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The Mountain Stands: An Autoethnographic Inquiry into Zulu Christians' Approaches to Spiritual Health

Makayla Lagerman
SIT Study Abroad

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THE MOUNTAIN STANDS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO ZULU
CHRISTIANS' APPROACHES TO SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Keywords: spiritual health, Christianity, Zulu, African Traditional Religions, ancestors, South
Africa, autoethnography

Makayla Lagerman

Advisor: Mandla Phehlukwayo

School for International Training

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Abstract

Spiritual health is a vital component of individual wellness that can be described in many ways; most commonly, it is thought of as the connectivity of the inner spirit to others, the world, transcendental beings, and more. From personal experience, I know that the state of my spiritual wellbeing can greatly impact my physical and mental health. For this reason, actively considered how to think about spiritual health for one of the first times in my life.

This project sought to explore Zulu Christians' approaches to spiritual health in concurrence with my own. This was done by interviewing one Swazi and eight Zulu Christians to hear narratives about spiritual health and how their relationships with God and/or ancestors affects their spirituality. My shared Christian identity with participants provided the opportunity to reflect deeply on my own personal spirituality and spiritual health in the form of an autoethnography.

This project showed me that spiritual health is a deeply personal experience. Rather than reading about extracted patterns or generalizations about Zulu Christians' health, readers of this project are instead taken along on my journey through participant narratives to recognize my changing spiritual health and subsequently "find myself again."

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Background

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1945 in Dhar, Chaturvedi, & Nandan 2011, n.p.). Spiritual health is neglected in this definition, and some public health experts are pushing to include it as a “4th dimension of health” because “becoming spiritually healthy is not becoming special, but it is becoming one with everything; learning to become grateful to life around and to consciously explore the meaning of this life” (Dhar, Chaturvedi, & Nandan 2011, n.p.). The researchers did not intend for this dimension to be solely religious, but it can be applied to organized religions like Christianity.

South Africa has a large population that claims to practice an organized religion. In 2013, 85.6% of South Africans surveyed identified as Christian, and 77.6% of KwaZulu Natal residents identified as Christian (“General Household Survey” 2013). Many Christians also participate in traditional rituals and ceremonies. The estimate that 60-80% of South Africans seek traditional healing before a Western doctor (Setswe 1999 in Truter 2007), though probably a gross overestimate based on the population composition, gives insight into the importance of traditional healing and rituals in Zulu culture. From my experiences in a Zulu community, many people are willing to speak about the intersections of their faith and Zulu practices like traditional healing.

During my research, I found few articles about both Zulu culture and Christianity using combinations of keywords such as Christianity, Christian, South Africa, Zulu, spiritual health, spirituality, ineffable, spiritual needs, ancestors, African, prayer, etc. The relationship between traditional healing and religion was discussed briefly in several papers, but not to a great extent. Literature is lacking in qualitative studies on the relationships between Christianity and African indigenous religions, especially when considering an individual’s spiritual wellness. In the Mandala of Health, “health is understood in its holistic sense, so the health of the individual at the centre is shown to have body, mind, and spirit dimensions” (Hancock 1993, 42). The spiritual fitness of each being seems to be neglected in Western medicine but uplifted in traditional medicine, making it an interesting subject for me as an American pre-medical student having lived with a Zulu family. Tackling spiritual health through Zulu Christian lenses provided a new paradigm through which I could consider the importance of ancestors and religion to the self. Surprisingly, when performing research, no autoethnographies were found that focused solely on

religion. Keywords such as autoethnography, Christian, religion, reflection, spirituality, etc. were used to no avail. This was unforeseen to me since faith is a prime topical candidate for qualitative research and reflection. I recognize that a religious or spiritual autoethnography may exist somewhere, but I pursued my own without a related example. I was excited, amongst other emotions including nervousness, to tackle religion from an autoethnographic approach.

This Independent Study Project (ISP)¹ is both a scholarly and personal endeavor; I collected data in the form of narratives from Zulu Christians to understand their perception of how their religion and ancestors influence their spiritual well-being. The purpose of my ISP was two-fold. The first aim was to better the relationship between spiritual health, Christianity, and ancestral communication in Zulu culture. The second aim was to explore my personal Christian journey and spiritual health by engaging with other Christians. To accomplish these aims, I considered the main research question “How do Zulu Christians approach spiritual health?” through an autoethnographic approach. The intersections of the Zulu identity and Christianity deserve to be investigated in South Africa as they are relevant, complex, and valuable to communities and individuals. These topics are intangible and difficult to explain, so my satisfaction with my project was based on my ability to reflect deeply on participants’ stories and consider them as individual constructions of spirituality’s role in their lives. I hope that you, as a reader, are also drawn to the narratives of spirituality laced through my autoethnography. Acknowledging that individual approaches to spirituality, faith, culture, and identity are difficult to verbalize and comprehend, a narrative approach through open-ended, semi-structured interviews was used to best represent the experiences of participants.

Autoethnography

As I toyed with how to write about traditional healing, spirituality, and Christianity, I had to deeply consider the best way to represent these ineffable topics. My professor, Dr. Clive Bruzas², frequently quotes a phrase from Rose (1992) in Richardson (2000, 923) about how to “‘word the world’ into existence” with regards to the beauty of autoethnography. This phrase ruminated in my mind; as a science major, I had always trusted the world to exist without my

¹ The ISP is a three-week class offered by SIT programs that allows students to explore a topic relevant to their program and study abroad location.

² Dr. Clive Bruzas obtained his PhD in autoethnography and is a professor for the SIT South Africa: Community Health and Social Policy program. He will be referred to as “Clive” for the remainder of my ISP.

input, but the notion of penning my paradigm was intriguing to me. Upon reading the Gospel of John³ for a second time this semester, I was struck by the correlation between this quote and the opening verse: “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1 NIV). It only felt right to share my deeply personal, pious topic through the words of an autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a useful way to consider new cultural information through personal reflection and writing. It involves the natural connections that humans draw between their memories and emotions and another person’s story. These memories can be intentionally thought of or subconsciously evoked, and they are used within autoethnography to enrich the impact of the stories on the readers.

Memory doesn't work in a linear way, nor does life either, for that matter. Instead, thoughts and feelings circle around us; flash back, then forward; the topical is interwoven with the chronological; thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, then reappear in another context (Ellis 1999, 675).

This idea was terrifying to me, and it sometimes still is. My entire life, I’ve clung to traditional and scientific research, avoiding “I” and emotions and richly descriptive writing. As my ISP progressed, I found myself becoming more distant from that tall, stable pillar of traditional research and floating out towards the unfamiliar world of qualitative research and autoethnography. However, I stayed tethered to the idea of traditional research for security and fear of change. I wrote and rewrote different sections of my paper, dissatisfied with the outcome each time. Something was missing, and I couldn’t identify it. I read past students’ ISPs and was left with the same cliffhanger of contentedness. “Am I being too critical of a writing style I have no experience with?” I thought to myself. Still, I trusted my instincts and went to talk to Clive about them.

“What is missing from all the ISP autoethnographies?” I sighed. “I’m done writing mine, but it doesn’t feel complete.”

He sat back in his chair and stroked his beard, contemplating my question.

“What they’re missing is letting go. They haven’t completely let go of traditional research.”

Ah, so that was it. I realized I had the same problem, but how could I throw years of my education out the window with only a week left of ISP time? My stomach knotted with anxiety at the thought of being honest and open about the process with my readers and, even more so, with

³ John is one of four gospels. A gospel is a chapter in the New Testament of the Christian Bible that acts as a biography of Jesus.

myself. I had misplaced the vulnerability of autoethnography on the stories I chose to tell rather than the way I told them.

