthermore, the source of her social isolation directly resulted from others' learning of her school status, making her acutely aware from a

young age that her family's decision to reject formal education distinguishes her from her peers. Overall, this rejection of formal education isolates her in two notable ways: socially, by making her an object of ridicule among her peers in Sunday school, and psychologically, by reinforcing the view instilled within her – that we do not go to school – solidifying her perception of herself as someone fundamentally different from others who do attend school. This interaction exemplifies Tara's identity regarding education status and her broader conceptions of boundaries between her family and the outside world, reinforcing the polarizing 'us vs. them' mentality that defines her early understanding of herself and her family.

The night Grandma-down-the-hill proposed the trip to Tara, Tara cannot sleep and envisions a vivid imagined scene the chaos that her decision to leave Buck's Peak would unleash at home: a panicked family search of the mountains (7). Tara imagines her father's reaction, "his dark eyes shrinking, his mouth clamping into a frown as he turned to my mother. You think she chose to go? Low and sorrowful, his voice echoed" (8). Note, that Westover describes her father's tone as sorrowful, not spiteful or angry – as we may be inclined to typecast an authoritarian, misogynistic man – reveals that the loss of a family member is not a personal, spiteful rejection but a failure to protect them from the corruption, danger, and evil of the outside world. Gene's sorrow, alongside the narratives like Ruby Ridge, enforce his belief that their family offers protection and an alternate life path from the dangerous, evil world beyond Buck's Peak. For Gene, the bottom line is clear: if his children leave, they will be defenseless against the diabolical forces of government, society, and the unknown dangers he has spent a lifetime preparing them to resist. Tara's imagined scene of her family's panicked search if she left for Arizona ends abruptly, interrupted "by sounds from another conjured remembrance - crickets, then gunfire, then silence" (8). Westover tactically calls back to her impossible memory, her Ruby Ridge cinematic adaptation. This involuntary, intrusive memory disrupts her envisioned

life away from Buck's Peak, serving as a powerful metaphor. On a meta-level, it visually and experientially reinforces the idea that leaving the family is not just a risk, it's tantamount to walking into danger, even death. Furthermore, this imagined scene reveals the deeply ingrained fear that dictates Tara's decision-making process. The idea of going to school represents a path antithetical to her family's beliefs and values. Entrenched in family loyalty because of family doctrine and social isolation along with being raised with the existential, imminent threat of the government or End of Days, leaving for Arizona and enrolling in school is a farfetched prospect.

By the time Tara is about 12 or 13, she still does not attend public school. She begins to interact with other children her age, however, through extracurriculars where she's developed a passion for dancing, and above all, singing. These new activities thrust her into spaces with more peers, but she still refrains from completely integrating into their social dynamics. When Tara attends rehearsal, the reader meets Charles, a local boy around Tara's age with whom Tara becomes acquainted and has an ongoing connection with throughout the memoir. One day, Charles introduces himself and compliments Tara, "your singing is about the best I ever heard," but this scene abruptly shifts, cutting the narrative retelling of their social interaction short (88). The literary choice to have an abrupt scene change creates the effect of Tara's real life hijacking this social interaction with an outsider, dragging her back into the orbit of her family's insular world. In the interrupting scene, Tara returns home to discover her father and brother, Richard, and a fifty-caliber rifle described as "an enormous military-green telescope, with its long barrel set firmly atop a short, broad tripod" (88). The weapon, of course, was acquired for defense, to prepare for when Ruby Ridge replayed on the Westover's property or when the government failed, causing the world to spiral into chaos. According to the family narrative, when this happens, the Westovers will be self-reliant, stocked, and ready to survive, while everyone else, will suffer.

After the description of the newly acquired weapon, the scene shifts abruptly, again, back to Tara's rehearsal. This time she's sitting next to Charles, "'You don't go to school,' he said. It wasn't a question" (89). Once again, like at Sunday school, the observations of her peers reinforce that her defining social feature is her lack of attendance in school. This time, instead of facing her Sunday school fate, social ostracization, Charles continues, "'You should come to choir. You'd like choir.' 'Maybe,' I said, and he smiled" (89). Their exchange ends there, but the experience of a redeeming social interaction with someone outside her family is novel. Charles departs with his friend group and Tara "imagine[s] an alternate reality in which I was one of them" (89). The idea of Tara integrated into a friend group is so farfetched that she describes it as an "alternate reality," emphasizing the chasmic divide between her and her peers. The language selection that describes her imagination as being "one of them" upholds her prevailing narratives and ideologies – of us vs them – that shape her identity and worldview.

Then, Tara's imagination stretches reality just a bit further, "I imagined Charles inviting me to his house, to play a game or watch a movie, and felt a rush of pleasure" (89). She's briefly allured by this exciting prospect of connectivity and friendship; however, intrusive thoughts dampen her fantasy quickly: "When I pictured Charles visiting Buck's Peak, I felt something else, something like panic. What if he found the root cellar? What if he discovered the fuel tank?" (89). Tara panics thinking about Charles encountering her home's distinctly survivalist furnishings, subtly reminding her of the massive differences between her and those she rehearses with.

Suddenly, like the grasshoppers did when she attempted to imagine school in Arizona with Grandma-down-the-hill, her fathers' stories invade Tara's consciousness, "Dad said we would be driving when everyone else was hotfooting it. We would have food, too, when everyone else was starving, looting" (89). The imagery evokes a sense of foreboding isolation, as

her family's preparedness places them on the fringes of society, poised to survive, while the rest of society will not. This prophecy reflects her father's survivalist mindset and continues to alienate Tara from her peers. Then, shifting from her father's prophecy to a more personal adaptation of her father's fear, she writes, "I imagined Charles climbing the hill to our house. But in my imagination, I was on the ridge, and I was watching his approach through crosshairs." Again, this fundamental difference between her and Charles resurfaces within this visual metaphor; Tara remains stationed on Buck's Peak viewing Charles through the 'crosshairs.' This imagery, overtly survivalist and militaristic, reinforces the notion that Charles represents 'them,' the very society the Westovers fear and isolate from, suggesting that when the world ends, it is 'them' who will be on the opposite side, while Tara and her family will be equipped and prepared to live on.

## Chapter 1 Conclusions

Three foundational dimensions shaped Tara Westover's early identity: survivalism, fundamentalism, and the rejection of formal education. First, survivalism placed Tara and her family on the fringes of society, fostering a culture of isolation and mistrust as they prepared for inevitable societal collapse. Second, fundamentalism imposed a rigid moral order, demanding absolute loyalty to Gene's authority, religious interpretation, anti-government, and anti-modern medicine stances. Third, the rejection of formal education severed Tara's connection to the outside world, depriving her of socialization, access to knowledge, and exposure to alternative perspectives. Together, these forces construct the framework of her upbringing, where the weight of her family's ideology and their self-imposed detachment from society make any life path beyond the mountain seem unthinkable. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding Tara's childhood influences and the deeply entrenched beliefs she was born into—a rigid worldview that will prove almost insurmountable to escape.

Tara's early experiences reveal the substantial impact of these three foundational dimensions on her psyche. As a child, she conformed to her father's beliefs, a developmentally appropriate response given that children naturally adopt the worldview of their parents. This conformity was likely also a coping mechanism, a way to navigate the fear and uncertainty of her environment. Her interactions with the outside world, such as her ostracization at Sunday school or her awkward exchanges with peers, reinforced her sense of being an outsider, further entrenching her loyalty to her family's insular world.

Even in these early years, however, there are inklings of dissonance. The scrap yard incidents and van accidents, for example, expose the hypocrisy and danger of Gene's beliefs. While Tara initially rationalizes these experiences through her father's doctrine of divine protection, the physical and emotional toll of these events hints at a growing internal conflict. The reader clearly sees how Gene's worldview endangers his family, creating a stark contrast between his professed faith and the harsh realities of their lives. These moments of contradiction lay the groundwork for Tara's eventual questioning of her father's authority and worldview.

Tara's early experiences are intense, fear-based, and isolating, making her eventual decision to leave her family environment immensely complicated. Additionally, the high-cost nature of her upbringing, marked by rigid adherence to her father's beliefs and the severe consequences of dissent, means that leaving is a significant, controversial endeavor fraught with trauma, adversity, and loss. Tara must confront not only the practical challenges of navigating a world she was taught to fear but also the challenge of deconstructing deeply ingrained beliefs that have shaped her identity and reconstructing a new sense of self.

# Chapter 2: Self-concept in adolescence

Chapter 1 identified the three major beliefs which governed Tara's early childhood environment. To understand Tara's emerging self-concept, Chapter 2 expands the timeline to consider the unique influences during her adolescence, starting from her early teenage years through when she begins college at seventeen. During this period of her life, Tara's self-concept is defined by those childhood beliefs and the physical and verbal torment she endures at the hands of her older brother Shawn, whose degrading labels and justifications for violence she internalizes as truths about her identity, worth, and morality. This chapter explores why these two influences so severely defined Tara's self-concept and examines the lingering ramifications of this dynamic on Tara's self-concept. Specifically, it demonstrates how Tara's understanding of herself is filtered through the patriarchal and abusive structures of her family, leaving her vulnerable to internalizing harmful narratives about her identity, worth, and morality. By analyzing the interplay of gender constructs, religious teachings, and familial power dynamics, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding Tara's long-term struggle to reclaim her right to self-definition.

## Defining Self-concept and identity construction

The terms 'self-concept' and 'identity [re]construction' can be difficult to conceptualize within a manageable scope due to the multiplicity of factors and broad-ranging scholarship on the topics.

### Self-concept

The term 'self-concept' has been widely studied across psychology and sociology, with scholars offering diverse perspectives on its nature, development, and functions. William James

(1910), one of the earliest psychologists to explore the self, described self-concept as "an object of what is known," emphasizing its role in self-awareness and self-reflection (Epstein, 1973, 405). Sociologist George Mead (1934) highlighted its social origins, arguing that self-concept arises from individuals' concern about how others perceive them (Epstein, 1973, 405). Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Harry Sullivan (1953) further emphasized the role of early socialization, particularly with parents, in shaping the self. Psychologist Carl Rogers (1951) refined the concept by defining it as encompassing only those characteristics individuals are aware of and believe they can control (Epstein, 1973, 406). Personality psychologist Prescott Lecky (1945) viewed the self-concept as the "nucleus of the personality," representing the organization of consistent values that define an individual (Lecky, 1945, 160).

These foundational theories illustrate the range of approaches to studying self-concept, from its cognitive and organizational functions to its social and developmental origins. More recent research, such as Gore and Cross's (2011) work, emphasizes its dynamic nature, noting that "people's self-concepts are not necessarily static entities; they change over time with new experiences and roles" (Gore & Cross, 2011, 135). This diversity in perspectives reflects the complexity of self-concept as both a psychological construct and a lived experience.

For the scope of my research, I employ a streamlined definition of self-concept as the mental schemas that we hold about ourselves. Schemas are understood as the "mental structures that organize our knowledge about the social world" (Aronson et al., 2015, 53). In other words, self-concept is the internal framework that organizes self-relevant information, such as strengths, weaknesses, relevant personal experience, or perceptions of identity, shaping how individuals understand and navigate their social and personal worlds.

This definition is particularly well-suited for analyzing Tara Westover's memoir, *Educated*, because memoirs are inherently curated autobiographical narratives that inevitably

reflect the author's self-concept as they interpret and organize their life experiences. By focusing on Tara's mental schemas—both those she holds about herself and those influenced by external inputs, such as family socialization—my definition encompasses the analysis of how she internalizes and processes her upbringing, education, social interactions, and self-conception throughout the memoir.

Overall, self-concept encompasses the attitudes and judgments we hold about ourselves, serving to organize our experiences and guide our behavior. In Tara's narrative, these functions are particularly evident as she navigates the tension between the beliefs she inherited from her family and her emerging sense of self.

## Identity [Re]construction

'Identity' construction involves the amalgamation of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that shape an individual's understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world around them. Identity 'construction' is ongoing and self-reinforcing. To understand how identity construction operates, narrative identity and autobiographical memory theory provide a useful framework. According to psychologists Robyn Fivush and Katherine Nelson (2020), "narratives provide both a story structure or narrative arc and an integration of the landscape of actions with the landscape of consciousness, making sense of human action through intentions, motivations, and emotions that lead to dramatic stories with social and emotional consequences" (Fivush & Nelson, 2020, 75). Narratives not only structure our cognitive understanding of the external world but also shape our subjective consciousness, offering a cohesive way to interpret and organize life experiences (Fivush & Nelson, 2020, 77).

If identity construction is operationalized through narrative identity and autobiographical memory, the question arises: why does human consciousness organize itself through this method? The narrative framework method is particularly effective for understanding identity

construction because it integrates disparate psychological elements, bringing order and meaning to the chaos of lived experience. The psychologist Dan McAdams writes, “a story potentially integrates different psychological elements, brings a certain kind of narrative order and logic to the chaos of experienced life” (McAdams, 2018, 361). This method provides structure to events and organizes these events with their newly synthesized meanings on a linear timescale humans can easily grasp. Upholding the principle that identity construction is an ongoing process, McAdams writes that narrative identity is “something more variegated and dynamic, more culturally contoured, and more situated in, and even constitutive of, ongoing interpersonal relationships and conversational performances” (McAdams, 2018, 361). Contrary to those who may suggest that life stories are simply retrospective, McAdams argues that the narrative framework can integrate “elements of the self in both a synchronic and diachronic sense” (McAdams, 2018, 364). In this context, the synchronic and diachronic elements mean that identity is considered in terms of both its historical development and evolution in time as well as its present and contemporaneous context.

For individuals who have departed from extremist religious traditions, both understanding their past and the experience of reconstructing a sense of self outside of pervasive religious expectations is a challenging process. For one, leaving the physical religious environment is significant, but leaving alone does not automatically eliminate the internalized narratives, beliefs, or values from their upbringing. Also, for those raised with fixed views disseminated through faith, realizing that their family and/or their community’s theological and religious perspective may not be fully trusted can drastically destabilize their worldview and sense of self. This worldview transformation can be described as an experience of “intense ontological insecurity” and “world collapse,” defined as “a disintegration of the all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework of reality once provided by religion that induces

psychosislike experiences of (dis)embodiment, derealization, and loss of self-affection" (Brooks, 2020, 307).

Understanding the complex process of identity construction requires consideration of the many factors that influence its formation. Narrative identity and autobiographical memory theory posit that identity construction is ongoing and self-reinforcing, utilizing storytelling as the model for understanding how individuals generate a sense of self. The narrative framework provides structure to events, organizes disorganized experiences, and integrates different psychological, cultural, interpersonal, and social elements.

Agency and coherency play a major factor in this process of identity construction, and, in change, self-determination. Agency, or the ability of individuals to act and make choices, is essential to this process of identity construction because it allows individuals to actively shape their beliefs, values, and behaviors. Coherency, or the degree to which an individual's beliefs, values, and behaviors are consistent with each other, is also important because it contributes to a sense of clarity and stability in one's sense of self. Both self-concept and identity construction are central to understanding Tara Westover's narrative. Self-concept represents the individual "dots" along the timeline of identity construction—the snapshots of self-appraisals, judgments, and attitudes that emerge at different points in one's life. Identity reconstruction, on the other hand, is the broader process of connecting these dots, integrating past and present experiences into a coherent narrative. Through the analysis of Tara Westover's memoir, specifically the stories she shares, we can trace this journey by examining the influential sources which construct her self-concept, how her self-concept evolves, and how she reconstructs her identity.

## Emerging self-concept in adolescence

Tara Westover's heightened awareness of her changing body and the societal expectations tied to it marks her transition into adolescence. This physical transformation

coincides with her emerging self-concept and the awareness of the rigid gender constructs upheld by her family. Central to this tension are her father's strict adherence to modesty, rooted in religious doctrine, and her older brother Shawn's abusive behavior, which weaponizes slut-shaming, purity policing, and verbal degradation to control and demean her. These influences shape Tara's understanding of herself and womanhood, as she begins to internalize messages about her identity, worth, and place within her family's patriarchal framework. This chapter will explore how Tara's beliefs about herself are shaped by these external forces, tracking the ways in which beliefs imposed on her about gender constructs, performance, and identity become central to Tara's struggle for autonomy and self-understanding.

As suggested by the chapter title's biblical reference, "Silence in the Churches" focuses heavily on issues of gender. The chapter title refers to an excerpt from 1 Corinthians written by the apostle Paul, where it is written, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:34-35). The directive for women to defer to their husbands and avoid speaking in church highlights a system of control that prioritizes male dominance and silences women. The chapter title, therefore, thematically encapsulates the chapter's content which includes numerous stories about the oppressive gender dynamics that dominate Tara's upbringing. The teachings, emphasizing women's silence and deference to their husbands, reinforce a patriarchal structure that prioritizes male dominance and suppresses female voices. This framework not only governs Tara's home life but also becomes a central factor in her struggle to forge her own identity amidst these oppressive norms.