With the dawning of this realization, I went back to work. I changed my short participant biographies to reflect the dialogue that occurred during interviews. I tried my best to represent the thoughts that floated through my head during them by consulting my past journal entries. I opened myself up to asking for help from my peers, something I rarely do at home because of my fear of failure. I prayed. I cried. I cried while praying. I let myself let go, and it was intimidating but exhilarating. Regardless of whether this honest vulnerability shines through my words, I know I've grown because of it. Writing an autoethnography about spiritual health provided an outlet through which I could strengthen my own spiritual health, pushing me to become more comfortable with uncertainty in my life because of my trust in God and myself.

An important component of this autoethnography was combining my life stories with the narratives of my participants and, to an extent, with the biography of Jesus in mind. "As social scientists, when we write we turn life into language" (Jackson 1995 in Bochner 2012, 160). It was important to pick an approach that best suited the narratives collected to maximize the impact of my autoethnography on you as a reader. "If our research is to mean something to our readers- to be acts of meaning- our writing needs to attract, awaken, and arouse them, inviting readers into conversation with incidents, feelings, contingencies, contradictions, memories, and desires that our research stories depict" (Bochner 2012, 158). This is my goal; I want to build a relationship between myself and you, the reader. An integral pillar of spirituality is faith, which I believe is centered in a vulnerable trust. To understand an ineffable topic such as this, I ask that you trust me to put forward my honest thoughts while allowing me to trust you to contemplate and digest some of the information for yourself.

It's difficult, some may even say impossible, to adequately verbalize spirituality and spiritual health. In the same way that I asked participants to delve into the unexplainable parts of their souls and vulnerably expected myself to do the same, I hope that you pause throughout this journey to reflect on your own spiritual health.

Data collection and "analysis"

Though I eventually synthesized a focus that excited me, I had difficulties narrowing and articulating my topic to match what I desired to learn during my ISP. I was overwhelmed with

the number of avenues I could pursue within spiritual health during both proposal and ISP writing. In an attempt to adequately describe an ineffable topic after only three weeks of inquiry, my autoethnography is primarily focused on the discovery of the state of my spiritual health through reflecting on a compilation of narratives about spiritual health: its definition, its roles in the lives of Zulu Christian participants, its distinguishing features, etc. I've come to realize the importance of spiritual wellness across my life story during this project, though I had never quite put a name to it before.

Quite like the paths a person takes with spirituality and faith, the stories I heard from participants and the thoughts these narratives evoked in my mind sometimes wandered from my original ideas. This made me nervous and initially hesitant to share these stories with you, but I think they add to a bigger picture of spiritual health that I couldn't necessarily control or create.

Hearing people's stories

Of the qualitative methodologies for learning more about people's stories, narrative inquiry is an important approach for ineffable topics because it helpful in "creating and managing identity; the expressive forms for making sense of lived experience and communicating it to others; the entanglements that permeate how interpersonal life is lived and how it is told to others; the reflexive dimensions of the relationship between storytellers and story listeners; and the canonical narratives that circulate through society, offering scripted ways of acting" (Bochner 2012, 155-156). Though its somewhat vague instructions were intimidating in approaching a qualitative study for the first time, its unique ability to consider participants' stories as individual and important was valuable to me. I used narrative inquiry to guide participants through semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

I completed eight interviews with nine participants over the three weeks of the ISP period. Many of my participants were introduced to me by fellow students, friends in Cato Manor, and homestay family members. One interview was arranged by my Academic Director. Five of my interviews were completed in participants' homes in Cato Manor; another was done at a local restaurant in North Beach in Durban, KZN; and the other two were done in the my Cowey Park classroom as part of a session with paid informants. One of my participants was provided transportation to Cowey Park and a stipend by my program for participating in this session. All other participants were compensated in the form of soda or juice provided for their enjoyment after our interview. One conversation included two participants who were friends, one

of whom was visiting the other's home when I arrived for an interview. Three men and six women were interviewed, and their ages ranged from 25 to 52 years old.

Narrative inquiry made it easy for the interviews to flow naturally as conversations. The preciousness of spirituality to each participant was obvious to me, and I was honored to have been trusted with such an important piece of their life. Diving into conversation with a stranger can be very intimidating. I was worried that my questions would be misunderstood, participants wouldn't feel heard by me, or people wouldn't want to share much about such a personal topic. During my first interview, I became more comfortable in the role of researcher, but I was also careful to not be complacent about my worries during the process.

Initially, I wrote questions about health, spiritual wellness, and traditional healing. However, after my first interview I realized that I could ask broader questions about spirituality (Appendix A) to give participants the platform to share what they found important rather than funneling them down the definition of spirituality that I assumed they would have. This was key to my understanding of Zulu Christian's perceptions of their spiritual health. My homestay family's traditional healing practices along with the commonality of their uses in South Africa led me to anticipate more discussion about the spirituality component of traditional healing; however, my participants were much more adamant about describing their relationships with God and ancestors rather than traditional healing and sangomas.⁴

Difficulties

Prior to studying abroad, I didn't mind being vulnerable. I was willing to share stories that affected me very deeply with others readily if we had mutual trust and respect. In writing my autoethnography, I wasn't nervous to share personal stories. However, after talking to Clive about others' fear of letting go, I realized my vulnerability was insincere; I was able to tell my personal stories unphased because I wasn't sharing any deep-seeded feelings or fears that accompanied them. In light of this realization, I committed to being honest about my emotions towards my ISP.

My largest fear was inserting too much of myself into the process and overshadowing my topic and participants. I was and am an infant in the world of autoethnography, so I worried constantly about being the main focus of my paper instead of using my reflections to help tell a

⁴ Sangomas are traditional healers who use divination to diagnose the ill in Zulu culture (Kleinhempel 2017).

story about spiritual health. However, this fear made me more aware of my relationship with participants and my project than I would have been otherwise. I also found that participants were quite interested in my personal relationship with God. I had to learn to trust myself to find the balance between humility and dominance. This balance provided me with a wonderful chance to bond with fellow Christians and many neighbors I had in Cato Manor. Discussing our spiritualities fostered an unexpected but beautiful connection between my participants and me.

A secondary, miniature crisis I experienced during the later stages of my ISP was the difficulty of exploring a topic which had unanswerable questions. The nature of this paper is exploratory in terms of personal reflection and the topic itself. My main question was “What are Zulu Christians’ perceptions of spiritual health?” Early in the proposal process, I was aware that this question was not explicitly answerable; however, as the research continued, I still worried that I was not finding answers. I was no longer in a classroom setting daily, so I was removed from Clive’s lectures that often boosted my confidence in pursuing an autoethnography. Meanwhile, my peers doing traditional ISPs excitedly began sharing their findings with me, and I felt behind. I panicked and began analyzing my data using more traditional methodologies. Eventually, I ended up in Clive’s office again to ask how to integrate my analyses into my writing. Several other students pursuing an autoethnography asked him similar questions. He later sent out an email with academic papers on analytic autoethnographies, and I resonated strongly with one of them because of its explanation that we, as autoethnographers, should “think of ourselves not as reporters or analysts but as storytellers and writers” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 12). This resonated with what I wanted to achieve through my ISP, so I left traditional methods behind.

Rather than provide responses, my autoethnography supplies stories and revelations from my data. Instead of taking on the role of traditional analysts, autoethnographers act as storytellers because there are some things, emotions, feelings, etc. that cannot speak for themselves (Bochner 2012). We experience our lives as stories partnered with reflection, so why not research and tell it in this way?