Tara's deeper reckoning and awareness of how womanhood is defined, policed, and practiced in her family's rigid, patriarchal belief system commences in adolescence. In the

chapter opening, Tara writes, “I was fifteen and I felt it… my body was changing, bloating, swelling, stretching, bulging. I wished it would stop, but it seemed my body was no longer mine… I’d always known that I would grow differently than my brothers, but I’d never thought about what that might mean” (113). Tara feels out of control in her body and identifies her fate as different from her brothers. Immediately following this reflection, Tara listens to her father harshly scrutinize the modesty of a female churchgoer, condemning her for wearing a hemline three inches above the knee and for bending over while wearing a blouse with a neckline of one inch below her collarbone (113). The structural effect of these moments is the pervasive and normalized enforcement of modesty standards within Tara’s environment. Most often spearheaded by men, conversations and comments that scrutinize women’s clothing and behavior surround her.

This newfound bodily awareness and discomfort with her changing body drive Tara’s internalized anxiety over how she moves, dresses, and exists in space. She reflects, “I worried that I might be growing into the wrong sort of woman. Sometimes I could scarcely move through a room, I was so preoccupied with not walking or bending or crouching like them” (114). Amidst typical pubescent development, Tara’s body becomes a site of surveillance—both her own and that of those around her– because of the expectation for women to preserve and practice modesty. Compounded by how foreign her changing body feels, even the smallest movements concern Tara who fears even the most minor movements could be inadvertently misconstrued as immodest.

This internal struggle is exacerbated by Shawn’s verbal abuse, which serves as an extreme, perverse enforcement of the gendered expectations that Gene preaches. Shawn’s cruelty is immediate and unrelenting. He repeatedly degrades Tara in front of Faye, branding Tara as a “bitch” and a “slut” and going as far as to make up false, damning accusations, claiming, “you

[Tara] pretend to be saintly and churchish. But I see you. I see how you prance around with Charles like a prostitute" (116). Despite witnessing Shawn's verbal abuse, Tara's mother, Faye never speaks out or defends Tara, a complicity that likely legitimizes Shawn's scrutiny and emboldens him to continue his behavior without consequence.

In another instance, Tara recalls, "the first time I wore lip gloss Shawn said I was a whore," illustrating how even minor acts of self-expression or experimentation with physical appearance can be interpreted as signs of immodesty and moral failing (114). Shawn's behavior aligns with broader cultural narratives that normalize and justify violence against women by framing it as a response to their perceived impropriety. In a study conducted by Varman et al. (2018), the authors examine how androcentric narratives, defined as male-centered perspectives that prioritize male dominance and control, normalize and implicate women in the violence they face. Although their research focuses on the normalization of sexual violence in Delhi, India, their findings offer a broader framework for understanding Shawn's actions. They found that women who consume certain products, such as cosmetics, or occupy public spaces in ways deemed inappropriate are often labeled as "characterless and unrespectable," thereby justifying male aggression as a form of corrective punishment (Varman et al., 2018, 956). This framework mirrors Shawn's reaction to Tara's using lip gloss, which he interprets as a sign of immodesty deserving of reprimand.

Sadly, this family dynamic is deeply rooted in the religious doctrines they have been raised to follow. Faye's inaction aligns with Gene's literal biblical interpretations, such as those from Corinthians, which position men as the ultimate authorities and women as subservient. Tara's upbringing defers judgment to the arbitration of men and heavily scrutinizes female behavior in the name of living modestly; these two cultural characteristics essentially legitimize

Shawn's comments, for his comments could be understood as a means of enforcing religious, moral, and gendered expectations.

For Tara, already grappling with the challenges of puberty, a culture that equates female immodesty with moral corruption, and the deferment of judgement exclusively to men, Shawn's relentless degradation becomes a primary source of input for Tara's self-concept. For example, Shawn's vulgar name-calling subconsciously infiltrates the way Tara understands herself, Westover writes, "I had always scoffed at the word "whore" … even though I silently mocked Shawn for using it, I had come to identify with it... I usually only heard the word in connection with myself" (199). Shawn's words became internalized through repetition, reinforcing Tara's distorted self-image as a reflection of Shawn's projections.

This internalization goes beyond mere insult; it redefines Tara's understanding of identity and morality. Her understanding of the word whore "was less about actions and more about essence" because Shawn's use of the term "whore" is not tied to specific behaviors or transgressions but rather as an abstract assertion of Tara's supposed inherent nature (199). By framing Tara's identity in this way, Shawn assigns the label to her regardless of her actions, effectively justifying his abusive behavior as a response to her supposed "whorish" essence. For Tara, this abstraction is particularly damaging because Shawn's accusations did not simply make her feel guilty for specific actions but convinced her that being a "whore" was a "fact of my being" (199). In this way, Shawn's words define her intrinsic nature, embedding toxic characteristics into her self-concept.

Shawn's accusations were relentless and imaginative. When Shawn told Gene that fifteen-year-old Tara "had a reputation in town…Dad thought [Tara] was pregnant" (199). Of course, Gene lost his temper, screaming that he should not have let Tara pursue extracurriculars in town (199). This exchange spotlights first how Gene assumes Shawn's assertions as truth,

further exemplifying the gendered power imbalance, and second, Gene's reaction as confirming his isolatory worldview, quickly drawing the inference that Tara's activities away from Buck's Peak must have resulted in immodesty and whoreish behavior. While Gene yelled, Tara journaled that she sat on her bed wondering if she was, in fact, pregnant. Despite never sharing something as small as a kiss, she ultimately arrives at the conclusion that maybe she was pregnant (199). Given the absence of health or sex education, Tara has no way to verify or combat Shawn's preposterous claims or Dad's subsequent conclusions. Both cases, the pregnancy assumption and Shawn's relentless usage of 'whore,' exemplify the drastic power asymmetry between Tara and the Westover men; Tara writes retrospectively, "ignorance kept me silent: I couldn't defend myself, because I didn't understand the accusation" (199). Ultimately, this knowledge gap and gendered power imbalance enable Shawn to impose his own version of reality onto Tara, infiltrating her understanding of herself.

The severe mistreatment Tara experiences at the hands of Shawn extends beyond verbal belittlement to physical abuse; "I awoke with needles in my brain… I was standing but not on my own strength. Two hands were gripping my throat, and they'd been shaking me" (115). Describing the attack, she writes, "My eyes were open but I saw only white flashes. A few sounds made it through to me. "'SLUT!' 'WHORE!'... I was yanked to my feet. Shawn grasped a fistful of my hair ...catching the clump near my scalp so he could maneuver me" (116). Shawn exerts dominance over Tara through words and physical force. While Shawn's attacks often appear unprovoked—as in this instance where Tara was asleep and had done nothing to incite his violence—it's impossible to say with certainty what drives his behavior. However, one explanation is that his actions are rooted in a distorted sense of moral authority. He frames his abuse as a corrective measure, driven by his perception of Tara as immodest or morally wayward. His violent intervention, he believes, is necessary to prevent her from becoming "that

kind of girl" (114), a justification that reflects both his control over her and the harmful ideologies that underpin their family's patriarchal structure.

These examples highlight two critical points: first, Shawn's mistreatment of Tara is codified and justified by a family environment where men hold exclusive power, while women remain silent, non-confrontational, and unable to contest male accusations. Second, the concept of modesty is exploited and manipulated to justify unchecked maltreatment, reinforcing the expectation that women must be subservient and policed in their behavior. This dynamic is evident in the Westover family, where Tara cannot fight back, and her mother, Faye, chooses not to engage.

Despite the fact that just a chapter prior, the reader witnessed the abuse Tara endured, in the subsequent chapter, Tara cites her journals which denote a different perspective. While working on a wooden pallet, Shawn lost his footing, fell twelve feet, struck a concrete wall, and fell another eight feet to the dirt ground (128). Someone called 911 and Shawn was airlifted to a hospital where he underwent neurosurgery (130). The doctors warned the family that the injury may "have altered his personality" and the volatile and violent tendencies he displayed in the hospital might be permanent alterations (131). Despite the examples of interpersonal violence and verbal abuse mentioned prior to his injury, in her journal, Tara wrote, "*I wish I had my best friend back…Before his injury, I never got hurt at all" (*131). This statement reflects a striking dissonance between Tara's lived experiences of abuse and her retrospective framing of Shawn's behavior, suggesting a possible distortion in her appraisal of the relationship.

Existing literature explains the psychological mechanism likely underlying Tara's appraisal distortion. In a study conducted by Whiting et al., (2012), researchers specializing in relationships, abuse, and control identify several types of appraisal distortions that frequently arise in abusive relationships. According to the American Psychological Association, an

appraisal is “the cognitive evaluation of the nature and significance of a phenomenon or event” (American Psychological Association, 2018). In the context of this study, “appraisal distortion” refers to the modulation and inaccurate evaluation of abusive behavior. Through a qualitative analysis of 29 individuals who had been in abusive relationships, the study identified several common distortions in the perceptions of those experiencing and perpetuating the abuse: denial, minimization, rationalization, distortion of blame, and avoidance or placating (Whiting et al., 2012). These distortions, as the study notes, serve as coping mechanisms: “Distortion that is generated from trauma may be important in helping the woman cope, but it may prevent her from realistically viewing the dangers of impending abusive situations” (Whiting et al., 2012, 135).

Tara’s diary entry, written after visiting Shawn in the hospital, provides a clear example of both denial and distortion of blame. Her statement, “*I wish I had my best friend back…Before his injury, I never got hurt at all,*” exemplifies denial, as she erases the abuse documented in earlier chapters (131). According to Whiting et al., “Denial occurred with women who were struggling to cope with being terrorized,” sometimes manifesting as a refusal to accept the truth or a repression of traumatic events (Whiting et al., 2012, p. 140). Tara’s belief that Shawn had never hurt her prior to his injury suggests an unconscious need to rewrite reality in a way that preserves a sense of stability, allowing her to continue seeing Shawn in a more favorable light.

Additionally, a second type of appraisal distortion, distortion of blame, is present in Tara’s reassessment of her experiences with Shawn and in Shawn’s justification for his violent actions. The same Whiting (2012) study found that “most men reported at times distorting who was to blame for the abuse in the relationship” a pattern consistently reflected in Shawn’s behavior when he frames his violence as a response to Tara’s alleged and uncorroborated immodesty (Whiting et al., 2012, 140). Although the Whiting study focuses on the perpetrator's

alteration, Tara falls into the same pattern, too. In her diary entry, Tara shifts the blame away from Shawn and onto another factor, his injury. Alongside this, Tara writes a retrospective acknowledgment of her revised history, “I’m not sure the injury changed him that much, but I convinced myself that it had, and that any cruelty on his part was entirely new” implying that she had reinterpreted Shawn’s past behavior as something other than abuse or was choosing to forget those instances of interpersonal violence or verbal abuse, attributing his violence not to his long-standing behavior but to a newfound neurological condition (131). This reframing aligns with the study’s findings that survivors often rationalize or minimize their abuser’s actions, a phenomenon that allows them to maintain a sense of control over their circumstances and personhood (Whiting et al., 2012, 140, 144). Later in the memoir, other distortions, namely minimization and rationalization, become evident as Tara grapples with reconciling her lived experience with the narratives imposed upon her. However, this moment in her diary represents one phase in her psychological journey, one where she is not ready or equipped to process or acknowledge the nature of nor the full extent of her trauma and relationship with Shawn.

Reflecting on these lived experiences Tara retrospectively writes, "Shawn had more power over me than I could possibly have imagined. He had defined me to myself, and there’s no greater power than that" (199). This realization underscores a fundamental sociological and psychological process: self-conception is not formed in isolation but emerges through social interaction. The power Shawn wielded over Tara was undeniably physical and devastatingly psychological; he dictated how she saw and understood herself. Thus, working in tandem with the power dynamics of Tara’s upbringing, to understand why his words and accusations had such a profound impact on her identity, it is useful to consider Charles Cooley’s concept of the looking-glass self.

A leading thinker in sociology, Cooley argues that individuals develop self-concept, which is the perception we have of ourselves, through the perception of how others see them. He outlines three key stages in this process: first, individuals imagine how they appear to others; second, they interpret how others judge them; and third, they experience emotions such as pride or shame based on those perceived judgments (Cooley, 1902). Crucially, Cooley emphasizes that self-conception is based not on actual appraisals—what others truly think—but on reflected appraisals, how individuals believe they are perceived (Cooley, 1902). In Tara's case, her understanding of herself is filtered through Shawn's accusations. When Shawn repeatedly calls her a "whore" and Gene assumes she is pregnant despite her lack of sexual experience, Tara internalizes these appraisals, even in the absence of factual evidence. She writes, "I sat on my bed wondering if I was pregnant" ultimately concluding that "maybe I was" (199). Her confusion illustrates the persuasive power of reflected appraisals and her lack of access to education, which leaves her unequipped to contest these false accusations. Shawn and Gene's views become the mirrors through which Tara sees herself, distorting her self-concept. Without the tools to critically evaluate their judgments—tools that education or additional socialization might have provided—Tara is unable to author or discern her own identity. Instead, internalizing the labels and assumptions projected onto her, she adopts the one forcefully imposed upon her.

Because self-concept is a social process, those in positions of power—such as Shawn and Gene—have a disproportionate influence over how Tara sees herself, and their reflected appraisals are especially compelling given her developmental stage, adolescence. Prominent psychoanalyst and psychologist Erik Erikson, best known for his theory of psychosocial development which outlines eight stages of human development spanning from birth to death, argues that adolescence, the last stage of childhood, is a pivotal period in which individuals establish a cohesive sense of self (Erikson, 1968). During this stage, adolescents experiment with

different roles, possibilities, and choices, and are highly sensitive to how they are perceived by others, as adolescents are "sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are" (Erikson, 1968, 128). Erikson's psychosocial framework assumes that adolescents have access to multiple sources of input—such as peers, school, or extracurricular activities—to shape their self-concept through various reflected appraisals. However, Tara's extreme social isolation deprives her of these external reference points, leaving Shawn's voice as one of the only inputs shaping her self-concept, thus, amplifying the impact of his words. Ultimately, her adolescent quest for selfhood is hijacked by Shawn's distorted reflections of who she is, making it nearly impossible for her to construct an identity independent of his imposed narratives.

Furthermore, when considering Cooley's looking-glass self and Eriksonian psychosocial theory alongside Tara's social isolation during the critical developmental stage of adolescence, it becomes clear why Shawn's words carry such weight and influence. Initially, Tara intellectually rejects Shawn's accusations—she scoffs at his language and dismisses his insults. However, because of repeated exposure to his judgments, combined with the absence of alternative narratives to counteract his degrative appraisals, Tara internalizes his words, constructing her sense of self through Shawn's distorted narratives.

## Chapter 2 Conclusions

This chapter captures the intersection of bodily awareness, gendered violence, and the psychological power dynamics shaping Tara's adolescent self-concept. Tara Westover's adolescence is a tumultuous period defined by her growing awareness of her body, the oppressive weight of patriarchal norms, and the psychological toll of familial abuse. Her internalized anxiety over her changing body is compounded by Shawn's relentless verbal and physical abuse, which enforces the rigid gender roles and religious doctrines followed by her

family. Tara's subconscious identification with words like "whore" or feeling as if her essence is wrong reflects the severe influence of Shawn's abusive, patriarchal authority over her self-concept, a dynamic further explained by sociological and psychological theories like Cooley's looking-glass self and Erikson's psychosocial stages of development. These theories highlight how Tara's identity is shaped by the reflections of those in power, particularly during the vulnerable stage of adolescence. In short, Tara struggles to define herself in an environment that systematically disempowers her.

Furthermore, Tara's appraisal distortions reveal the psychological mechanisms that allowed her to cope with Shawn's abuse. Discussing Tara's appraisal distortions reveals that Shawn's power over her self-concept was maintained through his habitual abuse and Tara's psychological coping mechanisms. These distortions, of course, are a product of Tara attempt to manage the trauma of her upbringing. Unfortunately, this process of coping results in her internalizing Shawn's beliefs and avoiding the painful reality that her older brother, someone whom she considered her best friend, was also her abuser. However, by understanding this process, the clearer message emerges: for as long as Tara remains within the confines of Buck's Peak, surrounded by these detrimental forces, she will remain unable to define herself autonomously. In Tara's journey of identity reconstruction, one major step includes dismantling the internalized narratives that others have defined her by.

# Chapter 3: Deconversion

Chapter 3 explores the relationships and experiences that shape a transitional period in Tara's life, a time when she is neither fully aligned with her father's rigid worldview nor fully established in her own independent ways. Tracing Tara's gradual exposure to alternative ways of living, thinking, and understanding the world, marking a pivotal shift in her journey toward self-definition, this chapter identifies the origins of Tara's doubt and need to distance from her upbringing. Tara's transitional experience can be categorized through two formative dimensions: 1) the deconversion from her father's belief system into the development of her own autonomous beliefs, values, and interests, and 2) the shift from her personhood narrated and defined by others to the narration of the definition of her personhood and identity by herself based on her newly formed beliefs, values, and interests. Central to this transformation is Tara's emerging doubt about the doctrine she was raised in and her realization that the world of her upbringing and the broader society she encounters through education operate on fundamentally different logics, histories, and rules. Their incongruence forces Tara to negotiate her identity and worldview. A daunting task for anyone, but especially harrowing for Tara given her survivalist, fundamentalist, isolated upbringing which taught her that deviation from her family's way of life is synonymous with moral failure and extreme danger.