“Analyzing” people’s stories

With a background in scientific research, I wanted to analyze and make conclusions about my data. However, it is unfair to extrapolate and generalize data to an entire certain population. This is especially true because I wanted to represent participants without reducing

the importance of their stories, and I also recognized traditional limitations like a small sample size. Just as spirituality is dually individualistic and communal, research into the ineffable must consider participants individually and collectively. I did this through the untraditional style of analysis called evocative autoethnography. Autoethnographers using this style perform analysis by “producing aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences...by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling, showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, n.p.).

I spent time with each interview, transcribing, praying, reflecting, journaling, and sometimes writing creatively about it. This showed me the value in the story of the individual within a collective research project.

As mentioned previously, my analysis was initially bogged down by old personal standards of “good” research. During transcription and review of my interviews, I planned to seek key themes among participants’ answers and stories without explicitly grouping interviews. I initially began coding statements that later would help me discover themes by interpreting the data. A code is typically “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana 2009, 3). My codes were inspired by common words and phrases found in interview transcripts and scholarly articles defining components of spirituality and spiritual health.

I worried coding would reduce the impact of individual’s stories but continued in the hopes that the process would give me clearer insight into commonalities between the participants’ perceptions of spiritual health. However, as my data analysis progressed, I began doubting my research. It felt dirty to reduce the words of my participants, real people who trusted me with their stories, down to color-coded categories. This was the type of analysis I knew from traditional research: Excel spreadsheets, categorization, and simplifying data down to a digestible format.

Trusting my instincts and Clive’s advice, I began to refocus on the framework of evocative rather than analytic autoethnography. “Instead of being obsessively focused on questions of how we know, which inevitably leads to a preference for analysis and generalization, autoethnography centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 11). I realized I had fallen

back into my comfort zone of writing and analyzing data as I always have in a more traditional sense, thinking of “theory as somehow superior to story” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 11).

Story-telling is an important part of autoethnography, and it encourages readers to engage in making their own meaning. By analyzing, generalizing, and attempting to theorize, I stripped my autoethnography of its sacred ability to allow you to process alongside me.

"Autoethnographies are not intended to be received, but rather to be encountered, conversed with, and appreciated" (Bochner 2012, 161). Similarly, my autoethnography is not intended to be given to you; I present you with my words and ideas, but I expect you to put in work as a reader as well.

Meditation and reflection as inquiry

Since I was not employing a traditional form of analysis, I had to explore new ways of meaning-making. To process my reactions and emotions surrounding my project, I investigated an array of reflective practices. Firstly, I continued my daily reflective journaling. Prior to the ISP, each morning in South Africa I read a portion of the Gospel of John. At night, I reflected on my day and had a specific section devoted to my response to the gospel reading. This compilation of emotions, reactions, and stories proved to be useful in remembering past experiences abroad that were relevant to my topic. It was difficult to maintain journaling in this way during my ISP; at the end of the day, I was so tired of thinking that I sometimes became too overwhelmed to physically write them down. After reading through some journal entries, I was inspired to expand further upon the experience or related stories in journal entries on my computer which were easier to do during a busy ISP period.

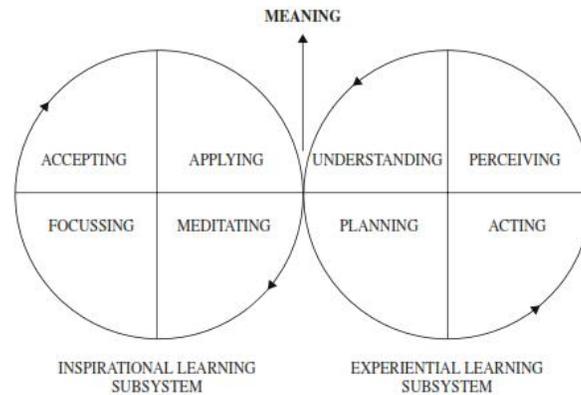
In addition to this expansion and to consider as much of my story as possible, I began with a technique suggested by Carolyn Ellis that involved penning my story first. Writing my story chronologically around the framework of my project topic, re-reading it the next day, and using the text as inspiration to recall other memories helped me think, “Remember, you are creating this story; it is not there waiting to be found” (Ellis 1999, 675). Being proactive and intentional was an important part of the initial autoethnography process. Having these stories fresh in my mind allowed me to better relate to the data as I read through it.

Another way in which I processed the data was through meditative prayer. One method of doing so was Lectio Divina. Members of Bucknell Intersivity Christian Fellowship, a ministry in which I participate in college, taught me this practice. Translating to “divine

reading,” it combines prayer and the Bible as “a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us” (“What is Lectio Divina” n.d.). Steps of silence, reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation are followed when considering a passage from Scripture (Abrams 2012). I repeated key readings in the Gospel of John with this process. Lectio Divina allowed the Holy Spirit to guide my thoughts regarding my data in a way that was beneficial to my spiritual health and my project. My time spent doing Lectio Divina was more helpful on some days than others, but the consistency of practice throughout my ISP period meant I had the chance to be more open to its effects as time went on.

In addition to meditation in a structured manner, I also prayed and processed during runs. During the time leading to and of my ISP, I ran over 20 miles per week training for a half marathon in Durban. My structured plan to run gave me a set time each morning to do nothing but run and think. Typically, my mind is clear when I run, but during the ISP, I used my time to meditate, pray, and untangle my thoughts about my project. "Long distance running as meditation has a particular place in our world because it provides a special opportunity to understand the action of time, our relationship in space and movement" (Shainberg 1977, 1002). Some of my most important thoughts popped into my mind while my feet were pounding on the pavement of the Golden Mile. After returning from my run, I would make a voice memo of my thoughts or journal about them. This provided inspiration for writing about my past thoughts and emotions surrounding my ISP.

Both meditative practices enriched my data analysis and the meaning-making process. For my qualitative research, "meaning emerges as the result of 'interactions' between the process of experiential learning on one hand, and what we have termed inspirational learning on the other hand with these processes in turn involving the concrete world of experience, the spiritual world of insights, and the abstract world of concepts at the interface" (Bawden 2010, 44). The image below from Bawden's paper is a visual representation of this idea (Bawden 2010, 44):



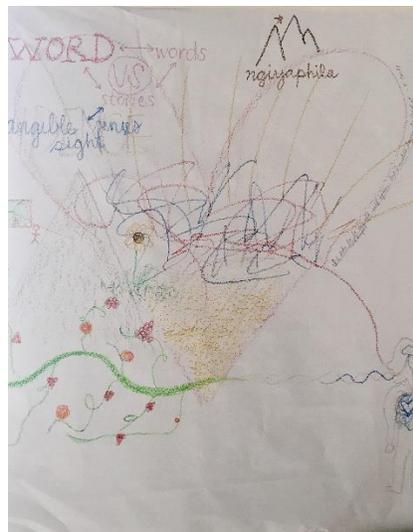
Experiential learning includes the cyclic process of perceiving, understanding, planning, and acting. Essentially, I completed a cycle with each interview as I heard the narrative of a participant, strove to understand it in their context, journaled my thoughts, and pieced narratives together into the big picture of my project.

On the other hand, the inspirational learning subsystem includes meditating, focusing, accepting, and applying. "The process of learning starts with the disengagement of the learner from the conceptual world through some process akin to meditation," or prayer in my case, "in order to allow the mind to free itself from thoughts and enter a state of self-awareness with compassion" (Bawden 2010, 52). My meditative prayer and reflections while running allowed me to extract meaning from my own stories and the stories of my participants. I focused on these deeply-held ideas and acknowledged their importance. I accepted my thoughts as valid and began applying them to my project. Thanks to introspection and prayer, I was able to reflect well on narrative data from my interviews and create meaning. "Meaning emerges from the 'systemic' interaction of insights gained through inspirational learning with abstract concepts learned through experiential learning" (Bawden 2010, 52), and the intersection of these realms proved to be helpful in my meaning-making.