Towards the end of part one and throughout part two of *Educated,* Tara navigates two drastically different environments, Buck's Peak and Brigham Young University (BYU). Through interactions with new people, financial dilemmas, and the quiet but mounting evidence of her own experiences, she slowly begins to experience life outside the rigid framework of her father's ideology. Tara's disidentification with her family's worldview is not a single moment of clarity,

but a series of doubts, choices, and realizations that ultimately lead her toward self-definition and independence.

## Early Moments of Doubt & Dissent

Before Tara leaves for Brigham Young University (BYU), she begins to question the logic of modesty. In the unforgiving summer sun, Tara works alongside her father and brother, Luke, hauling purlins. Seeking relief from the sweltering heat, Tara instinctively rolls up her sleeves, only for her father to approach her and physically "yank the sleeves down," condemning the action by saying, "this ain't a whorehouse" (136). Tara writes, "I wanted to obey. I meant to," but "it was just a few inches. I was covered from my temples to my toes in grime…I didn't feel much like an object of desire or temptation. I felt like a human forklift. How could an inch of skin matter" (136). This moment demonstrates Tara's emerging doubt, as she begins to question the legitimacy of the conceptualization and enforcement of modesty. This moment also provides a clear example of an instance where Tara experiences cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can be understood as "the discomfort that people feel when two cognitions conflict, or when they behave in ways that are inconsistent with their conception of themselves (Aronson & Summers, 2019, 151). In this passage, Tara grapples with two conflicting cognitions: her father's belief that pulling up her sleeves is "whorish" and immodest, and her own lived experience of being covered in grime and feeling like a "human forklift" and far from being an object of temptation. Her attitudes are inconsistent with the doctrines of modesty she is expected to follow, bringing to light a contradiction between her lived reality and the beliefs expected of her. Her inability to reconcile the supposed moral weight of an inch of exposed skin alongside the small action of continuing to pull up her sleeves even after being reprimanded signals a small step toward independent thought from the perspectives she was raised with.

In another instance before college, Tara acts in direct opposition to her father's command demonstrating another early moment of defiance and independence. One evening, Shawn joined Tara at Grandma-over-in-town's house to watch a movie. Since they arrived separately, they departed in different vehicles. Heading home, Tara winds along the familiar but dimly lit highway, when she sees stagnant headlights beaming along the curve in the road. Upon closer examination, Tara finds Shawn "facedown on the gravel," not moving, seemingly unconscious, and with a bloody hole through his head (144). Shaken up by the gruesome injury, Tara dials home and Gene instructs her to bring Shawn home for Faye to tend to; instead, however, Tara hits a U-turn and delivers Shawn to the hospital. After the doctor shared that the "wound was nasty but the damage was minimal," Tara feels "stupid for panicking and bringing him [t]here" (147). Her disappointment transitions into a reflective, self-condemning monologue, "the truth is this: that I am not a good daughter. I am a traitor, a wolf among sheep; there is something different about me and that difference is not good" (147). Her self-assessment can be understood on two levels: first, by judging herself as inherently wrong for failing to align with her father's command; second, by evaluating herself according to the only moral framework she has known, one where loyalty to family is the highest virtue and deviation from that path is unforgivable and fraught with danger. This example demonstrates cognitive dissonance through the conflict between Tara's actions and her internalized beliefs. On one hand, Tara believes in her father's doctrine that modern medicine is dangerous and that loyalty to family means adhering to his anti-medical stance. On the other hand, her lived experience, seeing Shawn critically injured and recognizing the need for medical intervention, compels her to act against this belief, leading her to take Shawn to the hospital. The resulting cognitive dissonance is evident in her self-condemnation and shame, as she struggles to reconcile her actions with the moral framework she

was raised to uphold, revealing the tension between her growing independence and her deeply ingrained desire to adhere.

Furthermore, this imagery, of the wolf and sheep, positions Tara as both separate from and in opposition to the family's conformist mindset. More specifically, likening her family to sheep connotes passivity, herd-mindedness, and lacking individuality; whereas, Tara, the lone wolf, a predatory animal distinct from the pack of sheep, perhaps, suggests the opposite traits and that her difference fundamentally endangers her family. Gene would likely agree with the latter, as Tara's decision to bring Shawn to the hospital directly contradicts his vehement opposition to modern medicine. Gene's earlier confrontation with Grandma over seeking medical care showcased how he views people who utilize the modern medical establishment akin to Satan worshippers and view medical intervention as destroying the purity of the human body (33). This sheep and wolf metaphor positions her as a threat to the family's way of life and also subtly affirms the prevailing perspective within the Westover family that change, or simply being different, is inherently dangerous and threatening to their livelihood.

Moreover, Tara explicitly states that "she is a traitor"; her word choice suggests that being a traitor is inherent to who she is. Tara's harsh self-condemnation stems from the painful realization that she does not conform to her father's staunch anti-modern medicine belief. Tara admits, "we both know that if I ever again find Shawn on the highway, soaked in crimson, I will do exactly what I have just done" (148). Tara's concluding words, "I am not sorry, merely ashamed," reveal her complex emotional landscape (148). Her lack of remorse supports the conviction that she made the right choice in prioritizing Shawn's life. Her shame reflects both the internalized guilt of defying her father and the confirmation of this situation as proof of her being defective, disloyal, and different from the rest of her family. Despite her defiance, Tara's shame reveals a lingering desire to conform to her family's expectations. Her self-condemning

monologue is an extension of the belief system she was raised to uphold, demonstrating how deeply ingrained her father's ideology remains, even as her actions begin to challenge it. Though her behavior contradicts her father's teachings, her emotional guilt underscores the internal conflict she faces as she navigates her growing doubt, questioning, independence, and opposition to her father's ideology.

## Clinging to Familiarity

Before attending BYU, Tara demonstrates moments of resistance to and divergence from her father's beliefs. At age 16 or 17, Tara earned a passing ACT score to gain admission into Brigham Young University (BYU), granting her the auspicious opportunity to pursue an education that could equip her with transferable skills and knowledge to pursue a life beyond Buck's Peak. However, when experiencing life away from home for the first time, Tara initially strengthens her adherence to the doctrines she was raised with. This reaction is evident when Tara first sees her roommate Shannon wearing revealing clothing, bare shoulders, spaghetti straps, and pants with "juicy" written on the butt (154). Instinctively recoiling, likely due to Tara's conditioned response to immodesty, Tara consciously recalls her father's teachings that such women were "Gentiles" and Tara had "always avoided getting too near them, as if their immorality might be catching" (154). Similarly, when another roommate, Mary, shops on the Sabbath and drinks Diet Coke, both of which Tara was taught were sinful, Tara withdraws to her room, reinforcing her impulse to separate herself from perceived impurity and malpractice. Her visceral reactions when confronted with new social and cultural contexts highlight how she instinctively retreats into the familiar structures of her upbringing, likely as a means of preserving stability and coherence. More than mere convenience, this reaction reflects the reality that, as she attempts to construct a life for herself away from home for the first time, the only framework available to her is the one her father instilled in her. Rather than consciously choosing

to adhere to these doctrines for ease or comfort, Tara relies on them because they are the only tools and beliefs she has been given to navigate the world.

Upon beginning her college coursework, Tara enrolls in American history, believing she would be well-prepared due to her father's teachings about the Founding Fathers. When Tara fails her first quiz, instead of resenting her upbringing for her fragmentary knowledge, she reflects, "My loyalty to my father had increased in proportion to the miles between us. On the mountain, I could rebel. But here, in this loud, bright place, surrounded by gentiles disguised as saints, I clung to every truth, every doctrine he had given me" (156). Tara explicitly acknowledges that physical distance from her home intensifies her attachment to her father's teachings. While she had previously been able to 'rebel,' being at BYU surrounded by "gentiles disguised as saints" compels her to embrace his doctrines even more rigidly. This passage demonstrates her instinctive retreat into the familiar when confronted with an environment that challenges her worldview, illustrating how unfamiliarity and uncertainty initially reinforce rather than weaken her adherence to her upbringing.

At BYU, Tara becomes increasingly aware of the chasmic divide between her family's religious beliefs and those of the broader Mormon community. Although her classmates and roommates identify as Mormon, their faith and practices are far less strict than those she was raised with. She asserts, "Our religion was not the same. They believed in modesty; we practiced it. They believed in God's power to heal; we left our injuries in God's hands" (159). This statement demonstrates her resistance to change and her prevailing belief that her family alone upholds true faith. Tara instinctively filters her experiences through her father's teachings, rationalizing his warnings about the corrupting influence of the outside world. She contemplates, "perhaps that was why Dad hadn't wanted me to come: because he knew that by living with them, with people whose faith was less, I risked becoming like them" (159). Tara staunchly

adheres to her upbringing, framing her experiences at BYU as something her father had anticipated and feared—that exposure to those with a weaker faith might erode her own.

Just as Tara clings to her father's belief system, she reverts to her familiar social role — the outsider. Although her roommate invited her to join their Sunday school discussion circle, Tara describes actively ignoring her and choosing to sit alone in a corner, recalling, "I was pleased by the familiarity of the arrangement: me, pressed into the corner, away from the other children, a precise reproduction of every Sunday school lesson from my childhood" (159). This anecdote reinforces the comfort she finds in isolation, or, more universally, the comfort she finds in replicating and occupying the same social position from her upbringing. Throughout her life outside Buck's Peak, she was always different from her peers, whether through her family's rigid faith, their separation from mainstream society, or her exclusion from traditional schooling. At BYU, instead of attempting to integrate or try something new, Tara replicates this familiar dynamic, displaying her initial regression into the beliefs and social patterns of her past.

Tara's reactions to her roommates' lifestyle habits, her first college quiz, and her instinct to isolate at BYU Sunday school can be better understood when considering Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT utilizes the concepts of ingroups (us) and outgroups (them) to explain that individuals maintain and reinforce their ingroup identity in the face of external threats as a means of preserving internal stability (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Dr. Michael Hogg's Uncertainty-Identity Theory (2007), expounds on the motivational foundations of Social Identity Theory, explaining how individuals identify strongly with groups, particularly in uncertain or unfamiliar situations. According to Hogg, people seek clarity and stability in their identity by adhering to familiar group identities and norms, as these provide a sense of security and structure when faced with ambiguity or change (Hogg, 2007). Together, these theories demonstrate that

Tara's intensified adherence to her upbringing when confronted with new social environments is not unique to her background but reflects a broader human tendency to rely on familiar group identities as a coping mechanism in the face of uncertainty. However, Tara's reaction is likely heightened due to the fundamentalist nature of her upbringing, which framed her family's beliefs as absolute and non-negotiable. The stakes of deviating from these beliefs amplify her need to cling to them, even in the face of novel experiences. This combination of psychological mechanisms and the specific intensity of her upbringing helps explain the strength of Tara's initial response to a new environment, despite the prior examples of resistance and questioning at home.

## Deconversion

Initially, when Tara encountered moments that challenged her worldview or demonstrated an alternative life path, she willingly and vehemently upheld her father's beliefs. Nonetheless, as she moves forward, both physically, by continuing her education at BYU away from Buck's Peak, and intellectually, by engaging with new ideas, her belief systems begin to shift. Over time, moments of dissonance accumulate and slowly degrade her faith. This process aligns with scholarly definitions of deconversion, which often combines experiences of doubt and intellectual tension, moral criticism, emotional upheaval, and eventually, a transformed narrative of self.

Deconversion usually denotes a belief shift tied to religious beliefs: the shift from believing in religious principles and actively practicing religion to proclaiming non-belief and departing from organized religion. However, for Tara Westover's journey, the definition of 'deconversion' is broader. I will use the term deconversion to span the departing and unlearning the amalgamation of Gene's wide-ranging views religious and non-religious: anti-government, anti-medicine, survivalist, anti-public school, and fundamentalist Mormon.

Understanding Tara's deconversion requires examining the moments when she questions the status quo, her robust faith erodes, doubt creeps in, the logic of her family's beliefs clashes with her new lived experiences, and her formerly unquestioned worldview begins to unravel. Tara's worldview transformation results from the aggregate of cognitive dissonance she experiences and the logical fallacies she discovers. On their own, each instance may not be immediate or definitive as they are certainly not singular spiritual or philosophical epiphanies. Rather, they accumulate over time, and experiencing each instance adds weight and legitimacy to the realization that she no longer accepts or believes her father's doctrines and that she, not her father nor Shawn, can narrate and define her lived experiences and personhood.

In its totality, the term 'deconversion' includes the doubt, loss, and rejection of religious beliefs or experiences, and the departure from the community in which one had previously belonged (Fazzino, 2014; Keller et al., 2013). Scholars studying different populations may define [de]conversion in slightly different ways. For example, scholar of religion and psychology, Dr. Lewis Rambo defines conversion—though I would argue this definition applies equally to deconversion—as "a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations" (Rambo, 5, 1993). Some scholars propose moving away from the term deconversion entirely, instead categorizing all transitions in belief—whether from religious to nonreligious or vice versa—as conversion, on the grounds that every deconversion is, in essence, a conversion to something else.

However, I find Fazzino's (2014) argument more compelling: "while the processes of conversion and deconversion might be identical, the narratives of converts and deconverts are not" (Fazzino, 2014, 251). Conversion narratives typically depict a decisive, assured shift toward a new belief system, marked by ecstasy, religious conformity, and a sense of salvation, as the individual embraces a known, privileged destination within a structured religious framework

(Fazzino, 2014, 252). In contrast, deconversion narratives emphasize spiritual struggle, ambiguity, grief, and a liminal state of loss, as the individual moves away from their former faith, experiencing ongoing self-liberation and an open-ended pursuit of truth, free from the constraints of religious conformity (Fazzino, 2014, 252). For Westover's experiences the term deconversion is most appropriate. More specifically, I use this definition because it captures the complexities of Tara's upbringing—her story is not merely a departure from religion, but from a broader ideological system in which religion is one of many shaping forces.

Deconversion usually denotes a belief shift tied to religious beliefs: the shift from believing in religious principles and actively practicing religion to proclaiming non-belief and departing from organized religion. However, for Tara Westover's journey, the definition of 'deconversion' is broader. In *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith*, author and scholar of religion, John Barbour, outlines four components in the process of deconversion. Barbour identifies four characteristics that comprise the deconversion process: 1) "doubt and denial of the truth of a system of beliefs" or general intellectual doubt 2) "moral criticism of not only particular actions or practices but an entire way of life" 3) deconversion "brings emotional upheaval, especially such painful feelings as grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair" and 4) "the rejection of the community to which he or she belonged" (Barbour, 2, 1994). Reserving space for the diversity of experiences that deconversion yields, Barbour simply defines deconversion as a "loss of faith" (Barbour, 2, 1994). A few decades later, Heinz Streib, a scholar of deconversion and fundamentalism expanded on Barbour's characteristics to compile five components to deconversion: "(1) loss of specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; and (5) disaffiliation from the community" (Streib, 2014, 1).

Throughout the memoir, several of Tara's anecdotes align with one or more of these deconversion characteristics, which provides evidence to support her journey of disaffiliation, education, and self-discovery. Beyond deconversion, Tara also grapples with realizing the chasmic divide between the reality she was raised in and the broader world she is beginning to understand and experience. Tara must reconcile her past with her evolving sense of self and truth.

## Doubt and Denial

Both Streib and Barbour concur that one characteristic of deconversion includes doubt and denial. Streib's definition aligns with Barbour who defined it as "the doubt and denial of the truth of a system of beliefs" alongside general intellectual doubt refers to the process of questioning and ultimately rejecting previously held religious or ideological convictions (Barbour 2, 1994). This stage often involves recognizing inconsistencies within the belief system and experiencing a growing disconnect between inherited doctrines and personal reasoning. In *Educated,* this stage is evident when Tara returns home for winter break after a difficult first semester. During an outing with Charles, he asks if she is angry that her parents did not send her to school. Tara instinctively defends her upbringing, shouting, "It was an advantage!"—a knee-jerk reaction that reflects years of internalizing her father's ideology (172). However, as the conversation continues, Tara becomes acutely aware of how rehearsed and unnatural her father's words feel when she tries to convince Charles. She describes this moment, "it was like hearing a phrase from a catchy song: I couldn't stop myself from reciting the next line," which demonstrates the ease with which she could regurgitate her father's convictions and, yet, still how she feels increasingly disconnected from them (172). Charles's blunt response, "Well, I'm angry. Even if you aren't" forces Tara into introspection (172). She reflects on her inability to respond, realizing that her father's words feel "awkward" and "rehearsed," even in her own mind

(172). Despite wanting to reactively rant about the Illuminati, Tara recognizes that she cannot authentically claim her father's beliefs as her own. What distinguishes this moment from earlier instances of dissent is Tara's explicit awareness that the origin of these thoughts is her father's, coupled with her realization that she no longer feels genuinely convinced by them. This revelation is deeply challenging, as she acknowledges, "I believed then—and part of me will always believe—that my father's words ought to be my own" (172). This tension between her lingering loyalty to her father and her growing intellectual independence contributes to the complexity of her deconversion. Although Tara has not yet fully rejected her father's worldview, she acknowledges that her beliefs are not entirely her own. This exchange exemplifies Barbour's first characteristic of deconversion, as Tara begins to question the truth of the system of beliefs she was raised with.