When combing through some stories, I felt inspired to use creative outlets to process my emotions. "Poetry often has the capacity to penetrate experience more deeply than prose" (Furman 2006), and I found this to be especially true for effectively communicating about spiritual health. Like many of my participants, I sometimes struggled to adequately explain and define my ideas about spirituality. Writing poetry about my personal spiritual health and data was helpful in articulating my thoughts. "Qualitative researchers who use the arts and humanities in their inquiry can uncover insights that are multisensory in nature, thus portraying more completely many aspect of the human condition..." (Furman 2006). In addition to writing free

verse, my professor, Clive, inspired me with his own poetry. Specifically, I wrote short poems using a format he introduced to my class. These nine-word poems are structured with one word in the first and last lines, two words in the second and fourth lines, and three words in the third line (Matthews 1994). It was helpful in reducing complex thoughts to a few impactful words. I have included selected pieces of poetry that best tell the story of my ISP journey.

Another artistic outlet employed in reflection was drawing with oil pastels. Each night, my roommates and I spoke about the joys and frustrations of our research. As we became more passionate, we began drawing on giant pieces of white paper taped to our living room walls. Initially, I wrote words to help me process, but I found it much more freeing to draw pictures that only I could understand. Others asked about the drawings as they came into our room, and I was happy to explain what I felt comfortable explaining. The personal nature of my drawings helped me to feel truly vulnerable and honest about my project and emotions towards it throughout the weeks.



Both creative outlets were cathartic, and I felt relieved that I didn't have to analyze their every component to others or even myself. For this reason, many of my pieces are for "show" and not "tell." I hope my autoethnography is similar in a way. As mentioned before, Ellis says that the intention of an autoethnography is not one of reception but engagement. For this reason, I have chosen to give you stories from which you can make your own meaning while reading about mine.

Limitations

Doing qualitative research was more difficult than I initially expected, especially because I set high standards for myself in academics and my passions. In seeking narratives from highly spiritual people, I found it challenging to find a diverse range of participants in the Zulu population I knew in Masxha. I attempted to find Christian participants with varying demographics, but I recognize that my participants do not fully represent all residents of Cato Manor, Zulu people, or Christians in South Africa. As humans, we all have different stories, but ideally, the demographics of my participants would have varied more.

My small sample size is a notable limitation of my project. It is unfair to draw sweeping conclusions about spiritual health after interviewing only eight Zulu Christians and one pastor from Swaziland. Fewer, more in-depth interviews were better suited to my project than a large sample size because of my lack of resources and time. My participants shared enough narrative data to make meaning of in only three short weeks. However, I also recognize that a small sample size means a reduced amount of overall data and therefore fewer insights into spiritual health. Because of this, I avoided generalizing statements to the best of my ability.

One characteristic all participants shared was their Zulu identity. I found this important in narrowing the scope of my question from all Christians in South Africa to a specific cultural paradigm. While living in kwaMasxha, a neighborhood within the Cato Manor township in Durban, I was exposed to many Zulu cultural practices, so it made sense for me to narrow the scope of my participants to this identity. Perspectives of other ethnicities were purposefully excluded but would be interesting in future projects.

An essential part of culture is language, and all Zulu participants spoke Zulu as their first language and English as their second. I chose to interview only fluent English-speakers so I could understand their stories as their own, rather than as a translator's interpretation. However, an ineffable topic such as spiritual health is difficult to communicate in a first language, and I asked participants to do it in their second. My conversations were productive, informative, and truly interesting to me, but I recognize the limitations I had in asking some metaphysical questions and receiving answers that may have been better articulated in someone's native tongue.

These conversations also encompassed an inherent personal bias stemming from my Western and Lutheran paradigm. Bias exists in all research to some extent, but it is especially

apparent because of my first-person accounts in my autoethnography. “Not only may my own biases influence the participants, their responses, and my own observations and interpretations, but so too may the very nature of this study” (Bourke 2014, 2). My understanding of spiritual health and Christianity has been cultivated since birth in a very different environment than Cato Manor. Prior to this project, my understanding of Zulu traditions and spirituality was limited to several conversations with my host family and a literature analysis. My personal lens unintentionally shaped the questions I asked, the emotional responses I experienced, and the meaning-making process I presented in this autoethnography.

I understand in purposefully selecting my participants to be Zulu and Christian that I largely excluded the components of spiritual health not directly tied to religion or transcendental beings. Participants were asked whether there was anything that contributed to their spiritual health other than these two factors, but they focused primarily on their religion and cultural practices as the largest contributors to their spiritual health.

Lastly, there are limitations to what you, as the reader, may experience, feel, learn, discover, and get from reading my ISP. Like the bias of what data I shared and how I chose to share it, your paradigm will frame how you do (or don't) interpret my autoethnography. I ask that you acknowledge this limitation but don't actively limit yourself in your responses to each section, each story, and each sentence because of it.

Ethics

In considering the ethical components of my project, I constructed a Human Subjects Approval Form detailing all the potential ethical concerns. This form was read by members of a Local Review Board. After meeting with the board to review my proposal, I obtained approval to begin my project. I was quite nervous before this meeting; I had never done qualitative research, and I worried that I had missed or misunderstood an important ethical component of my project that would negatively impact my participants. However, the only potential issue we discussed was my body language and subtle reactions to participants as they talked about beliefs different from my own. I was thankful for the members' reminder, and I was very conscious about appearing engaged and nonjudgmental during my interviews.

In my Human Subjects Review form, confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were highly emphasized. I was insistent about stressing these to my participants along with their rights to not answer questions or withdraw their information from my project.

As a researcher, it was my responsibility to establish the trust of participants if they were to be candid and open with me during interviews. To maintain this trust, I was cognizant of protecting participants' privacy. I acknowledged that people have the right to act as autonomous agents and control others' access to their personal information. To the best of my knowledge, I was respectful of cultural norms of privacy without probing further into uncomfortable territory. No focus groups were used in this project, so individuals' information was unable to be shared by other participants. The interview that involved two women occurred because they were friends, so they had an element of trust in sharing their answers. Interactions with participants occurred in a location that provided adequate privacy such as in their home or in a secluded section of a restaurant or office. I tried to create a relaxed environment by doing interviews in these locations. I was careful to not corner people into doing my project. I considered attending church to bond with people and find participants, but I decided against it to prevent making people feel uncomfortable or targeted in a sacred space.

Individuals were made aware of their right to withdraw their participation or to retract their informed consent at any time. The project was explained to participants along with its purposes, their role, informed consent, and the potential for this project to be published or put online.

Participants had the right to anonymity to protect their personal opinions from public scrutiny. When collecting data, information was password-protected so only I was able to access an individual's personal data. I was careful to avoid key identifiers of participants within my writing. I acknowledge that unique identifiers may not be apparent to me since I am not a permanent member of the Cato Manor community. Therefore, I was especially cognizant to avoid distinguishing characteristics of my participants in my project. Photos and videos were not taken of participants, and audio recordings from interviews were deleted after transcription was completed. Because of anonymity, the names of participants you read in my ISP are pseudonyms. I chose to pick Zulu names to appropriately reflect their ethnicity, but I also wanted to represent their individual personalities by selecting a name with an English meaning that best described my impression of them.

I do not plan to use project data in future research endeavors, so participants were reassured that their opinions will not be extrapolated beyond the context of this project. Confidentiality was maintained via password-protected devices. Prior to deletion, recordings of interviews were kept on my iPhone to which only I had access under the security of a six-digit numerical password and a fingerprint scan. Interviews were transcribed by listening to recordings with personal headphones. Transcriptions of said interviews were saved on my laptop under the security of a unique password. I did not share personal information about a participant, without their informed consent, with any other people. This includes other participants, family members, friends, peers, etc. Data was destroyed after the ISP's completion.