In another instance, Tara's doubt about her family's narrative deepens when she takes Psychology 101 and learns about bipolar disorder for the first time. She immediately associates the symptoms with her father: "I listened with a desperate interest. This is my father, I wrote in my notes. He's describing Dad" (207). This knowledge provides Tara with a new framework to reexamine her childhood and her father's erratic behavior. The same class leads her to reconsider the foundational narratives that shaped her worldview when a student asks the role of mental disorders in separatist movements, specifically referencing Ruby Ridge. Tara is struck by the familiarity of the event name and embarks on independent research. Initially, she recalls her father's version of events: "Dad was always saying that one day the Government would come after folks who resisted its brainwashing… for thirteen years, I'd assumed that this was why the Government had come to Randy: to force his children into school" (209). However, upon deeper investigation, she uncovers the true nature of the incident, including Randy Weaver's involvement in white supremacist movements and firearm sales. Tara's revelation is jarring:

"Then I understood: white supremacy was at the heart of this story, not homeschool" (209). This realization fundamentally shifts Tara's acceptance of her father's narratives, offering her an alternative framework for understanding Ruby Ridge—one that revises Gene's insistence that the event was inextricably tied to the Government's desire to force children into public school. By uncovering the historical and ideological context surrounding the incident, Tara recognizes that her father's version was misleading and modulated the event to reinforce his own fears and beliefs. She reflects, "The government, it seemed, had never been in the habit of murdering people for not submitting their children to a public education. This seemed so obvious to me now, it was difficult to understand why I had ever believed anything else" (210). The ease with which she once accepted her father's theories now feels incomprehensible, highlighting the depth of her emerging intellectual transformation.

A large component of Tara's deconversion journey includes the rejection of her father's beliefs; however, she also reckons with the sincerity of her father's delusions. After discovering the origins, history, and context of Ruby Ridge, she acknowledges, "for one bitter moment, I thought Dad had lied. Then I remembered the fear on his face, the heavy rattling of his breath, and I felt certain that he'd really believed we were in danger" (210). This realization complicates her understanding of her father not as a manipulative liar, but as someone deeply consumed by paranoia and mental illness. She processes this through the language she has only recently acquired in her psychology class: "paranoia, mania, delusions of grandeur and persecution" (210).

Through education, Tara gains the tools to deconstruct not only her father's worldview but also the mechanisms that allowed her to believe in it for so long. The Ruby Ridge revelation dismantles one of the primary narratives justifying her family's isolation and rejection of formal education. The recognition that her father's fears were not grounded in reality but in paranoia

forces Tara to question the broader system of beliefs that governed her upbringing. In doing so, she takes a crucial step toward intellectual autonomy and self-definition, further distancing herself from the doctrines that once defined her worldview and identity.

Another significant moment of ideological separation occurs when Tara is confronted with the choice to accept financial aid. At BYU, despite working several jobs, Tara struggled to cover her college expenses. The BYU bishop, with whom Tara met weekly and developed an amicable relationship, urges her to apply for the grant because she is the target demographic for assistance (204). But when Tara hears this advice she reacts, "my opposition was beyond rational, it was visceral" (204). Having been raised to believe that government assistance was a form of control, she instinctively resists the suggestion of applying. Eventually, Tara reluctantly complies and receives a government check, allowing her to pay rent, textbooks, and tuition, receive urgently needed dental care, and still have cash leftover. In retrospect, Tara reflects on the moment when she finally accepted financial help: "I believed the money would be used to control me, but what it did was enable me to keep my word to myself: for the first time, when I said I would never again work for my father, I believed it" (204). Here, her lived experience directly contradicts her father's ideology, revealing that financial aid, rather than exerting control over her, grants her the freedom to pursue her education on her own terms. Unlike in the past, when financial instability forced her to return to the scrapyard on Buck's Peak, the grant provides her with the mobility and autonomy to sustain herself independently. Tara's realization that the grant empowers her directly contradicts her father's teachings. This contradiction forces her to confront the inconsistency between her lived experience and her inherited beliefs, further bolstering her developing doubt surmounting against her father's worldview.

These moments of ideological separation—questioning her father's beliefs, accepting financial aid, and reinterpreting her past through education—exemplifies Streib and Barbour's

first characteristic of deconversion: doubt and denial. Step by step, Tara demonstrates her growing ability to think independently and critically evaluate the doctrines she was raised with. Her initial doubt, sparked by moments like her conversation with Charles and her psychology class, evolves into a deeper denial of her father's worldview as she begins to recognize its inconsistencies and limitations. While she has not yet fully rejected her father's ideology, these experiences mark the beginning of her intellectual and emotional liberation.

## Moral Criticism

Barbour and Streib's second characteristic of deconversion includes the "moral criticism of not only particular actions or practices but an entire way of life" (Barbour, 2, 1994). Assumed in the definition is that the individual embarks on the moral critique of their own former way of life. Moral criticism is concerned with the rights and wrongs of values, ethics, or norms that people uphold, critically investigating the implications of belief frameworks on individuals or populations.

Tara's process of deconversion is intellectual and moral; as she gains knowledge beyond the confines of her upbringing, Tara questions the legitimacy of the values she once accepted without question. This shift is not limited to religious or familial doctrines, but extends to broader societal structures, particularly the ways in which power and oppression are maintained through ideology, history, and language. This moral reckoning is exemplified in her exposure to American history at school, where she begins to recognize the consequences and lived realities of systemic injustice.

At BYU, Tara attends lectures on American history where she learns about the Emancipation Proclamation, The Great Depression, World War II, and the civil rights movement. Studying figures like Rosa Parks and Emmett Till, she experiences a jarring realization, noting that "the distance between me and Emmett Till collapsed. My proximity to

this murdered boy could be measured in the lives of people I knew. The calculation was not made with reference to vast historical or geological shifts… it was measured in the wrinkling of human flesh. In the lines on my mother's face" (179). This realization alters Tara's understanding of history, a kind of timeline crunch where events she once thought were distant and disconnected from her life are actually startlingly close, overlapping with the lifetimes of people she knows. She begins to see that the problems she assumed were confined to the past are, in fact, deeply present and interconnected with contemporary life. This knowledge alters Tara's awareness as she begins to comprehend the implications of history and its ongoing reverberations.

However, when Tara returns to Bucks Peak this newfound social and historical awareness collides with the stark reality of her upbringing. Shawn returns to an old habit of calling Tara the n-word. Unlike past experiences with Shawn when Tara did not have the context to understand the history of the n-word, this time, Tara responds, "'Don't call me that…You don't know what it means.' 'Sure I do,' he said. 'You've got black all over your face, like a nigger!"[2] (180). Tara writes that she has heard this word before and, in the past, might have laughed it off or been indifferent to it, but this time is different. As Tara recounts, "the word and the way Shawn said it hadn't changed; only my ears were different… What they heard was a signal, a call through time, which was answered with a mounting conviction: that never again would I allow myself to be made a foot soldier in a conflict I did not understand" (181). Tara's learning about the civil rights movement at school exposes the way she grew up inadvertently internalizing harmful ideologies

[2] My choice to include the N-word in this analysis aligns with Tara Westover's explanation of her usage of the word in writing her memoir. Westover wrote in a footnote, "I wrestled with the decision of whether I should allow "nigger" to appear in this book. The word carries a brutal power, and part of me felt it would be more appropriate (or perhaps only more comfortable) to substitute a euphemism rather than resurrect this old demon. In the end, I chose to include the word as I'd heard it used. I did so because I agree with historian Diane McWhorter that "to sanitize the language of segregation is to mute its destructive force." It is to dismiss or downplay. I believe that to respect out past, and those who suffer in it, we have to at least try to see it the way it was" (181).

and unknowingly perpetuating derogatory language. She reflects, “I had begun to understand that we had lent our voices to a discourse whose sole purpose was to dehumanize and brutalize others—because nurturing that discourse was easier, because retaining power always feels like the way forward” (180). Shawn’s repeated casual use of an extremely derogatory racial slur forces Tara to confront a deeper, painful truth: that her family has played a part in perpetuating a harmful, oppressive system. Processing this realization, she understands that she can no longer passively accept such language or remain complicit in a belief system that dehumanizes others. This moment represents a moral criticism because now that her education contextualized the n-word, Tara actively rejects the prejudiced ideology embedded in her upbringing, recognizing its role in sustaining oppression; thus, Tara confronts the moral responsibility of refusing complicity in a system that dehumanizes others.

Later in the memoir, Tara returns to BYU after completing a study-abroad program at Cambridge. One evening, Tara studies in the company of her Mormon friend Mark. The conversation begins with Mark asking Tara if people should study church history if it makes them unhappy. The conversation segues when Mark adds on, “ ‘Many women struggle with their faith after they learn about polygamy…my mother did. I don’t think she’s ever understood it’ ” (244). Tara responds, “ ‘I’ve never understood it, either’... There was a tense silence. He was waiting for me to say my line: that I was praying for faith” (244). Tara’s simple admission that she has never understood polygamy marks a small yet significant act of resistance. Rather than following the expected religious script by reaffirming her faith or expressing a desire to believe, she allows her doubt to stand alone.

Temporarily stepping outside of the chapter’s scene with Mark, Tara recalls her childhood vision of heaven. Tara describes the vision: her donning a white gown, “standing in a pearly mist across from my husband,” and, ideally, standing as a first wife although she “knew

there was no guarantee of that; I might be hidden anywhere in the long chain of wives" (245). Simultaneously, Tara writes, "there was a sting in this arithmetic: in knowing that in the divine calculus of heaven, one man could balance the equation for countless women" (255). Tara's recollection of her childhood vision of heaven reveals the deeply ingrained belief that her worth and place in the afterlife depended on a system that inherently diminished and devalued women. The "sting" she feels in this realization indicates her emerging critical consciousness. Tara questions the fairness of a doctrine she once accepted as natural, reflecting a growing discomfort with the moral implications of her faith's gender hierarchy, marking another step in her journey toward self-authorship and ideological independence.

After her reflection on her childhood vision of heaven, the narrative abruptly returns to her conversation with Mark: "Mark was still waiting. Then he gave up and mumbled the words I was supposed to say, that he didn't understand fully, but he knew polygamy was a principle from God" (256). Her hesitation in filling the prescribed religious script reflects a fractured allegiance to a theology she no longer truly believes in. Yet, despite this resistance, Tara momentarily caves, offering Mark an inauthentic agreement, "I agree. I said the words, then braced myself for a wave of humiliation – for that image to invade my thoughts, of me, one of many wives standing behind a solitary, faceless man – but it didn't come" (246). Instead of being mentally inundated with religious imagery, Tara turns to introspection, "I searched my mind and discovered a new conviction there: I would never be a plural wife. A voice declared this with unyielding finality; the declaration made me tremble. What if God commanded it? I asked. You wouldn't do it, the voice answered. And I knew it was true" (246). Tara's doubt no longer manifests as guilt, nor does it prompt a renewed effort to conform. Instead, it transforms into a personal conviction, an involuntary certainty that emerges from within herself. The "voice" that answers her is distinctly her own, signaling both a growing autonomy from her father's

implanted religious script and the strengthening of her own belief system and mind. Overall, Tara's rejection of polygamy also constitutes a moral criticism because she is not merely questioning a single practice but the broader system of belief that normalizes female subjugation. By recognizing that she would refuse polygamy even if God commanded it, she asserts her own moral authority over a doctrine that she now sees as fundamentally unjust, representing a decisive break from the values she was raised to accept.

Tara's process of deconversion is marked by the moral criticism of the belief systems and practices she was raised with, as she begins to question not only specific actions but the entire way of life she once accepted as natural and just. Her exposure to new knowledge, particularly through her American history studies, which reveal the systemic injustices embedded in the ideologies she grew up with, fuels her intellectual and moral awakening. This awareness leads her to confront the harmful language and attitudes perpetuated by her family, as seen in her rejection of Shawn's use of the n-word, and to critically examine the gender hierarchies within her faith, as exemplified by her rejection of polygamy. These moments of moral reckoning signify Tara's growing autonomy and her refusal to remain complicit in systems that dehumanize others or diminish her own worth. Her journey reflects a shift from passive acceptance to active resistance, as she begins to assert her own moral authority and redefine her values outside the oppressive structures of her upbringing.

## Emotional Suffering

Barbour states his third characteristic of deconversion is that "Deconversion "brings emotional upheaval, especially such painful feelings as grief, loneliness, and despair" (Barbour, 2, 1994). However, Streib's definition of deconversion extends slightly further; for him, deconversion ushers in "emotional suffering that consists of grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair," differing from Barbour in adding guilt as one of the principal characteristics of emotional

suffering during deconversion (Streib, 2014, 1). Compared to Barbour, Streib's expanded definition more accurately captures Tara Westover's deconversion experience.

Over Thanksgiving Break, Tara returns home and invites Charles to dinner, attempting to present a facade of normalcy by hiding her family's eccentricities. However, Shawn's normalized escalating abuse, verbal taunts, physical violence, and ultimately him dragging Tara by the hair to the bathroom, eviscerates the charade. Tara's primary fear is not the assault itself but Charles witnessing the reality of her upbringing, Tara writes, "Charles could not see me like this. He could not know that for all my pretenses– my makeup, my new clothes, my China place settings – this is who I was" (189). Tara equates Shawn's treatment of her with her identity, believing that no matter how much she tries to transform or present herself as someone new, she cannot escape the fundamental reality of her past. In addition to this tension, Tara's fear that Charles will see through her carefully constructed facade reveals her deep-seated shame and the internalized belief that her personhood is tethered to her family's dysfunction and the abuse she endures. Rather than embracing and identifying with the version of herself she cultivates with Charles, engaging in ordinary activities like grabbing burgers downtown and building a relationship grounded in mutual respect, she remains trapped in the shadow of her upbringing, unable to fully lean into the possibility of growth and self-redefinition.

Later that night, Charles refuses to return to Buck's Peak after witnessing the violent, volatile family dynamic. So, Tara meets Charles in a parking lot, where she denies the abuse, insisting, "You didn't see what you thought you saw" (189). This moment transitions into a reflective narrative, where Tara explains to the reader how the psychological turmoil of her upbringing infiltrates her relationship with Charles. In hindsight, Tara admits that her priority was not love or friendship but maintaining the illusion of strength through self-deception: "What was important to me wasn't love or friendship, but my ability to lie convincingly to myself: to

believe I was strong" (189). This self-deception, again likely rooted in cognitive dissonance and appraisal distortions, reflects the psychological toll of holding conflicting beliefs and realities.

This internal conflict mirrors a phenomenon discovered by a Lee & Gubi (2019) study which examined the lived experiences of six individuals who deconverted from Evangelical Christianity to Atheism. The researchers summarized that "All participants described a period of cognitive dissonance that led to their deconversion... an increasing conflict between their Christian beliefs and their reality" (Gubi & Lee, 2019, 174). These individuals articulate their struggle to reconcile their desire for normalcy with the oppressive realities of their upbringing, leading to emotional and psychological turmoil. Furthermore, their participants similarly described how the process of deconversion included a struggle to maintain the illusion of control, even as their former beliefs began to unravel (Lee & Gubi, 2019, 174). Tara Westover's narrative is similar as her attempt to integrate Charles, symbolic of a normal, non-toxic relationship, into her family life, clearly an oppressive dynamic, leads to emotional and psychological turmoil. In Tara's case, her denial manifests in erratic and self-destructive behavior, devising irrational tests for Charles' devotion and lashing out when he failed to meet her impossible standards. Her volatility escalates until Charles ends the relationship, "He said he loved me but this was over his head. He couldn't save me. Only I could. I had no idea what he was talking about" (190). Tara's inability to comprehend Charles' words reflects her entrapment in a cycle of trauma and denial. At this moment, Tara remains emotionally unmoored and incapable of envisioning a future or identity beyond her upbringing.

This scene exemplifies the emotional upheaval Barbour associates with deconversion. It is striking how Tara's journey mirrors the experiences of Evangelical deconverts who also described feelings of regret, embarrassment, and anger as they grappled with the loss of their former worldview and the challenge of constructing a new identity (Lee & Gubi, 2019, 176). Her

erratic behavior, self-deception, and inability to accept support underscore the substantial psychological toll of breaking away from a deeply ingrained belief system. Rooted in shame, fear, and a distorted self-perception, the emotional turmoil she experiences highlights the painful process of deconversion and the struggle to reclaim agency over her identity.

In another instance much later in the memoir, Tara attends graduate school at Cambridge and develops a strong social network. Although Tara finds a sense of belonging at Cambridge, her attitude towards this support system as a positive force is overshadowed by deep guilt. She acknowledges that her new friends have become "a kind of family," and that "although I wished it were otherwise, I did not want to go home. I preferred the family I had chosen to the one I had been given" (280). Yet, Tara cannot escape the crushing guilt, she feels "damned" by her emotions (280). She questions, "No natural sister should love a stranger more than a brother… and what sort of daughter prefers a teacher to her own father?" (280). Her happiness in Cambridge is tainted by the belief that she has betrayed her family, a belief so potent it somatizes—she can "taste it on [her] tongue" and "smell it on [her] own breath" (280). This reaction is unsurprising given the deeply ingrained teachings of her upbringing. Gene's fundamentalism and survivalism were governed by strict family loyalty—she was taught that trusting outsiders was dangerous, that non-believers could not be relied upon, and that her biological kin were the only people she could count on. Demonstrating the magnitude of these pervasive forces, the deep guilt she experiences is so consuming that it becomes a physical repulsion to her physical body, aligns with existing research which documents the prevalence of somatic symptoms associated with significant shame and guilt (Kealy et al., 2018).