Speaking about health had the potential for personal medical information to be shared. I was very careful in wording of questions and things said in the conversations to avoid eliciting private medical information from participants. Before each interview began, I explained to participants that they should not share any medical information with me about themselves or people they know. I shared gentle reminders before questions regarding traditional healing, faith healing, and poor spiritual health as well.

The Mountain Stands

The mountain stands.

If you've always lived here, you may forget its true majesty every so often.

You may have never noticed it at all.

If you're new to town, you may look past the mountain to the skyscape.

But the mountain still stands.

One morning, you may wake and choose to walk to its base.

You stand and admire, feeling a tug to start climbing.

The peak doesn't seem so far, so steep, so dangerous that you can't begin.

So, you do.

Looking out from the first plateau, your heart rate is elevated, but so are you.

This mountain can show you a new world.

You look onward. You look upward.

You sigh-

from relief? From tiredness? In awe? In anticipation of what's to come?

-and continue climbing.

The terrain varies from soothing aloe plants dotting the ground to wobbling boulders towering to loosened soil.

There are thorns.

There are also vines, vines with fruit.

There are flowers and some passersby.

You grow tired of searching for a mountain peak that keeps growing. You sit.

The mountain stands.

The peak is clearer now and shows promise of a beauty you never imagined from the base.

You look out at the view and you're flushed with peace.

It's overwhelming.

It's home.

You have cuts and weary legs. You wonder how people ever manage to reach the top or if they ever truly do.

But you know now why they try.

The journey is strenuous but with views that are breath-taking.

You remember what life looked like on the ground,
But now you can't imagine never knowing the views from this place
You sigh-
from relief? From tiredness? In awe? In anticipation of what's to come?
-and again, you climb.
We climb this mountain each day.
We run up, tumble down, carefully maneuver, and stop to rest along the way.
But still we climb.
Some look at the mountain in fear.
Some in anger.
Some never look at the mountain in the first place.
Many never think to begin the climb.
All are valid, but now you know.
The mountain still stands.

Makayla Lagerman

My project made me realize the difficulty of putting faith into words, and poetry seemed to be the best way to do this. Throughout my ISP, the imagery of mountains continuously came to mind. In the stories of my life in which I most felt God's presence, the poetry I wrote, the Bible and Jesus' frequented place for prayer, the lyrics of worship songs I sang on my apartment balcony, mountains frequently appeared. I think everyone can have a different mountain in their life, but mine has always been God. It only felt right to title my autoethnography "The mountain stands" as a nod to God's unchanging, powerful presence in my life and the mountain imagery that had appeared so often during my ISP.

Spiritual health: an inner dialogue

“Spiritual health is based upon your awareness of the connection between your inner self, others, your environment, the universe, and transcendental beings.” This is the definition that I type in my ISP proposal and informed consent forms, excited to see how my participants understand their own connection. However, Clive comments in my consent form about the possibility of influencing a participant’s definition of spiritual health if I present my own first. “That makes sense,” I think, and I promptly delete it from my writing.

Before my interviews, I do more research about spiritual health. I stumble upon a paper and am enthralled. It contains a whole chart with definitions from literature (Jaberi et al. 2012, n.p.):

Table 2 Definitions of spiritual health

Author	Definition
O'Brien (1982)	“...is understood as a state of well-being and equilibrium in that part of a person’s essence and existence which transcends the realm of the natural and relates to the ultimate good.” (O'Brien 1982)
Young (1984)	The interrelatedness of body, mind, and spirit within the context of inner peace, and in terms of relationships with others and with nature (Young 1984)
Chapman (1986)	Optimal spiritual health: “the ability to develop our spiritual nature to its fullest potential. This would include our ability to discover and articulate our own basic purpose in life, learn how to experience love, joy, peace and fulfillment and how to help ourselves and others achieve their full potential.” (Chapman 1986)
Bensley (1991) and Chapman (1987)	Our ability to discover, articulate, and act on our own basic purpose in life; to learn how to give and receive love, joy, and peace; to pursue a fulfilling life; and to contribute to improvement of the spiritual health of others (Bensley 1991; Chapman 1987)
Hawks et al. (1995)	A high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment which includes connectedness with self, others, and a higher power or larger reality (Hawks et al. 1995)
Fisher (1998)	Spiritual health is a fundamental dimension of people’s overall health and well-being, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health (i.e., the physical, mental, emotional, social, and vocational) (Fisher 1998)

I pocket these definitions and hope that my participants’ ideas relate to those on the chart so that I can form a consensus on the definition in my autoethnography.

“How do you define spiritual health?” I pose this question to my participants, and they respond, putting the ineffable into words:

“You need to be healthy spiritually. That’s the most important thing because you can eat healthy food and everything but according to us, we believe that God is the source of everything.

So, you need to be healthy. Healthiness to me doesn't only mean appearance. You need to be healthy in your mind, internally and outside (Thobeka 2018, April 4).

“Spiritual health, it will be more of from, we do, let's say the readings. What we get from scripture. Let me just put it like that. In scripture. For spiritual health, it will be in the words of scripture that where we more get to know what all the apostles and saints, whoever were at the time of Jesus, or were writing things as the Word of God. So spiritual health, that is how it is reformed or gained I should say. Because in sometimes where it is called the Holy Gospels, we find out that it says, 'the food of the spirit.' So, by then, it nourishes the spirit. So, even those who are in pain, like people who have lost someone, so that's what we bring, we bring the Word of God. So, spiritual health, that is it” (Msizi 2018, April 8).

“Let me start with my spirit. What I know about the spirit is, the spirit is related to God. He is the owner of the spirit. Our health, too, is related to God, dependent on God. Because we're not living our own lives. We do not know when we'll die. When we are going to die, we don't know. That's why our health of our spirit is depending to God. That is why we have hope and why we believe as Christians” (Busisiwe 2018, April 8).

“Since we do both, you can find it through God,” says Nofoto. Nokuthula adds, “And through ancestors.” Nofoto clarifies further, “There is a time when you have to go to church and depend on God, and a time that you need your ancestors and depending on them.” For example, Nokuthula says, “Just like us, we don't have parents. Sometimes when we have problems and God is not answering, you have to pray. You ask your mom, 'Mom, why? What is happening? Tell God that I need something. It's not on my powers. Just speak to God. Tell him I'm in trouble. I need this, I need that.’” (Nofoto and Nokuthula 2018, April 8).

“I would say it is that state of finding. As a person, there is my innermost being that longs for nourishment, tranquility, contentment. So, that innermost part of me longs for that. It longs to connect with God, in my case, my Creator. A supreme being for many people, but I just want to say God in my case. If that is the case, then it longs for worship. When it is able to connect with the Savior or my Lord, I am able to reach that state of peace and contentment and security in spite of what may be happening around me. I am aware that the spiritual health I am talking about, I cannot achieve it myself. It is something that is imparted to my spirit by the Lord. I think that is it. Then, being mindful that there are challenges. One can face turbulence inside. As long as one is connected to the Lord at the right place, the right standing with the Lord at that time,

then the Lord is able to come during storms and rough waters. He helps to wrestle with whatever and be victorious and reach the sense that I have overcome. Because overcoming, in my perspective, is not the total eradication of the negative per se because we are always surrounded with evil, but it is being able to remain yourself and to retain your peace in the midst of it. To be able to function properly and worship more, above all else, to be able to connect to that Supreme Being which is God in my case, Jesus” (Anele 2018, April 10).