In another instance, Tara becomes extremely sick, to the point where she quits her internship and begins sleeping through entire days. Her boyfriend at the time, Nick, although initially amused by her refusal to see a doctor, becomes so concerned that he arrives at her

apartment to force her to go to the doctor. What Nick does not know is the extent of the radical beliefs that undergird Tara's resistance to going. Tara's deeply ingrained distrust of modern medicine is a direct consequence of her father's rigid belief system, which casts doctors as agents of corruption and pharmaceutical treatments as dangerous pollutants. This belief remained unchallenged until she fell ill during college and faced a difficult choice: "Given the choice between seeing an evil socialist doctor, and admitting to my boyfriend that I believed doctors were evil socialists, I chose to see the doctor" (213). Her decision is not born out of genuine acceptance of medical care but rather out of the shame of exposing the extremity of her upbringing to someone outside her family. Even as she enters the clinic parking lot, she experiences an acute sense of transgression: "I felt as though Mother were watching me" (213). Her internalization of her parents' surveillance reveals the extent to which their ideology continues to govern her actions, even in their absence.

At the clinic, the doctor diagnoses Tara with strep throat and mononucleosis and prescribes penicillin for the strep infection. Holding the pills in her palm, she hesitates, recalling the anti-medicine teachings she has absorbed since childhood. Her mother warned that "antibiotics poison the body, they cause infertility and birth defects," while her father preached that herbalism "was a spiritual doctrine that separated the wheat from the tares, the faithful from the faithless," implying using modern medicine renders one a sinner (33). Yet, this time, her parents' voices are not the only ones in her mind, Charles' influence lingers as well. She remembers the moment he had once given her ibuprofen to relieve an earache, an experience that had subtly challenged her worldview when the ibuprofen relieved her pain without any other negative symptoms (183). This previous exposure likely made her more receptive to taking the penicillin. Simultaneously, the discomfort she feels when taking penicillin reflects the tension

between her new actions and her ingrained beliefs. Nonetheless, in a small but significant departure from her past beliefs, she consumes the medicine.

Despite this, the guilt that follows is substantial. Perhaps hoping that confession will ease her conscience, she calls her mother and discloses both the doctor's visit and her decision to take the antibiotics. Days later, Tara receives a package from her mother: "She hadn't sent any remedies for the strep or the mono. Only for the penicillin" (214). The irony of her mother's response reinforces the depth of her family's conviction that the use of modern medicine demands correction, yet the diagnosis of mono and strep do not warrant treatments. This moment encapsulates Tara's gradual process of deconversion. Although she has taken a step toward challenging her upbringing, her instinct to confess, demonstrative of internal policing methods and the guilt she experiences, illustrates how deeply she is still entangled in the belief system she is beginning to question.

The existing literature on high-control religious groups often focuses on surveillance as an internal community mechanism, where members monitor one another to enforce conformity and loyalty. Social scientist, Diedre McDonald, conducted a study on surveillance in insular religion; she found that these groups employ a surveillance technique called "unidirectional visibility," wherein leaders demand complete transparency from members while remaining cloaked in secrecy themselves (McDonald, 2018, 489). As concluded in McDonalds study and narratively exemplified in Deborah Feldman's *Unorthodox*, a memoir of her rejection of her ultra-Orthodox Hasidic upbringing, this dynamic creates a feedback loop of surveillance, where members monitor each other to curry favor with leadership, reinforcing loyalty and obedience (McDonald, 2018, 491; Feldman, 2012). Similarly, for example, in FLDS, fear of ostracization and public shaming motivates compliance as members are constantly observed and reported on by both leaders and peers (McDonald, 2018, 496). Similarly, in ultra-Orthodox Jewish

communities, Dr. Roni Berger highlights how defectors face intense social ostracization and familial pressure, with surveillance extending even to those who attempt to leave (Berger, 2015, 671). These practices of surveillance, whether through eavesdropping, public shaming, or familial betrayal, serve to isolate members from external influences and sustain the community's insularity (McDonald, 2018, 497; Berger, 2015, 678).

Together, these examples illustrate how surveillance mechanisms in high-control religious groups enforce conformity, sustain insularity, and perpetuate power imbalances between leaders and members. Yet while the existing scholarship documents communal surveillance, it seldom examines in-depth the internalized self-policing, guilt, and shame that persists after leaving such groups—precisely the dynamic Tara Westover describes. For Tara, her parents' voices and beliefs continue to influence her actions, even in their physical absence. This internalized guilt and shame reflect the prevailing psychological grasp of her upbringing on her psyche, even as she begins to question and challenge it. Overall, Tara's experience aligns closely with Streib's (2014) expanded definition of deconversion which includes guilt as a central characteristic of emotional suffering. Yet, Westover's narrative includes pervasive shame and internal policing, which is an under-discussed dimension in the broader deconversion scholarship.

## Chapter 3 Conclusions

In reference to Barbour and Streib's deconversion characteristics—doubt and denial, normal criticism, and emotional suffering—Tara Westover's deconversion journey, as examined through her narrative recapitulation, demonstrate the challenging psychological and emotional toll of breaking away from a high-cost upbringing. Her initial moments of doubt, such as her inability to authentically defend her father's beliefs to Charles or her realization of the historical inaccuracies in her father's narratives, indicate the beginning of her intellectual liberation. These

moments of cognitive dissonance, where her lived experiences clash with her inherited beliefs, accumulate over time, eroding her adherence to her family's ideology. As Tara gains exposure to new ideas and histories through education, she begins to critically examine the moral implications of her upbringing, rejecting harmful practices like Shawn's use of racial slurs and the patriarchal structures of her faith. However, this progression is not linear; her emotional upheaval, predominately characterized by shame, guilt, and self-policing, underscores the persistent influence of her upbringing. In the pursuit of identity reconstruction and claiming authorship of her self-concept, Tara's deconversion narrative illustrates how her experience is not merely an intellectual shift but a deeper emotional and moral reckoning. Like the deconversion narratives described by scholars, Tara grapples with cognitive dissonance, doubt, worldly revelations, interpersonal relationship tensions, and the challenge of separating herself from her family ideology and reconstructing a new worldview. Her journey reflects the ongoing tension between the beliefs she was raised with and the truths she is beginning to uncover, highlighting the complexity of deconversion as both a process of unlearning and a path toward self-definition.

# Chapter 4: Identity Reconstruction

## Introduction

In Part Three of *Educated,* Westover takes deliberate action toward independence and integration into mainstream society, including lifestyle changes that violate her father's beliefs. Her openness to learning and experimenting marks a turning point in her transformation, as she begins to assimilate into mainstream society and redefine her identity. Before renegotiating the stories of her life and achieving a sense of wholeness and true autonomy though, Tara navigates the agonizing experience of disenchantment and familial rejection. Ultimately, Tara's education, exposure to alternative perspectives, and critical self-reflection enable her autonomous identity reconstruction.

## Deliberate Experimentation & Rescripting Through Education

While studying at Cambridge, Tara encounters the story of Bob Marley's preventable death from melanoma which he refused to treat due to his Rastafarian beliefs. Reading this story triggers a visceral reaction in Tara as she imagines a grotesque surgeon "with sharp teeth and long, skeletal fingers" urging Marley to undergo surgery (258). Her reaction, physically shrinking in response to the frightening image, reveals the lingering influence of her father's teachings, despite her intellectual rejection of them. In a moment of self-awareness Tara acknowledges, "Although I had renounced my father's world, I had never quite found the courage to live in this one" (258). Noting a significant milestone, Tara consciously decides to act on her revised beliefs by scheduling her vaccinations – a direct rejection of her father's anti-medicine doctrines and another example of self-determination.

In another instance, while her Cambridge peers engage effortlessly in academic discourse, Tara grapples with the massive cultural and educational shift. Tara writes, "They debated concepts from the lecture; I debated whether to drink my coffee" (258). This simple

detail reflects her lingering sense of being an outsider at Cambridge, but drinking coffee, a direct violation of rules she was raised with, symbolizes another step in her purposeful experimentation and integration into this new world.

Despite the hardships, Tara continues to push herself, embracing change with conscious intent. University is the site and the mechanism for this transformation as she reflects, “I presented myself to the university like resin to a sculptor. I believed I could be remade, my mind recast” (266). This quotation declares her willingness to reshape herself through new experiences at school. Unlike her time at BYU, where she largely adhered to the practices of her upbringing, at Cambridge, she pushes herself beyond defaulting to typical outsider status. She writes, “I forced myself to befriend other students, clumsily introducing myself again and again until I had a small circle of friends” (266). She drank red wine for the first time and discarded her “high-necked blouses and began to wear more fashionable cuts – fitted, often sleeveless, with less restrictive necklines” (266; 267). Socializing, drinking wine, and adopting a new, less modest wardrobe were once unthinkable within the strict moral framework of her upbringing. These actions signify a deliberate rejection of the prohibitions that once governed her life. More than simple rebellion, these examples mark moments of self-directed transformation and intentional experimentation, as she actively negotiates new possibilities for her identity.

Through her education, Tara develops the language and critical framework necessary to articulate the hypocrisies, inconsistencies, and oppressive aspects of her upbringing. This intellectual growth enables her to better understand her experiences, reconcile her identity, and navigate the world with a greater sense of self-awareness and acceptance. Throughout childhood and adolescence, Tara internalized the beliefs and attitudes preached by Gene and Shawn, generating an internalized script that shaped her consciousness. Westover writes, “That voice had many timbres, many tones. Sometimes it was my father's voice; more often it was my own”

(259). This comment is refreshingly self-aware, as Tara identifies the cognitive influences shaping her thoughts. She understands that she has so thoroughly internalized his voice that it becomes part of her own. Nonetheless, by identifying the origin of these thoughts as her father's, she exposes them as external constructs rather than inherent truths. This awareness is a crucial step in unlearning and renegotiating her internal narrative—a process akin to a popular psychological tool, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), wherein recognizing and challenging ingrained thought patterns is foundational for change. This short quotation captures how Tara begins to dismantle the internalized script of her upbringing.

To revise this learned script from her upbringing, Tara utilizes a new resource, her education. When Tara encounters the complex language of her Cambridge peers, including terms like "hegemonic masculinity" and "second-wave feminism," she recognizes the significant gaps in her own understanding and turns to the library to educate herself (258). In this quest, she stumbles upon the works of John Stuart Mill, which, for the first time, give her "a vocabulary for the uneasiness [she'd] felt since childhood" (259). This moment illustrates how education opens up new perspectives, allowing individuals to expand their vocabulary and conception of the world and themselves. For Tara, encountering Mill's ideas provides representation for feelings she couldn't previously articulate, demonstrating how education directly contributes to her personal identity transformation. Comparative literature scholar Michael Hanne discusses the power of storytelling, noting that narratives are "primary cognitive instruments" that help individuals make sense of their experiences and reconstruct their identities (Hanne, 1994, 8). Although Hanne focuses on fiction, his insights apply broadly to the transformative power of education, new information or perspectives, and storytelling, all of which are central to Tara's journey. Tara's engagement with Mill's ideas exemplifies this process, as she finds language for her unease.

Thus, when Tara reads Mill's assertion that "of the nature of women, nothing final can be known," Mill's words offer her a new understanding of womanhood, one that is not fixed or defined by prescribed roles but open to interpretation and self-determination (259). Mill's insight is comforting and liberating because his recognition of the absence of a singular "right" way to be a woman gives Tara the freedom to exist beyond the limitations imposed on her and to define herself on her own terms. Mill's perspective on the nature of women contrasts sharply with her father's rigid belief that a woman's essence is fixed and universal, most notably defined by motherhood and submission to men. For Tara, this moment of intellectual awakening affirms her yearning for knowledge and personal autonomy, providing the language for her to rewrite her identity. As Hanne argues, storytelling and education do not merely help us acquire information but, more significantly, help us to find the language and conceptual tools to understand new perspectives, challenge ingrained beliefs, and envision new possibilities for oneself (Hanne, 1994). Tara's journey exemplifies this transformative power, as education enables her to dismantle the internalized script dominated by her father's voice and reclaim her agency, ultimately rewriting her identity on her own terms.

Only a few pages later on a trip to Rome with friends from Cambridge, Tara finds herself fully present, engaged in her vibrant travels and the group intellectual discourse. During a picnic on the grounds of the Villa Borghese, "someone said something about Hobbes, and without thinking I recited a line from Mill" (268). Tara's effortless contribution marks a shift: Tara is no longer an outsider struggling to decode the academic world around her but rather is an active participant, integrated into the intellectual culture she once found intimidating and inaccessible.

In fact, this positive momentum of cultural immersion and effortless academic integration persist as Tara develops a newfound confidence in engaging with intellectual traditions and integrating them into her real life. In Rome, she learns to approach history with both humility

and critical thought, articulating, “I could admire the past without being silenced by it” (269). This new, empowered perspective extends into her academic pursuits, particularly in her master’s research, where she examines the intellectual influence of Mormonism on nineteenth-century philosophers. Revisiting the letters of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, she recognizes a shift in her approach: “As a child I’d read those letters as an act of worship; now I read them with different eyes, not the eyes of a critic, but also not the eyes of a disciple…. It felt like a radical act” (280). No longer bound by unquestioning reverence towards these materials, Tara questions, navigates, and recontextualizes the contents of the faith she was raised on with a new historical context, intellectual rigor, and personal agency.

Through deliberate steps to experiment with new experiences and engage with new ideas, Tara makes significant progress in rewriting the internalized script of her upbringing. Her education provides the language and critical framework necessary to challenge the oppressive beliefs she once accepted as truth, enabling her to articulate her unease and envision new possibilities for herself. This process of identity reconstruction is dynamic and gradual, driven by her exposure to alternative perspectives and her growing intellectual confidence. Furthermore, Tara’s journey illustrates how education serves as a transformative tool, empowering individuals to question ingrained beliefs, expose themselves to new perspectives, and construct their own realities. By finding a sense of belonging in Cambridge, engaging in meaningful academic projects, and culturally assimilating, Tara takes significant strides toward autonomy and self-definition.

## Mirage

After her trip to Rome, Tara returns to Cambridge, eager to respond to a message from Drew. Tara excitedly opens her inbox where she also discovers a message from her sister,

Audrey. Out of the blue, Audrey's email expresses guilt for not stopping Shawn's behavior towards Tara when they were younger, explaining that "she'd wanted to tell Mother, to ask for help, but she'd thought Mother wouldn't believe her" given Faye had called Audrey's nightmares related to Shawn's real-life torments as "false" and "impossible" (269). Tara agrees to join Audrey in confronting their parents about Shawn's violence with the hope of creating an action plan to help him change. From an author's standpoint, Westover reflects on this in a poignant realization: "as long as we had never asked, it was possible to believe that they would help" (270). The use of the past perfect tense bleakly foreshadows the inevitable and emphasizes the fragile, contingent nature of this hope, suggesting that their hope for change was sustained only by the uncertainty of never having tested it.

After the email exchange between Audrey and Tara, Audrey shares Tara's message with Faye, who reaches out to Tara. In their online conversation, Faye legitimizes the abuse Tara endured, expressing regret for her past inaction and acknowledging how she shifted blame onto Tara (270). Faye insists she will no longer be bullied by Gene and suggests they can "rewrite the story" to spare Shawn's wife, Emily, from his abuse (271). The conversation culminates in Faye's powerful apology: "You were my child. I should have protected you" (271). These exchanges become the foundational evidence for Tara's subsequent revisionism. For the first time, Faye claims responsibility for her failures, and Tara feels validated, loved, and seen—even though nothing concrete has changed.

In a follow-up phone call, Faye assures Tara, "It's being dealt with…I told your father what you and your sister said. Shawn will get help" (272). This assurance ignites a significant shift in Tara's self-perception as she "fashioned a new history" for herself (273). Tara writes, "the future could be different from the past. Even the past could be different from the past, because my memories could change: I no longer remembered Mother listening in the kitchen

while Shawn pinned me to the floor" (272). The first sentence captures Tara's hope for transformation, while the second offers a retrospective critique of her former self—suggesting that, at this point in her life, she was engaging in a form of purposeful revisionism. While it is scientifically accurate that human memory is fallible and constantly subject to slight revisions over time, Tara acknowledges this storytelling "wasn't the truth exactly, but it was true in a larger sense: true to what would be, in the future, now that everything had changed for the better. Now that Mother had found her strength" (O'Keane, 2021, 205, 207-208; Westover, 273). Tara understood these memories were reshaped in a way that absolved her mother of responsibility and cast her family in a more positive, hopeful light. In doing so, she heavily revised her narrative, constructing a version of past events where Faye was not the mother who had repeatedly failed to intervene against Shawn's violence, and one that projected her hope of a transformed family dynamic. Moreover, Faye's validation also alters how Tara shares her life story, specifically, embracing her identity proudly at Cambridge and shedding the shame she long held about her family, "for the first time in my life I talked openly about where I'd come from" (272).