“I think spiritual health is just a way that you individually connect with your inner spirits and inner self. It’s how you connect with the world, not just your perspective of what you think the world is like. For example, social media, television. It’s what you feel, your instincts, what you feel is the purpose of yourself in life in this world. That’s what I think” (Funani 2018, April 10).

“I think it’s something that’s within your inner beliefs and your head. It has to start from the mind” (Nonjabulo 2018, April 10).

“Health is to go with God. He is the only way. Nothing about anything. What people can say. God is the one in my life. He changed my life a lot” (Sibongile 2018, April 13).

Clearly there is no one way to define spiritual health. After each interview, I process what I’ve learned about each person, their life, and their relationship with their spirit. I consider their definitions and blend mine with theirs.

Sometime during many hours of prayer and reflection, I realize that my spiritual health is not dependent on the events in my life and my emotions per se. Instead, being spiritually healthy takes me safely through the storms of life and allows me to adequately celebrate its joys. I realize that spiritual health is more of a longitudinal thread than a phenomenon that shifts with every new emotion in my life.

In writing this ISP, I present this section as one of the first but compose it last. I found it important to reflect on the dynamic definition of spiritual health before attempting to define it. I was incredibly frustrated trying to carefully craft a definition from my thoughts, the answers of my participants, and quotes from literature. Pieces of each stand out to me as important, and I realize that’s the beautiful thing about the undefinable: We are constantly adding to one another’s understanding of it. Your understanding of spiritual health may differ from mine, and that will certainly affect how you interpret each person’s story that I will soon present. It’s something that you can’t understand through a definition alone; it must be realized and

experienced by you. Whatever your definition may be, I pray that you open your mind, heart, soul, and spirit to the possibility of an addition to your understanding of spiritual health through the stories you are about to experience. In this autoethnography, you will notice that the stories are intertwined. They may not be directly answering my main question of "How do Zulu Christians approach spiritual health?" but that's almost the point. Each person's differing ideas on spiritual health contributed to the stories they found important to share. The path of spiritual health is winding, and sometimes you retrace your steps or make stops on the path. Spiritual wellness isn't a straight and narrow journey, and you must be expectant of uncertainty along the way. Your mind wanders, sometimes in a different direction than your steps. It can be painful or confusing, but when you look up in the darkness, sometimes you see the beauty of the night sky, and you're reminded that the path is worthwhile.

Meeting on the mountain

I can't sleep in my hammock. My feet are freezing and the sounds of roosters crowing and dogs barking rattle around my eardrums. I close my eyes and imagine silence. Instead, rapid Spanish is blasted through a sound system in the distance.

I look down at my watch. 3:00 am? There are still so many hours until the sun rises here in El Porvenir. I sigh and look around.

A friend sees my movement and whispers, "Hey, Makayla. Are you awake?"

"Yes. Are you?" And a second voice answers back. Lying side-by-side in our hammocks which are tied to the ceiling beams of a wooden pavilion, the three of us talk and giggle about the noisy night.

"I figured being on a mountain in the middle of nowhere would be the best sleep I'd get in Nicaragua. I guess I was wrong," says one person.

"Well, if we can't sleep, we might as well get up," I respond.

We roll out of our hammocks and tiptoe to a short stone wall just outside of the pavilion. Sitting on the edge, we stare up at the sky. We are far from any light that could pollute our view, so the night sky dances with millions of twinkling stars.

"Isn't it crazy how big the universe is?"

My new friends turn and look at me. The last thing they were expecting to do at 3 in the morning in Nicaragua was to talk about the vastness of the universe, but here under the stars, it

seems as good of a time as any other. A few people walk by, and one of my friends asks in Spanish where they are going.

“That loud speaker noise?” they say, “That’s where I’m going. It’s a church service.”

A church service? This certainly didn’t seem like the hymn-filled, traditional Lutheran services I knew. It was loud and sounded almost like a party. This worship was so different than any I had heard of before. Still, God is here with us. He’s in El Porvenir at three in the morning on a Thursday night in March. I wasn’t looking for Him here, but He surprised me anyway. I open up to my two friends about my interest in the church service, and they agree.

But for me, it’s different. It means much more.

We talk and talk until the sun rises over the horizon, the rays kissing parts of the sky where stars previously shone. Eventually, the others in our group start to wake and join us in soaking in the view. However, I’m soaking in much more than that.

God is here. He’s in El Porvenir. He’s on top of this mountain at this coffee cooperative. I feel Him here even though I never would have thought to look on my own.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I would go on to not only feel God, but to find Him again in my life again and again after this.

I close my eyes and picture that night sky once more, and I know I will never be the same.

In the beginning

Where do I begin when it comes to my spiritual health? It's such an abstract topic, one sprinkled with mountain-top moments of clarity that shine through the muskiness of questioning in which faith lives. I suppose the best place to begin, then, is the beginning.

My parents welcomed me into the world in 1997, and we all attended Trinity Lutheran Church in Robesonia, Pennsylvania together. I still go regularly with my dad and brother. Pastor Bill, the current senior pastor at my church, and Pastor Michael, a retired pastor who moved to Florida when I was in 8th grade or so, baptized me. I've been told several times by family members and friends that I was a sweet baby. I didn't cry or fuss, and I stared up at the ceiling fans and plaster butterflies from Lent and Easter in awe. I have no recollection of this event as I was only a few months old, but isn't it peculiar that strangers, family, and friends alike gathered

in a sacred space and promised to raise me in the Word of God? I often wonder if they understood this commitment fully and what it would mean for my future.

I've grown in many ways since that moment as a newly-baptized baby, but I often feel as though I'm still in the infancy of my faith. I grew up in the Lutheran church, learning its rules and stories but never really having a personal relationship with God. It wasn't until the summer after my first year of college that I realized knowing God was more important than knowing about God. This realization was a result of several different moments throughout my life. From this foundational belief, my spiritual health began to flourish. Even through difficulties in my family life and mental health, God remained a consistent thread throughout my life and well-being. I learned over time that my faith in God could allow my spiritual health to remain consistent through the turbulence of life. This realization chipped away at my hesitation to study abroad in South Africa after a significantly rough semester in terms of mental health.

Though I struggled at times with adjusting to a new culture and place, I found that my spirituality gave me comfort in challenging myself while studying abroad. Initially, my plan for the final project of my program was to complete an internship in the anesthesiology department of a local Durban hospital. This decision was made with the uncertainty of my mental health in mind, but my strong spiritual health kept poor mental health at bay. With a renewed sense of contentment and an interest in learning about a topic specific to South Africa, I began to make the transition to pursuing an ISP instead.

My interest in the intersections between spiritual wellness, Christianity, and African indigenous religions began early in my homestay experience. The first night in which I stayed in Cato Manor, one of my homestay sis⁵ began speaking in tongues, moaning, and weeping in her bedroom while I overheard from the living room. Later, I discovered that my family's ancestors were communicating through her, taking control over her body and mind without her initiation. The ancestors had warned her about her sister's poor behavior, encouraged her to soon pursue her gift of traditional healing, and communicated that I was happy to be with my new family (Sisi, pers. comm. 2018, January 31). Meanwhile, a Bible sat on a table in the living room. I was certainly confused in the moment. The juxtaposition of Christianity and what I saw at the time as ancestral worship was nothing I'd ever witnessed before. This encounter sparked many conversations with my homestay family about traditional healing, the ancestors, and faith.

⁵ isiZulu word meaning "sisters"

In my experiences as a Christian, I had never seen this type of spiritual communication, so my initial exposure to ancestors during my homestay was in the forefront of my mind when contemplating my ISP topic. I also recognized the importance of spirituality in my life, especially the connections it allowed me to form in Cato Manor with my host mama. Initially, I attempted marrying spiritual health and traditional healing, but my thoughts wandered. I wrote errant questions that provided little insight into my overarching, broad topic of the intersections of traditional healing and Christianity. My main question shifted several times from “What are the intersections of traditional healing and Christianity?” to "How does Christianity impact an individual's ties to their Zulu culture?" As I wrote the proposal and continually reflected, I journaled, "Something about this question isn't settling right. I feel stumped and a bit defeated, even after bouncing my ideas off of friends" (Personal journal, 2018, March 13).

I was frustrated. I felt defeated because my topic was so important to me, and I wanted to represent my passion and love of God in it while also doing good qualitative research. I sat on the balcony of my apartment staring out at the ocean and talking to my boyfriend on the phone. Eventually, our conversation landed on my ISP topic. We went back and forth about my ideas until my main question of “How do Zulu Christians approach spiritual health?” emerged. I took that question and ran.

This is the story of that journey.

“The heroes of these stories”

In referencing the respect owed to people who came before us as faithful examples, one of my participants, a reverend, described our antecedents as “the heroes of these stories in the Bible.” I felt it was only appropriate to channel this same respect towards my participants, people whom demonstrated steadfast devotion to their religions, their cultures, and their identities. They are the heroes of these stories I will be telling.



*Thobeka*⁶

Today is my first interview, and I am a bundle of nervous excitement. I walk through the streets of Cato Manor towards Thobeka's house. A sense of home rises up within me during this first extended trip back to Masxha since living with my host family.

"Are you Thobeka?"

"Yebo. Unjani?"⁷

Thobeka greets me and guides me to her house. Her endearing, calming nature contrasts with her bright, patterned dress. She seats herself on an armchair and caters to the small child roaming in and out of her home. As the child runs out the door, she yells something in Zulu to him before turning to me so that we can begin the interview.

I ask several questions, and Thobeka patiently ponders each one. She repeats my words back to me and answers with careful consideration of her spiritual health.

"How do you define spiritual health?"

She closely ties it to her Christian faith, saying to be spiritually healthy "is to believe in God. God is our Creator, and everything that we have is from God".

Thobeka speaks with wisdom about her life, the power of forgiveness, and the importance of generosity. I ask her to elaborate more on how she serves others when she mentions it. She begins a story with a distance in her eyes:

At work, I'm just thinking how many children have stayed with me, children from really needy families. I've stayed with them here. Yeah, they've lived with me. Sometimes you find that the rates of child abuse is very high where I am teaching... Now this child was from one of the rural areas, and her grandma was here. In fact, it was her mother's aunt. She was a nurse. But, the way that she was abusing the child, one day- I remember it was February 14th last year when she was brought to me by one of our ex-learners saying that she had to sleep over at her place because she was sitting on the street crying that the lady had chased her away. So, I had to take that child, report the matter to the social workers, the police. I also had to involve Child Protection Unit, so the child had no place to go. Even with the homes, you don't just take a child there; there is a process that needs to be followed. So, she came and lived with me.

Thobeka opens her home to children without a place to stay with the same welcome that she used to greet me. I smile because of her warmth and generosity.

⁶ Rather than look for citations for participants' quotes within these short interview representations, assume that the only people represented in the dialogue are myself and the respective participant.

⁷ In Zulu culture, the typical greeting dialogue in isiZulu is: "Sawubona." "Yebo, sawubona." "Unjani?" "Ngiyaphila. Wena unjani?" "Nami ngiyaphila." It translates as "Hello." "Yes, hello." "How are you?" "I am well. And you?" "I am also well."

After seeing such hardships, I wonder aloud how she deals with them. She responds by stressing the importance of her religion. Contributing time and love in life greatly impacts people and the church. She also shares some personal gain to be found in generosity. “Blessed is the hand who gives, more than the one who receives. So, if you give, you get more blessings. That’s what we believe in.”

This woman clearly opens her heart, home, and mind to accommodate and help others. I think how actively doing, it seems, aids the component of health that Thobeka described as “intra, within me.” She serves in several facets. I am surprised to hear that in addition to working full-time at a primary school, she has been a member of a guild and served as a youth leader, a Sunday school teacher, and a church warden during her past few years at church.

I am overwhelmed by her involvement. “How has all of this affected your spiritual health?”

“We need to contribute. To do something, people believe that you need to pay the church money; it’s not about that. Your time. The little time that you have, you can contribute something to the church.”

This reminds me of a saying at my church about offering: time, talent, and treasure. As a poor student, I’ve never been able to give much money to my church, but they see the value in multiple ways of giving. Donating my time to decorate paper bags to give to hospital patients on Easter and my musical talents to be a music leader for Vacation Bible School helped me serve my church in ways that best suited me.

Despite being generous with her time, talents, and treasures, Thobeka is hesitant to laud herself. Her belief in God and dedication to the church are admirable, but she is so humble. This is why I give her a name meaning “humble” (Arshi 2017). After our interview, one of her friends explains how Thobeka rarely tells people about her good deeds, like buying groceries for her unemployed neighbor. I can tell Thobeka loves helping others, but she becomes shy when people give her praise, discrediting the significance of her own service by insisting that it’s not of great importance.

I think about Thobeka as my roommates praise me for some of my personality traits. Like her, I am uncomfortable hearing myself being lauded for things I don’t see as worthy of praise. Even writing about it makes me worried that I will appear self-absorbed. One day, I write motivational quotes on sticky notes for my roommates because they are having difficulty with

their school work. Later in the day, they tell me, “Makayla, you bring hope to people. The things you do may not seem like much to you, but they inspire others to be a good person like you. You live your life like Jesus wanted people to. You’re the definition of a good person and an example of what a Christian should be like.” I am flattered, but their compliment makes me uncomfortable. I’ve never accepted praise well, but this feels hypocritical to appreciate. I’m all too aware of my flaws and the mistakes that I make. I know I am far from the standards of my perfect Savior. Being glorified makes me feel as though I am not living in a way that gives credit to God for the good aspects of my life. While I’ve experienced hardships, God has always been the one to help me back onto my feet whether or not I recognized Him at the time. Their compliment makes me feel good, but it also forces me to think, “I need to be doing more.” I am so far from Jesus’ standards. I can’t settle at being a “good person.” I must constantly live and think and act in positive ways that point towards Jesus as my motivation. I’m sure Thobeka feels similarly.

“Why is Christianity important to you?” This is a question I am excited to hear answered by this seemingly flawless, wise woman.

She pauses and mumbles to herself. She emphasizes that Christianity is important to her because of Jesus’ immediate offer of forgiveness to her, to me, to you, and to the criminal hanging beside him during the crucifixion. Easter was only a few weeks ago, so this story is fresh in her mind.

“When the criminal asked for forgiveness, *u*Jesus Christ⁸ responded by saying, ‘Today, I will be with you in Paradise.’⁹ He did not say, ‘I’ll think about it’ as he asked for forgiveness.”

I’ve never thought about forgiveness from Jesus in any way but this, but perhaps I am taking his unconditional mercy for granted; Jesus has always been willing to help and heal us despite our sins. Thobeka so gracefully reminds me of God’s forbearance in the concluding moments of our interview.

I return to my apartment deeply moved by my first conversation, especially Thobeka’s concluding remarks. My nervousness about conducting an interview with a stranger faded as questions and answers turned into conversation. I commit to being more honest with myself

⁸ A lowercase “u” is used as a prefix for names in isiZulu.

⁹ This is a quote from Luke 23:43 in the Bible.

about my emotional responses in future interviews and hope my participants can recognize my vulnerability. I hope that Thobeka found this helpful in thinking about her spiritual health.