This process reflects psychologist Dan McAdams's observation that "people select and interpret certain memories as self-defining, providing them with privileged status in the life story" (McAdams, 2001, 111). Tara's selective reinterpretation of her past is both a conscious act of alteration and omission and a deliberate effort to selectively integrate her experiences into a coherent, meaningful narrative that melds with her present hopes. McAdams notes that life stories are based on biographical facts, however, "people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences," (McAdams, 2001, 10 1). In summation, Faye's validation of Tara's childhood experiences prompts Tara to reinterpret her past and begin rewriting the story

of her family, projecting hope onto their future. At the same time, this exchange sets Tara up for devastating disillusionment, as she will confront the painful reality that her family's dynamics remain unchanged.

## Disenchantment

Disenchantment, a term rooted in sociology and philosophy, describes the unraveling of deeply held beliefs, often leading to psychological and existential distress. In his work with ex-Latter-day Saints, medical and religious scholar, Dr. Edward Brooks, identifies disenchantment in the distinct religious context of the narratives of ex-Latter-day Saints. Again, Brooks defines this type of distress as psycho-existential trauma, a condition arising from a 'world collapse' (Brooks, 2020, 194). A world collapse describes the moment when an individual's constructed reality crumbles resulting in a "unique form of ontological insecurity and existential distress" (Brooks, 194). While disenchantment is often discussed in the context of losing faith in religious frameworks, Tara's experience reflects disenchantment more broadly, encompassing the shattering of deeply held beliefs—both religious and familial—and the emotional fallout of severed ideological ties.

Although Tara's deconversion has unfolded gradually, two inflection points within this journey mark unprecedented, more consequential ruptures. The first rupture most closely aligns with the term 'disenchantment.' In this instance, Tara confronts her parents about Shawn threats against Audrey's and her lives, only to be met with their denial in the form of a distorted, faux-engineered perception of reality. The second, more definitive rupture, occurs during her parents' visit to Harvard when Gene attempts to reconvert her. In the aftermath, Tara spirals into a mental breakdown. These moments fracture Tara's sense of belonging, shatter her worldview, and force her to reckon with the irreconcilable gap between her family's reality and her own. Her story echoes broader research conducted on the narratives of disenchantment, setting the stage for her

eventual reconstruction. At these inflection points, Tara experiences the profound fear of losing her family entirely and being ostracized as their ideological differences reach an irreparable breaking point—two roads now too foreign and contradictory to converge.

Thus, the memoirs' blazing psychic struggle[3] comes into sharp focus—Tara must decide whether to surrender to her family's version of reality or preserve the integrity of her own mind, even at the cost of severing ties. Yet, this is not truly a decision she makes; it is an unavoidable outcome. She cannot claim narratives she cannot rationalize or understand. She chooses the truth of her own experience, rather than yielding to a reality constructed by others.

## First Rupture

About a year after the email correspondences with Faye and Audrey, Tara returns to Buck's Peak. On a night out with Shawn, he told Tara, "Audrey is a lying piece of shit…I'd put a bullet in her head…but I don't want to waste a good bullet on a worthless bitch" (283). Faced with this outburst, Tara chooses silence and inaction, a survival tactic she has long relied on with Shawn. But, after returning home that night, Tara decides to act, passing along the information to her father (284). Predictably, Gene demands evidence and denies the legitimacy of Tara's claims about Shawn. Desperate to validate her experience and attempting to cue in her mother to affirm what Faye acknowledged in their email exchange, Tara reminds them that both he and Mother have witnessed Shawn's behavior. When Faye remains quiet, Tara realizes that "she would not speak, that she would sit there and say nothing, that I was alone" (285). While Faye may have wished for change, her allyship dissolves under the hegemony of Gene's authority demonstrating that Tara stands alone in her fight. When in a room with a Westover man, her mother remains a

[3] I borrow this term coined by writer Mary Karr in her book *The Art of Memoir*. The blazing psychic struggle of a memoir references the personal inner conflict that drives a compelling, meaningful narrative.

passive bystander, choosing silence over defending her daughter; Faye cannot and will not stand beside her (289).

Retreating to the bathroom where Shawn had abused her throughout her adolescence, she attempts to collect herself: “I stopped the bawling using the old methods: staring my face down in the mirror and berating it for every tear. It was such a familiar process, that in doing it I shattered the illusion I’d been building so carefully for the past year. The fake past, the fake future, both gone” (285). Tara had revised her childhood narratives, projecting her parents and family in a more benevolent light, making her family seem redeemable and capable of significant changes because of Faye’s validation. At this moment, Tara confronts the painful truth: the future she had envisioned, a family capable of change, was never real or realistic. This hope had been built on nothing more than empty promises, and her family’s fate remains unchanged; she is physically right back where she had been as a teenager, even going as far as to use the same coping strategies to calm down. Alongside this illusion shattering, though, Tara experiences a moment of lucidity and self-determination. Instead of further relapsing into her past survival tendencies, Tara affirms an agentic, internal conviction “that a life is not a thing unalterable” (286).

After unsuccessfully advocating for Audrey’s safety, Tara cuts her home visit short and returns to school. Guilt grips her in the following weeks as she convinces herself that her actions alone fractured the family. But as time passes, she begins to see that she did not solely cause the damage that night: her mother never followed through on the promises in her email, her father never promised to help, and Shawn remained unchallenged. Faye’s reassurances, which once comforted Tara and emboldened her newfound sense of self, vanished under Gene’s dissent, exposing Faye’s words as hollow and powerless (289).

Months later while studying at Cambridge, Shawn's violent threats escalate to death threats toward Tara (291). Desperate for support and protection, Tara turns to her parents, who, instead, validate Shawn's actions. They position Tara as the true threat, claiming her "rage was a real danger," despite never having acted out that night (291). Further reinforcing the long-standing pattern of denial, Gene dismisses Tara as "hysterical," claiming she had "thrown thoughtless accusations," and had an "obviously untrustworthy memory" (291). Gene's choice of words and narrative reconstruction is clearly gendered—Tara is cast as the irrational, unstable woman whose emotions distort reality, while Shawn, the older male who aligns more closely with Gene's beliefs and lifestyle, remains unquestioned. In a perverse manipulation of reality and logic, Gene constructs the idea of Tara's emotional instability, volatility, and danger as central to justifying Shawn's actions.

But the tipping point for Tara arrives when Faye ups the ante on the accusations, making an unfathomable comparison, claiming that Tara's "anger that night… was twice as dangerous as Shawn has ever been" (292). In hindsight, the reader understands the full weight of this statement: that same night, Shawn had brutally slaughtered the family dog, Diego, with the bloodied knife he later handed Tara. With ease, her mother equates a preposterously faux interpretation of Tara's emotions with Shawn's brutality. The demonization of a woman's emotions, deemed more dangerous than a man who slaughters animals and terrorizes his siblings, reveals the depth of Gene and Faye's complicity and warped worldview. They have rewritten the family narrative entirely, casting Tara as the villain and the true source of violence and transgression, leaving the real danger, Shawn's cruelty, unquestioned, protected, and justified.

Examining other disenchantment narratives offers a helpful, supplemental lens for understanding Tara's experience, as it reveals recurring patterns in the psychological toll of deconversion and the immense personal cost of choosing self-determination over familial

belonging. Through these narratives, we can better grasp the depth of Tara's internal conflict, not as an isolated struggle, but as part of a broader, deeply human reckoning with belief, identity, and autonomy. For Tara, after receiving Faye's vilifying accusation, she describes her disorientation, "Reality became fluid. The ground gave way beneath my feet, dragging me downward, spinning fast, like sand rushing through a hole in the bottom of the universe" (292). The similarities between Tara's written description and the experiences of other disenchantment narratives are striking. In Brooks' (2020) study on disenchantment, ex-Mormons shared responses through semi-structured interviews; several respondents described their psychological worldview collapse in the following terms: the world "crumbling beneath my feet," that "nothing seem[ed] real," the world having "literally shook," and "the world I thought I had been living in was all make believe" (Brooks, 2020 198). Akin to other individuals' descriptions of experiencing disenchantment, Tara's sense of reality collapses as she listens to the nonsensical narrative constructed by her mother about her and Shawn's behaviors.

In the same Brooks disenchantment study (2020), participants described their psychological state as feeling "meaningless," like they were "waking up from a dream," or "floating" (Brooks, 2020, 198). After this interaction with her parents, Tara Westover's narrative demonstrates similar sentiments, experiencing a period of detachment from daily life. For example, she writes "I had won a visiting fellowship to Harvard. I don't think I have ever received a piece of news with more indifference… I couldn't summon the fervor" (293). Even as she reaches extraordinary milestones, her sense of meaning erodes, highlighting the emotional toll of her world collapse.

Tara's narrative description of this first major breaking point also aligns with Fazzino's (2014) categorized definition of deconversion narratives. Fazzino argues that deconversion narratives often include an ambiguous destination or the experiencing of a liminal space

(Fazzino, 2014, 252). Occupying this liminal state, Tara describes her debilitating self-doubt and inability to maintain a cohesive, coherent narrative about herself, at one point even questioning her own sanity (294). She writes that she relied "on Drew to tell me the facts of our lives" and thought that "the delusion was deeper, in the core of my mind" as if to suggest her essence is a falsity or that she is fundamentally incapable of accurately interpreting reality or trusting her perceptions.

The last component of this first major breaking point is the existential destabilization Tara experiences when she realizes the extent to which this faux narrative fuels further ostracization from her family, specifically, her former ally, Audrey. While on a grant to study in Paris, Tara receives a letter from Audrey. Audrey condemns Tara as a dangerous, corrupted agent of Satan. Audrey severs their relationship by declaring Tara unwelcome in her home and forbidding Tara from contacting her without supervision (293). Tara writes, "When I lost my sister, I lost my family" (293). This line is the final nail in the coffin of the illusion that the Westover women would confront Shawn's violence and catalyze change within their family. Tara had originally spoken up to her parents because of Audrey's first email, acting on the shared interest between the women of the family. That illusion crumbles as both Faye and Audrey ultimately submit to the dominant forces governing their family. Upon reading Audrey's accusatory letter, Tara laughs out loud from the absurdity, describing the situation as "perverse" when she realizes the irony: "a few months before, Audrey had said that Shawn should be supervised around children. Now, after our efforts, the one who would be supervised was me" (293). The very person who sought to protect their family from real harm has become the danger. This reversal delegitimizes and demonizes Tara within the family, easily typecasting her as the out-group member corrupted and poisoned by outside influences and disrupting the status quo.

Furthermore, the situation with Audrey accelerates the collapse of Tara's personal, social, and relational world at home, insofar as her family's influence can reach. Before, Tara's physical distance at school provided a degree of separation, but when she took action to attempt to hold Shawn accountable, the family's gaze shifted to Tara as the problem. She is recast as the scapegoat, absorbing the consequences of disrupting the status quo. This mirrors the same patriarchal logic that justified the abuse Tara endured in childhood where the responsibility for harm was inverted onto her. Tara realizes that there was "little hope of overpowering the history my father and sister were creating for me," soon, her brothers, extended kin, and those associated with her home valley will know her through the lens of her family's defamatory narrative (293). This social isolation process mirrors common patterns carried out against individuals who choose to depart from other high-cost environments. For example, in *Leaving the Witness*, former Jehovah's Witness missionary Amber Scorah describes how her community responded when she confessed to the Elders that she encouraged a pupil to question the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Despite having an extensive laundry list of long-standing disagreements with the religion of which she did not share—including her rejection of life-threatening practices like refusing blood transfusions and her disillusionment with the mandated missionary role, deeming it nothing greater than being a salesperson—Scorah's self-admitted small act of encouraging critical thinking in a pupil was enough to justify immediate ostracization by the Elders. "Word traveled fast, underground," she writes, friends stopped visiting her to avoid association with an apostate, and relatives cut her off entirely (Scorah, 2019, 207). Similarly in another context, scholar Roni Berger conducted in-depth interviews with 19 men and women who left Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities to live in the modern world. Berger documented their departure stories which included anecdotes about how their former community members treated them; these individuals faced a range of reactions: tepid acceptance, efforts to reconvert or convince

the individual to stay, completely being cut off and excommunicated, receiving hate mail, and being the subject of negative rumors within the community (Berger, 2015). These case studies exemplify how high-cost groups manipulate social dynamics to silence dissent, demonize alternative ways of life, and preserve their worldview, a pattern that resonates deeply with Tara's experience of being scapegoated and defamed by her family.

This first major breaking point in Tara Westover's deconversion narrative illustrates the existential fallout of her realization that her family cannot and will not change—a hope she had clung to for years. The shattering of this illusion reveals with undeniable clarity that her family's dynamics are entrenched in ideological rigidity and patriarchal control. Yet, within this collapse, Tara also experiences a moment of personal clarity: she recognizes herself as a changed woman, no longer bound by the predetermined path her family had scripted for her. This realization, encapsulated in her affirmation that "a life is not a thing unalterable," underscores her growing sense of agency and autonomy. The subsequent fallout with Faye, Gene, and Audrey as the family narrative shifts to scapegoat and demonize her, thrusts Tara into a state of ontological distress. Ultimately, this first breaking point solidifies her separation from her past self, reveals the unchanging nature of her family's beliefs, and forces her to forge her own path forward.

## Second Rupture - Final Reconversion Attempts

As a visiting fellow at Harvard, Tara immerses herself fully in academic life, balancing PhD work, an ambitious, interesting course load, and co-curricular activities such as conversational French and charcoal sketching. However, Tara's flourishing is quickly eclipsed by a message from her parents announcing that they are coming to visit her. When they arrive, Tara quickly realizes their mission includes a carefully orchestrated intervention: "While they plotted how to reconvert me, I plotted how to let them. I was ready to yield, even if it meant an

exorcism" (300). Tara envisions the possibility of belonging again, of shedding the burden of estrangement. Despite major progress in building an independent life, Tara still longs to be accepted back into her family.

During their visit, Tara accompanies her parents to a sacred Mormon site where God is believed to have appeared to the prophet Joseph Smith in his First Vision. At the site, Gene reverently admires the temple, his fingers grazing its surface. Tara watches him, but the depth of their ideological divide is evident, "My father and I looked at the temple. He saw God; I saw granite. We looked at each other. He saw a woman damned; I saw an unhinged old man, literally disfigured by his beliefs" (300). This passage encapsulates the fundamental misalignment of Tara and Gene's realities. The first half of the quotation underscores her disbelief—the temple holds no sacred power for her, no vestiges of the divine. The second half, a natural consequence of this fracture, illustrates how they now perceive one another. To Gene, her rejection of faith renders her spiritually lost.

A week passes, and on their final night together, Gene offers Tara a priesthood blessing, an ordinance in Mormonism believed to channel God's power to guide, heal, and expel evil spirits (302). In this moment, the choice before her crystallizes: to accept the blessing is to return, to be redeemed, to cleanse herself of corruption. Tara writes, "All I had to do was yield, and in five minutes it would be over. I heard myself say no" (302). Tara does not simply refuse, she *hears* herself refuse, as if the decision bypasses conscious thought entirely, her body acting on behalf of a self that has, despite longing for reconciliation, refuses to submit. A deep part of her, beneath her desperate desire to accept her father's blessings, recognizes the truth of her own reality and speaks for her. Fearing the consequences of her defiance, Gene, again, asks for her conversion. When Tara refuses for the last time, Gene and Faye hastily pack up their belongings

to return home saying, “Better to sleep on a bench than with the devil” solidifying Tara’s position in their eyes, an apostate, a threat to their faith, and a danger to their family.

## Tara’s Refusal to Deny Self-Creation

Throughout their visit, Tara entertained the possibility of reconversion, not out of renewed faith, but out of a longing to reclaim her family. Despite this, when the consequential moments arrive, she cannot bring herself to surrender. Tara realizes her father’s request is not about religious recommitment or belief in God, it is something far more fundamental and consequential. Between Gene’s final request and Tara’s ultimate rejection, Tara realizes with piercing clarity the stakes of Gene’s plea, “if I yielded now, I would lose custody of my own mind,” (304). She knows this fact because she’s already lived in Gene’s reality which left no room for alternative opinions, lifestyles, nor intellectual and personal agency. She knows this fact because she has witnessed how easily reality can be rewritten given her experience with Audrey, Shawn, and Faye.

Gene’s power does not come merely from his adherence to faith but from his ability to construct and enforce a version of reality that serves his authority. It is established in psychology that “the past is not given but reconstructed” through fallible memories and retellings (Nelson & Fivush, 2020, 88). However, Gene is not simply misremembering; he is creating an entirely new narrative, one that he insists upon so forcefully that it becomes his reality which he transmits to his family. Whether Gene’s revisionist storytelling stems from attempting to relieve cognitive dissonance, a need to maintain control, or a refusal to acknowledge uncomfortable truths, the reasoning matters less than its effect: Tara is being asked to abandon her understanding of the world and adopt Gene’s perspective without question.

The significance of narrative identity becomes abundantly clear in understanding Tara's journey. Narrative identity plays a critical role in shaping how individuals understand themselves, their relationships, and the world around them. At its core, narrative identity is the "internalized, evolving story that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity" (Adler, 2012, 367). It is a process of selecting, interpreting, and co-creating the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences, integrating them into a cohesive sense of self. These narratives are far from static; they evolve with new insights, interactions, and circumstances, often reshaping as we grow and change over time (McAdams, 2018, 361; Nelson & Fivush, 2020, 85). Tara's understanding of herself and the world has been shaped by years of education and personal discovery, built on the freedom to "evaluate ideas and histories from many perspectives" (304). This stands in stark contrast to Gene's rigid, survivalist, fundamentalist perspective which demands adherence to a single narrative.

This clash of narratives highlights the stakes of Tara's actions. Accepting Gene's "blessing" offers familial acceptance; however, it would also require readopting his narratives, returning to the force from which she fought so desperately to escape. Tara recognizes what now shapes her narrative: "I wanted to see and experience more truths than those given to me," "to construct my own mind," and "to evaluate ideas and histories from many perspectives" (304). Tara sees her narrative as one that is ever-evolving, informed by her own experiences and broader, more diverse perspectives. Whereas Gene vehemently believes in a single, definitive interpretation and requires those around him, under the guise of divine instruction, to adhere to his worldview. She understands, with devastating clarity, that "what my father wanted to cast from me wasn't a demon: it was me" (304). Gene's request is not about faith—it is about authoritarian control over the narratives that define who she is. If Tara accepts, she relinquishes

the agency that allows her to author her own life, in essence, erasing her autonomous self. Ultimately, the cost is too great. And so, for the final time, she refuses.

In the following pages, Tara describes the consequential mental breakdown which ensued. She describes dropping out of her co-curricular activities, watching TV for eighteen to twenty hours a week, being unable to read or comprehend her studies, and verging on failing her PhD program (307). She experiences nightmares related to home life so disorienting that she would wake up "standing in the middle of Oxford Street, half a block from my dorm room" (306). She concludes that she must have made a mistake in denying her father's blessings, which prompts her to buy a plane ticket home.

This section marks the second and definitive breaking point in Tara Westover's deconversion narrative, as she rejects her father's blessing and, by extension, his authority over her identity. Tara's realization that yielding to Gene would mean "losing custody of [her] own mind" captures the stakes of her decision: to accept his worldview would be to erase herself, surrendering the agency and intellectual freedom she has fought to claim (304). Her refusal highlights the irreconcilable divide between Gene's rigid, authoritarian narrative and Tara's evolving, self-authored identity, shaped by education and a multiplicity of perspectives. This breaking point crystallizes Tara's understanding that her family's narrative is fundamentally incompatible with hers. The psychological toll of this consequential exchange, evident in her subsequent mental breakdown, underscores the devastating effect of her deconversion and separation from her family.

## Narrative Resolution

In order to move forward, Tara must grapple with her past, present, and future. She seeks to reconcile her identity within the context of the family she was raised in, but no longer

welcome in, while acknowledging the truth of her personal growth. To meaningfully proceed without returning to the ontological distress or mental breakdowns she previously experienced, she must construct a new narrative identity, one that integrates multiple conflicting truths into a cohesive understanding of herself. This process reflects the concept of narrative identity, defined as "a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, 233). In the final chapters of her memoir, Westover shares the newly negotiated stories about her childhood, home, and family. These narratives do not simplify or eliminate the complexity of her experiences; instead, they allow her to hold space for both the pain and love she feels for her family and upbringing, without compromising her present sense of self.

While Tara's journey could be interpreted as a redemptive sequence—a narrative framework in which negative experiences are reframed to lead to positive outcomes—her greater achievement lies in her ability to embrace the complexity of her past and present without reducing it to a tidy, redemptive arc (McAdams & McLean, 2013, 234). She integrates multiple perspectives into an authentic, cohesive narrative that links her past, present, and future. This resolution comes in the form of the narratives Tara constructs about her father, mother, home, and, ultimately, her own selfhood.

## Gene: the father who raised her

Tara's final interaction with Gene encapsulates the nature of their relationship. When Gene gives her a stiff hug and says, "I love you, you know that?" Tara responds simply, "I do. That has never been the issue" (328). This dialogue exchange aptly represents their broader relationship dynamic and the reason for their diverging paths. Love was never the issue; it was Gene's inability to recognize the repercussions of his rigid, controlling, fundamentalist,

survivalist beliefs. Tara reaches the point where she chooses not to endure its consequences any longer.

Tara finds the language to articulate what separated her from her father, reflecting, “What has come between me and my father is more than time or distance. It is a change in the self. I am not the child my father raised, but he is the father who raised her” (328). The difference between them is not merely circumstantial but existential. Tara is not the person Gene molded, and his ideology no longer governs her; yet, he remains the father who raised her. Tara acknowledges this paradox, recognizing her transformation and the inescapable fact of their relationship. In accepting this truth, Tara embraces the whole self she has constructed—one shaped by Buck’s Peak, her father, and simultaneously, one shaped by her education, experiences, and the hard-won freedom to define her own reality.

## Faye: A wife’s unrelenting loyalty

When Tara returns home unannounced and unexpectedly, Faye warmly greets her and insists on putting biscuits and gravy in the oven. Tara uses the family computer to communicate with Drew when she stumbles upon email exchanges between Faye and Shawn’s ex-girlfriend, Erin, with whom Tara had previously corresponded regarding Shawn’s abuse. Tara finds confirmation that Faye shared Gene’s vision, that “she believed the devil had a hold of me, that I was dangerous” (309). Further reading through the messages confirmed the extent to which the family had defamed Tara within the immediate community; Erin expressed that she understood Tara was “lost without faith” and “building her life on fear” (310).

When Tara later reaches out to see Faye individually, her mother’s position is made plain: “I could see her and my father, or I would never see her again” (309). Though not explicitly stated, it is likely that Faye, like Audrey, was warned not to speak with Tara

unsupervised. Whether spoken or unspoken, Tara understands that her mother's allegiance to Gene and his worldview will always take precedence over her relationship with her daughter.

## Familial Pattern of Resisting Change & Finding Belonging Elsewhere

Soon after entering her home, she arrives at a sobering conclusion: "I had come to reclaim that life, to save it. But there was nothing here to save, nothing to grasp. There was only shifting sand, shifting loyalties, shifting histories" (310). "Shifting loyalties" draw reference to Faye and Audrey's fleeting, wavering solidarity. "Shifting histories" nod to Gene and Shawn's numerous revisions that negated women's subjugation time and time again. It also likely alludes to Tara's own attempts to idealize her family, imagining them as changed or redeemable. Regardless of who is revising the narrative, the point remains: within the family, the integrity of stories or lived experiences matters little because storytelling is wielded as a tool to protect the powerful, obscure uncomfortable truths, and reinforce their rigid worldview or ideology.

Tara further reflects that all that was left of her life at home was "a puzzle whose rules I would never understand, because they were not rules at all but a kind of cage meant to enclose me. I could stay, and search for what had been home, or I could go, now, before the walls shifted and the way out was shut" (310). Tara's new narrative of home reveals there is nothing left for her to reclaim. The place where she sought to find wholeness, she now sees as a volatile, unstable environment that threatens to trap her once more. The so-called "rules" of her upbringing were tools of control, designed to bind her to the demands and expectations of others. There's a palpable sense of urgency in her writing, as if she recognizes that this is her small window of time to make the ultimate decision to walk away. By choosing to leave, Tara rejects the cage of her upbringing and steps into a future defined by her own terms, free from the shifting sands, loyalties, and histories of her past.

Tara's ostracization isn't an anomaly but a larger pattern within a family that demands loyalty. The cycle of control and the threat of exile repeats itself across family members. In the final chapters of the memoir, Tara shares Tyler's attempt to confront Gene about Shawn's abuse, which results in the same ultimatum given to Audrey: to pronounce Tara as possessed and dangerous or to be disowned (315). Unlike Audrey, Tyler refuses. Tara includes a paraphrased version of a note sent by Tyler who articulates how the family's resistance to change is structural, not personal: "*our parents are held down by chains of abuse, manipulation, and control... They see change as dangerous and will exile anyone who asks for it*" (316, italics in original). Tyler describes this as "a perverted idea of family loyalty," reinforcing Tara's realization that reconciliation of their vastly different beliefs was never a feasible option (316). Reinforced by Tyler's allyship, Tara understands her family unit as unchangeable.

Having lost her familial support system, Tara turns to new relationships. With Tyler and his wife, she finds unwavering support, a contrast to the conditional acceptance her parents offered. She also forms connections with others who have experienced Gene's rigid control, such as Angie, a former midwife fired by Gene. Tara also begins to reinterpret past relationships, particularly her understanding of her maternal family. She realizes that "my perception of [Grandma-over-in-town] had been distorted because I'd been looking at her through my father's harsh lens" (325). This shift reinforces the prevailing change: her father's narrative no longer dictates her understanding of the world, and she is finally at the point where she has the freedom to choose her own truths.

## Tara's new self-concept

As Tara concludes her memoir, she reckons with its central dilemmas: identity autonomy, education, and her life story. In a narrative dominated by trauma, violence, danger, and heart-wrenching emotion, Westover crafts an ending that is agentic and hopeful. She writes, "you

could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education" (329). By naming her journey an education, she reclaims her own narrative. What others might call betrayal, she reframes as growth. What some might see as loss, she defines as learning. Tara's story does not end in despair but in agency. She chooses her own mind, her own truth, and her own life, leaving the reader to ponder selfhood as an ongoing, ever-evolving human experience. This final act of self-definition is Tara's ultimate triumph, as she steps into a future with limitless possibilities of her own making.

# Conclusion

Tara Westover's narrative began dominated by survivalism, an idiosyncratic form of fundamentalism authored by her father, the rejection of education, and deference to the beliefs and identities projected onto her by others. Westover's gradual journey and experiences enabled her to author an adulthood with revised beliefs, intellectual growth, inevitable disaffiliation from her family, and self-definition. Chapter 1 examined how Tara's early self-concept was shaped by her family's core beliefs, which positioned the outside world as dangerous and reinforced unwavering loyalty to familial authority. Chapter 2 highlighted the detrimental effects of patriarchal religious interpretations and teachings and Shawn's abuse on Tara's adolescent self-concept, emphasizing her struggle to shift from being defined by others to defining herself. Chapter 3 traced Tara's gradual disidentification with her family's worldview, a process marked by doubt, cognitive dissonance, moral reckoning, and emotional upheaval. Chapter 4 demonstrated how Tara reconstructed and renegotiated her identity through education, critical self-reflection, and narrative reconstruction, finding resolution within herself despite her estrangement from her family.

By engaging in meaning-making and constructing a narrative identity, Tara transforms her traumatic experiences into a story of resilience and growth, offering a powerful example of how individuals can navigate the challenges of high-cost upbringings and emerge with a stronger, more autonomous sense of self. Her resolution lies in embracing the complexity of her past and present and finding a way to hold space for both the pain and the love. By constructing a coherent narrative that integrates her past and present, Tara demonstrates how individuals can reconcile conflicting truths to achieve a unified yet multifaceted understanding of themselves.

Although Tara's journey is formidable and extraordinary, it reveals a broader truth: while we may not choose the circumstances we are born into, we all have the power to shape who we

become. This research offers a deeper understanding of the complex and often traumatic effects of high-cost upbringings on personal identity, as well as the ways individuals navigate and reshape their identities in response to these experiences. By studying Tara's story, we gain critical insights into the social, psychological, and emotional impacts of such environments, as well as the factors that enable individuals to leave, recover, and thrive. Fundamentalist groups, similar to the environment Tara was raised in, often isolate members from the outside world, restrict access to education, and deplete autonomy and agency. Stories like Tara Westover's provide insight into how power and control operate within these communities. They also demonstrate how individuals like Tara, despite the immense hardships, regain agency and rebuild their lives outside these forces. As Tara's story exemplifies, however**,** sometimes the best course of action isn't internal reform or finding common ground; despite the emotional and psychological challenges it entails, the best choice for the individual may be to depart and pursue their own path. After all, we cannot control the actions, decisions, or beliefs of others—only our own.

In Tara's journey, education plays the key role in her remaking of the self. In this memoir, education is far more than just the acquisition of knowledge—it is the key to her transformation, equipping her with the tools to question, analyze, and renegotiate the beliefs she was raised with while providing the language to articulate her experiences and the confidence to redefine her identity on her own terms. Through education, Tara not only gains intellectual insight but also achieves emotional growth, healing, and access to new opportunities beyond the expectations she was born into. Metaphorically, education becomes the lens through which she understands the fluidity and complexity of identity, empowering her to see herself as more than the roles prescribed by her family. In the holistic sense—extending far beyond the classroom or lecture hall—education embodies the principles of ongoing learning, critical thought,

reexamining, questioning, and doubting. Ultimately, Tara's journey demonstrates that education, in this expansive form, is a powerful tool for liberation, enabling individuals to break free from oppressive systems and construct their own narratives of self .

The broader applicability of this project lies in its illumination of universal processes—identity (re)construction, belief negotiation, and personal transformation. I selected memoir as the form of analysis because it provides extensive, rich documentation of lived experiences, offering a unique window into the psychological, emotional, and sociocultural challenges of departing high-cost upbringings. Tara's story, with its central theme of self-definition and its throughline of the transformative power of education, serves as a tool for liberation. This thesis addresses a gap in research by focusing on how education and narrative reconstruction empower individuals to break free from oppressive systems, contributing to academic discussions about trauma, belief, deconversion, and identity.

This research also demonstrates how we are creatures who build our own stories. The narratives we tell ourselves about who we are and the world around us shape our identities and interactions. The power of this lies in our ability to adapt, reinterpret, and rewrite these stories. Tara's journey reminds us that there is immense psychological potential in harnessing the narratives of our lives and the lives of those around us. Education, mentors, and her own determination guided Tara to craft a future beyond her upbringing, but the transformation came from within her. My hope is that readers will reflect on the influences shaping their own identities—familial beliefs, religious affiliations, political perspectives—and critically assess how these forces impact their lives. Constructing a self is the ongoing endeavor of a lifetime, and Tara's journey reminds us that education is a powerful tool for liberation, enabling individuals to break free from oppressive systems and construct their own narratives of self.

It must not be understated that Tara's story is extraordinary; it should not be mistaken or co-opted as the prevailing narrative about women who depart from high-cost upbringings. To do so would erase the lived reality that most in similar circumstances seldom attain such privileges or 'success' in traditional metrics, such as earning a PhD and publishing a New York Times bestseller. Tara's journey is extraordinary in her academic and literary achievements, the scale of the adversity she endured and overcame, and also, the numerous contingencies that enabled her to depart. My research identifies the psychological trajectory of constructing a self-authored identity, but this cognitive and emotional work was only possible alongside material and structural support. In other words, her departure hinged on many forces outside of her control: the bishop pressuring Tara to apply for government grants, excellent mentors who advocated for her schooling, and even the opportunity to study at BYU. Without these, even her fierce determination and clear intellectual aptitude would have been insufficient. At numerous points, she might have been forced back to Buck's Peak, not for lack of will or hard work, but for lack of options.

The tension between agency and structural power is at the heart of the matter. Although this thesis has focused on the psychological mechanisms of identity reconstruction—how education, critical reflection, and narrative autonomy empower self-reinvention—we must not let these aspects eclipse the systemic barriers that trap many individuals in high-cost upbringings. Tara's memoir offers a window into these oppressive systems: the patriarchal control, weaponized modesty, isolation, and deprivation of education that leave many unequipped to imagine, let alone pursue, alternatives. We must remember hers is just one voice among many, most of whom do not and will not have the ability to amplify their voices or simply live outside the constraints of their upbringings because their mobility is constrained by forces far beyond their control.

In noting these complexities, it does not diminish Tara's remarkable, formidable journey, but rather contextualizes it. To celebrate Tara's story without acknowledging this truth is to perpetuate the myth that mobility is solely a matter of personal will, grit, and hard work. Her story risks being co-opted into a bootstrap narrative, a "triumph over adversity" trope that obscures the systemic failures it exposes. As Westover herself resists becoming "Horatio Alger in someone's tear-filled homage to the American dream," we must resist framing her journey as a template for what others are expected to achieve (249). The lesson should not be that anyone can overcome similar circumstances with enough determination, but that no one should have to. Progress demands dismantling the systems that leave so many without transferable skills, social capital, or viable alternatives. Progress demands dismantling the systems that make her success an exception.

This tension between Tara's agency and structural barriers is further complicated by the memoir genre itself—a form that both reveals and reconstructs truth. Tara's story, like all memoirs, is a curated truth shaped by the pressures of genre, publishing, and the author's own meaning-making. While Westover's account is undeniably true to her perspective and lived experiences, it is not an unmediated record; it is a story altered by retrospection, memory's fallibility, literary craft, and the invisible hand of editors and market forces. The fact of mediation does not erase the story's value, meaning, and truth nor does it mean these experiences are not important or worth the time and effort of research. Additionally, the economic forces that shape such narratives cannot be ignored. A New York Times bestseller like *Educated* must balance authenticity with marketability, inevitably likely privileging certain themes (resilience, agency) over others (systemic intractability, unresolved pain). This is not to suggest Westover's portrayal is disingenuous, but to acknowledge that seldom does a memoir escape the gravitational pull of genre conventions and public consumption preferences.

Furthermore, Tara Westover's retroactive narration, a form of narrative superimposition and a compelling literary technique she uses throughout the memoir, such as reframing childhood passivity as "ignorance kept me silent," reveals how the act of memoir-writing can reconstruct fragmented lived experiences into a cohesive self and narrative. This is storytelling's alchemy. It is not deception nor a falsehood, but the necessary shaping of raw experience into narrative form—a process that mirrors autobiographical consciousness and narrative identity theory, which my research engages with. The difference lies in degree; while all people mediate their life stories, whether consciously or unconsciously, memoir demands a publishable arc, further distilling truth into structure.

For my research, this poses both opportunity and ethical responsibility. Memoir provides a genre form that grants readers unparalleled access to the lives of other people. In *Educated,* one of the many luxuries readers were granted was to bear witness to the psychological and emotional processes of identity reconstruction. Yet we must remember that the narrative is filtered through layers of mediation: the author's retelling, the publisher's pursuit of salability, and the audience's craving for a satisfying story. When analyzing Westover's journey, I've focused on the mechanisms of self-authorship her memoir depicts, but I acknowledge that these mechanisms are themselves impacted and influenced by many layers of narrative choices. I also hold space for what this inevitable mediation might exclude.

Memoir is an incredible medium to publish and amplify marginalized or underprivileged voices, but we must also recognize and resist forcing women, or any other person for that matter, into thinking that a successful or adaptive self-concept and life story must fit into digestible, linear, or marketable arcs. When we valorize only the stories that conform to tropes of redemption, we silence and delegitimize those stranded in the messiness of unresolved survival. We must not let individual exceptionalism obscure the innumerable realities of those left behind

or unequipped to share their stories. This is not to say Westover's memoir represents her experience in an untruthful way, but to treat her story as the blueprint or expectation for others to follow in their real lives would ignore the extraordinary contingencies that aided her departure and the genre's broader influence on the curation of her published narrative.

Ultimately, Tara's story is both unique – in the idiosyncrasies of her upbringing and her subsequent extraordinary educational accomplishments– and universal—a testament to the human capacity for growth and self-reinvention. None of us have a say in the circumstances we were born into, and by the nature of being human, each of us inherited a set of influences—biological, social, cultural, religious, political, and more. So, the question remains: What will you choose to do with the life you've been given, and who will you become?

**Bibliography**

"1 Corinthians 14:34-35 NIV - Women Should Remain Silent in the - Bible Gateway." n.d. Bible Gateway. Accessed March 18, 2025. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2014%3A34-35&version=NIV.

Adler, Jonathan M. 2012. "Living into the Story: Agency and Coherence in a Longitudinal Study of Narrative Identity Development and Mental Health over the Course of Psychotherapy." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102 (2): 367–89. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025289.

admin. 2015. “THE INCIDENT AT RUBY RIDGE - Criminal Defense Lawyer | McAlester | Wagner & Lynch.” April 25, 2015. https://seoklaw.com/the-incident-at-ruby-ridge/, https://seoklaw.com/the-incident-at-ruby-ridge/.

Almendros, Carmen, Jose Carrobles, Alvaro Carballeira, and Manuel Gámez-Guadix. 2009. “Reasons for Leaving: Psychological Abuse and Distress Reported by Former Members of Cultic Groups. Cultic Studies Review, 8(2), 111-138.” *Cultic Studies Review* 8 (January):111–38.

Aronson, Elliot, Samuel Sommers, and Timothy Wilson. 2019. *Social Psychology*. 10th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. n.d. “ERIK ERIKSON’S THEORY OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.”

Berger, Peter. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. First. Anchor.

Berger, Roni. 2015a. “Challenges and Coping Strategies in Leavening an Ultra-Orthodox Community.” Sage Journals. 2015. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325014565147.

———. 2015b. “Challenges and Coping Strategies in Leavening an Ultra-Orthodox Community.” *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice* 14 (5): 670–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325014565147.

“Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 13:24-30 - New King James Version.” n.d. Bible Gateway. Accessed December 13, 2024. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2013%3A24-30&version=NKJV.

Bradley, Martha S. 1990. “The Women of Fundamentalism: Short Creek, 1953.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (2): 14–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/45228076.

Brooks, E. Marshall. 2020. “The Disenchanted Self: Anthropological Notes on Existential Distress and Ontological Insecurity Among Ex-Mormons in Utah.” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 44 (2): 193–213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-019-09646-5.

Cooley, Charles. 1902. *Human Nature and the Social Order*.

“DOJR - IV. Specific Issues Investigated (Part C).” n.d. Accessed November 12, 2024. https://famous-trials.com/rubyridge/1126-marshalsefforts.

Epstein, Seymour. 1973. “The Self-Concept Revisited: Or a Theory of a Theory.” *American Psychologist* 28 (5): 404–16. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034679.

“Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women.” n.d. Accessed March 9, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838009334131.

Fazzino, Lori L. 2014. “Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (2): 249–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.903664.

Fenelon, Andrew, and Sabrina Danielsen. 2016a. “Leaving My Religion: Understanding the Relationship Between Religious Disaffiliation, Health, and Well-Being.” *Social Science Research* 57 (May):49–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.01.007.

———. 2016b. “Leaving My Religion: Understanding the Relationship Between Religious Disaffiliation, Health, and Well-Being.” *Social Science Research* 57 (May):49–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.01.007.

Fisher, Adam R. 2017a. “A Review and Conceptual Model of the Research on Doubt, Disaffiliation, and Related Religious Changes.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9 (4): 358–67. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000088.

———. 2017b. “A Review and Conceptual Model of the Research on Doubt, Disaffiliation, and Related Religious Changes.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9 (4): 358–67. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000088.
Fivush, Robyn. 2011. “The Development of Autobiographical Memory.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 62 (1): 559–82. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.121208.131702.
———. 2019. “Sociocultural Developmental Approaches to Autobiographical Memory.” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 33 (4): 489–97. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3512.
Fivush, Robyn, and Azriel Grysman. n.d. “Accuracy and Reconstruction in Autobiographical Memory: (Re)Consolidating Neuroscience and Sociocultural Developmental Approaches.” *WIREs Cognitive Science* n/a (n/a): e1620. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1620.
Fivush, Robyn, and Natalie Merrill. 2016. “An Ecological Systems Approach to Family Narratives.” *Memory Studies* 9 (3): 305–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016645264.
Foa, Edna B., and Diana Hearst-Ikeda. 1996. “Emotional Dissociation in Response to Trauma.” In *Handbook of Dissociation: Theoretical, Empirical, and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Larry K. Michelson and William J. Ray, 207–24. Boston, MA: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-0310-5_10.
Foley, Mary Ann. 2015. “Setting the Records Straight: Impossible Memories and the Persistence of Their Phenomenological Qualities.” *Review of General Psychology* 19 (3): 230–48. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000049.
Gore, Jonathan S., and Susan E. Cross. 2011. “Defining and Measuring Self-Concept Change.” *Psychological Studies* 56 (1): 135–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-011-0067-0.
Gull, Bethany. 2022. “‘We Are the Women Our Parents Warned Us Against:’ Identity Reconstruction and the Re-Imagining of Gender After High-Cost Religious Disaffiliation.” *Symbolic Interaction* 45 (1): 97–122. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.541.
Hartz, Gary W., and Henry C. Everett. 1989. “Fundamentalist Religion and Its Effect on Mental Health.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 28 (3): 207–17.
“Herbal Medicine Information | Mount Sinai - New York.” 2015. Mount Sinai. November 6, 2015. https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/treatment/herbal-medicine.
“———.” n.d. Mount Sinai Health System. Accessed December 12, 2024. https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/treatment/herbal-medicine.
“How Children Cope With Ongoing Threat and Trauma.” n.d. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Accessed March 7, 2025. https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/trauma/how-children-cope-with-ongoing-threat-and-trauma.
“ICSA Articles 2 - The Group Psychological Abuse Scale.” n.d. Accessed April 17, 2024. https://articles2.icsahome.com/articles/the-group-psychological-abuse-scale-csj-11-1-1994.
Ineichen, Bernard. 2019. “Losing the Rapture: Escaping from Fundamentalist Christian Belief.” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 22 (7): 661–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1557872.
Janet S. Belcove-Shalin. 1995. *New World Hasidim : Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*. SUNY Series in Anthropology and Judaic Studies. Albany: SUNY Press. https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=5754&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Jindra, Ines W., and Justin Lee. 2023. “Negotiating Leaving Religion, Family Relationships, and Identity: The Case of LDS Faith Transitions in Therapy.” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 51 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00822-y.
Karr, Mary. 2015. *The Art of Memoir*. Harper.
Kealy, David, Simon M. Rice, John S. Ogrodniczuk, and Alicia Spidel. 2018. “Childhood Trauma and Somatic Symptoms among Psychiatric Outpatients: Investigating the Role of Shame and Guilt.” *Psychiatry Research* 268 (October):169–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.06.072.
Keller, Barbara, Constantin Klein, Ralph W. Hood, and Heinz Streib. 2013. “Deconversion and Religious or Spiritual Transformation.” In *Constructs of Meaning and Religious Transformation*, edited by Herman Westerink, 1st ed., 119–40. Göttingen: V&R unipress. https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737000994.119.
Klein, Linda Kay. 2018. *Pure : Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*. First Touchstone hardcover edition. New York, NY: Touchstone, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Lahad, Mooli. 2017. “From Victim to Victor: The Development of the BASIC PH Model of Coping and Resiliency.” *Traumatology*, Resilience and Trauma: Expanding Definitions, Uses, and Contexts, 23 (1): 27–34. https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000105.
Lange, Paul A. M. van, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins. 2012. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*. London: Sage.
Lee, Karen Adriana, and Peter Madsen Gubi. 2019. “Breaking up with Jesus: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience of Deconversion from an Evangelical Christian Faith to Atheism.” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 22 (2): 171–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1623767.
Leine, Antra. 2021. “Identity Formation in Tara Westover’s Educated: Literature & Culture: Process, Interaction, Problems / Literatūra Un Kultūra: Process, Mijiedarbība, Problēmas.” *Literature & Culture: Process, Interaction, Problems / Literatūra Un Kultūra: Process, Mijiedarbība, Problēmas*, no. 21 (January), 93–101.
Mackelprang, Romel. 1994. “They Shall Be One Flesh: Sexuality and Contemporary Mormonism,” January. https://www.academia.edu/108966963/They_shall_be_one_flesh_Sexuality_and_contemporary_Mormonism.
McAdams, Dan P. 2001. “The Psychology of Life Stories.” *Review of General Psychology* 5 (2): 100–122. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100.
———. 2018. “Narrative Identity: What Is It? What Does It Do? How Do You Measure It?” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 37 (3): 359–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618756704.
McDonald, Deirdre. 2018. “Regulating Visibility: Secrecy and Surveillance in Insular Religious Communities.” *Surveillance & Society* 16 (4): 488–501. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i4.6773.
McLean, Kate C., Monisha Pasupathi, and Jennifer L. Pals. 2007. “Selves Creating Stories Creating Selves: A Process Model of Self-Development.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11 (3): 262–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868307301034.
McSkimming, Josie. 2017a. “Documenting Stories of Disaffiliation from Christian Fundamentalism: The Challenge of Reflexivity and Coconstruction.” *Qualitative Psychology*, Reflexivity, 4 (2): 165–84. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000036.

———. 2017b. “Documenting Stories of Disaffiliation from Christian Fundamentalism: The Challenge of Reflexivity and Coconstruction.” *Qualitative Psychology*, Reflexivity, 4 (2): 165–84. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000036.
Nelson, Katherine, and Robyn Fivush. 2020. “The Development of Autobiographical Memory, Autobiographical Narratives, and Autobiographical Consciousness.” *Psychological Reports* 123 (1): 71–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294119852574.
Nica, Andreea A. 2020. “Leaving My Religion: How Ex-Fundamentalists Reconstruct Identity Related to Well-Being.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 59 (4): 2120–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00975-8.
O’Keane, Veronica. 2021. *A Sense of Self: Memory, the Brain, and Who We Are*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
Peels, Rik. 2023. “On Defining ‘Fundamentalism.’” *Religious Studies* 59 (4): 729–47. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000683.
Puffer, Keith A., Kris G. Pence, T. Martin Graverson, Michael Wolfe, Ellen Pate, and Stacy Clegg. 2008a. “Religious Doubt and Identity Formation: Salient Predictors of Adolescent Religious Doubt.” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36 (4): 270–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710803600403.
———. 2008b. “Religious Doubt and Identity Formation: Salient Predictors of Adolescent Religious Doubt.” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36 (4): 270–84.
Rambo, Lewis R. 1993. “Models and Methods.” In *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5–19. Yale University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkp2k.7.
Rambo, Lewis R., Charles E. Farhadian, and Heinz Streib. 2014. “Deconversion.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.012.
Ransom, Heather J., Rebecca L. Monk, Adam Qureshi, and Derek Heim. 2021. “Life after Social Death: Leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Identity Transition and Recovery.” *Pastoral Psychology* 70 (1): 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-020-00935-0.
Roberts, B. H. (Brigham Henry), and Joseph Smith. 1902. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*. Salt Lake City, Utah : Deseret News. http://archive.org/details/historyofchurcho01robe.
Rousselet, M., O. Duretete, J. B. Hardouin, and M. Grall-Bronnec. 2017. “Cult Membership: What Factors Contribute to Joining or Leaving?” *Psychiatry Research* 257 (November):27–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2017.07.018.
“Ruby Ridge | History, Facts, Aftermath, & Map | Britannica.” 2024a. October 29, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/event/Ruby-Ridge.
“———.” 2024b. October 29, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/event/Ruby-Ridge.
“Ruby Ridge, 1992: The Day the American Militia Movement Was Born | Idaho | The Guardian.” n.d. Accessed November 12, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/26/ruby-ridge-1992-modern-american-militia-charlottesville.
“Ruby Ridge Carved Niche in History.” n.d.-a. Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed December 14, 2024. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2012/08/21/ruby-ridge-carved-niche-history.
“———.” n.d.-b. Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed November 12, 2024. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2012/08/21/ruby-ridge-carved-niche-history.

Scheitle, Christopher P., and Amy Adamczyk. 2010. “High-Cost Religion, Religious Switching, and Health.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51 (3): 325–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510378236.
Scorah, Amber. 2019. *Leaving the Witness : Exiting a Religion and Finding a Life*. New York: Viking.
“Self-Discrepancy Theory: What Patterns of Self-Beliefs Cause People to Suffer? - ScienceDirect.” n.d. Accessed March 11, 2025. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260108603068.
“Special Report.” n.d. Accessed December 14, 2024. https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/0211/chapter5.htm.
Stromberg, Peter G. 2020. “Chapter 26 Narrative and Autobiographical Approaches to Leaving Religion.” In . Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004331471_027.
Taylor, Alan C., Bethany L. Fisackerly, Elise R. Mauren, and Kelly D. Taylor. 2013. “‘Grandma, Tell Me Another Story’: Family Narratives and Their Impact on Young Adult Development.” *Marriage & Family Review* 49 (5): 367–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2012.762450.
“The Wheat and the Tares—Matthew 13:24-30 by Martin Luther.” n.d. Blue Letter Bible. Accessed December 13, 2024. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther_martin/misc/003_wheat-n-tares.cfm.
Varman, Rohit, Paromita Goswami, and Devi Vijay. 2018. “The Precarity of Respectable Consumption: Normalising Sexual Violence against Women.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 34 (11–12): 932–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1527387.
Verhoeven, Monique, Astrid M. G. Poorthuis, and Monique Volman. 2019. “The Role of School in Adolescents’ Identity Development. A Literature Review.” *Educational Psychology Review* 31 (1): 35–63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-018-9457-3.
Wagner & Lynch Admin. 2015. “THE INCIDENT AT RUBY RIDGE - Criminal Defense Lawyer | McAlester | Wagner & Lynch.” Wagner & Lynch. April 24, 2015. https://seoklaw.com/the-incident-at-ruby-ridge/.
“Weaver’s Lawyers Say Warrant Was Invalid -- Court Clerk Testifies That Suspect Was Given Wrong Date | The Seattle Times.” n.d. Accessed November 12, 2024. https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/19930423/1697496/weavers-lawyers-say-warrant-was-invalid----court-clerk-testifies-that-suspect-was-given-wrong-date.
Whiting, Jason B., Megan Oka, and Stephen T. Fife. 2012. “Appraisal Distortions And Intimate Partner Violence: Gender, Power, And Interaction.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38 (s1): 133–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00285.x.
Wilson, Jason. 2017. “Ruby Ridge, 1992: The Day the American Militia Movement Was Born.” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2017, sec. US news. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/26/ruby-ridge-1992-modern-american-militia-charlottesville.
Wright, Stuart A., and Elizabeth S. Piper. 1986. “Families and Cults: Familial Factors Related to Youth Leaving or Remaining in Deviant Religious Groups.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 48 (1): 15–25. https://doi.org/10.2307/352224.
Yui, Daniela. n.d. “Erik H. Erikson - Identity Youth and Crisis 1(1968, W. W. Norton & Company) (1).” Accessed May 2, 2023. https://www.academia.edu/37327712/Erik_H_Erikson_Identity_Youth_and_Crisis_1_1968_W_W_Norton_and_Company_1_.

Zakar, Rubeena, Muhammad Zakria Zakar, and Alexander Kraemer. 2013. “Men’s Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Pakistan.” *Violence Against Women* 19 (2): 246–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213478028.