Though Thobeka is a human who makes mistakes, she is an incredibly wise, gentle, humble person. Her devotion to God is incredible. Her personality is wholesome and sweet and caring. She makes me want to know and serve God better because, as a Christian, I understand the goodness of God that she spoke of. Anybody with a different or no religion would not understand this, though. How can I best express this to others? I reflect on the beauty of seeing the world by Jesus' side and how my words will never be enough to explain it.

Lectio Divina journal; John 1:29-51

April 5th, 2018

We, as humans, need some sort of evidence based on the nature of our minds. It's hard for us to accept without seeing, and You understand that, and You wish it wasn't that way, but You know the reality of it as a human. God, you're so cool. You've thought of so many things. "You will see much greater things than this." You show us Your glory because we can't put it into words, and when we do put it into words, we don't believe it. You can't accurately or fairly or adequately describe what it means to have faith. I don't even know what it's like to have faith in You without using physical representations as analogies. It's like a flush. It's a flush followed by a sigh of relief. It's the calm you get after you had a really hard cry, and there's just a peace that settles down from the ashes of despair that have been floating around in the atmosphere around you. It's the feeling that you get when you're overwhelmed staring out into the mountainscape knowing that you are so small compared to a single mountain, let alone the entire universe, but also the security of knowing that you still matter to the Creator of it all. That's what it's like to be spiritually healthy. It's getting those feelings- things you can't even plan or necessarily actively try to conceive or experience. They just come to you when you need them, sometimes when you don't know you need them. And God, when we need reminders, You give them to us. You give them to us because sometimes we don't realize that those feelings are enough. Sometimes we need to see to remember that You're still there. God, You promise us so many wonderful things, and You have to give it to us in words and stories and in tangible things that we can consider, parables, because we won't comprehend it otherwise. That's a limitation of our brains, that we as humans need those stories and words and sights and things that we can touch and feel, more than

just our emotions. We don't trust our emotions if we don't have the evidence to go along with them. That's what faith is. It's trusting that things aren't just a coincidence. It's the excitement that you get when you know it's not a coincidence anymore because you have faith and trust that Jesus is working in your life. God, You're so good and I pray that I don't need signs from You in my day-to-day life to remind me of Your goodness. I pray that I just rest in Your goodness. I pray that I'm able to actively and subconsciously know that You're here with me. You're working in my life whether I can see it or whether I'm very blind to it. God, I thank you for that work that You're doing in my life. You are good. You are holy. You're so much more than words can say (Personal journal, 2018, April 5).



Msizi

I approach the gated door of a house on a breezy day in Masxha. The top half of the door is open, and I peer through to see Msizi sitting on a maple-colored arm chair. He is watching a classic version of “Cinderella” on his television before standing up to greet me and let me into the house.

"Sawubona, Msizi. Unjani?"

"Ngiyaphila. It's so nice to finally meet you."

He sits again on the maple chair, this time in a cross-legged style that embodies his childlike wonder with spirituality. I find this ironic as he explains his annoyance with attending church as a kid.

That's when I used to go and see people pray, but I didn't understand... I was always looking like, 'Why are they closing their eyes? Who is this person they're talking to?' You know, there was also at the point where my family was dying. I went to my grandma and said, 'Grandma, why is my family dying?' She said, 'God is calling them back.' I was like, 'Why is this 'God' not being arrested for killing people? Something's wrong!' But she said, 'They are His people, so He has given, He is taking.' But I decided I was not having this life. I don't like this. I don't like this person. There came a time where it was time to go to church, but I didn't see the point. I didn't see the need. I was spiritually unhealthy. I will die eventually, so why would I go to someone who is just going to kill me? Why pray to someone who is going to kill me at the end of the day?

We laugh about this idea; I'm thinking back to sitting in the pews of Trinity Lutheran Church with a coloring book and a 64 pack of crayons, kicking and screaming when my parents

told me I was too old to resort to worksheets during worship. Nothing about organized sitting, standing, and singing was interesting to me as a child.

I ask him how he came to be a Christian after much protestation as a child.

He explains that his mother enrolled him in Catechism classes despite his detestation. As he learned about the church, he traded his annoyance for admiration. Through his time in confirmation classes, he became interested in helping the church as an altar server. I'm not Catholic, so I ask him to explain the significance of this role in his life.

“One priest said, ‘Sitting in an altar is like sitting on your parent’s lap, and that parent is Jesus...’ I help the priest in breaking the bread, breaking the lamb and stuff like that. It’s something so pure and something so lovely that I love to be a part of.” I am struck by his dedication to God and his church. For this reason, I give him the name Msizi, meaning “helper” (Arshi 2017). It is at mass where Msizi feels most connected to God, craving to be in the place he feels most at home daily.

"What's the relationship between your religion and your Zulu culture?" I ask him, curious about his response since he's so dedicated to his church.

The conflict between his church home and the home in which he lives is apparent in his answer.

At home, we're given this belief, and at church, it's this belief. At home, it is the ancestral, spiritual world. At church, there is another spiritual world. These two do not coincide. It just clashes. You find that these from home, spiritual, ancestors are people that once lived like us. And, it's something that I see in life that happens when people don't follow customs and do these, they get angry and they punish you in some sort. Whereas here, we're believing in God because we don't need to slaughter any cow, goat, or have any sacrifice because the sacrifice was made when Jesus died and stuff like that. What I think, as much as I acknowledge my ancestors, I don't know I acknowledge it, but I see Christ more. I see God is more important. I would say it's quite an imbalance because one, you'll practice both and if you don't practice the others, one will call you a heathen within Christianity if you're doing [traditional practices], and if you're doing Christianity and you're not doing [traditional practices] they will call you stupid because you're not practicing what you are as an African. These are our African roots. These were done by our forefathers. Why are you not doing this? Why are you doing something that came, that is quite foreign to us? That's what we Africans believe. As much as we, yes, we do believe in Christ, but it came with foreigners to us and introduced them to us. Hence yet this is what we were doing. This is what our forefathers were doing, and it worked for them. I would say the relationship between the two is imbalanced.

He seems almost relieved to admit this internal conflict to me, or at least I am relieved for him. I wonder if living in a Zulu community while also being heavily involved at his church built a dual identity for him. I know I've felt similarly torn by the competing keystones of Christianity and science. A sticker on the door of a biology professor at my home university comes to mind. The classic Christian fish symbol with feet growing out of the bottom adorns the sticker along with the word "Evolution". As a Cell Biology and Biochemistry dual major, I value and believe in theories like evolution and the big bang because I have a foundational understanding of their roles in science and the world. Still, the total time I've spent researching how to fit this scientific framework between the lines of the Bible has amounted to hours and hours during my college experience. I search for views of how the Bible can be scientifically accurate. I often feel like an imposter when I'm with a group of only Christians or only scientists. How can I call myself either if I question the foundations of each? Reconciling such different views of the world is arduous.

Msizi explains his culture and Christianity so eloquently that he clearly listens to both frames of thought. I know I've struggled in college with passive-aggressive comments about the incompatibility of Christianity and science. He is so faithful to God whom he knows so much about, but does he struggle with the criticism Christianity can face from people in his Zulu culture? This is a question that I'll have to leave unanswered, I think.

From there, my mind jumps back to his response. I look down at my pale hands and am reminded of his remark about Christianity being introduced by foreigners.

I flashback to my ISP proposal, sitting in Clive's office talking about whether to include literature about colonialism and missionaries.

"Do you think it will be relevant to your research?" he asks me genuinely.

"I'm not sure. It obviously has impacted Christianity, but my project is more so about spiritual health," I retort. I decide to read some articles, but I don't include my research in my proposal. There are so facets of spiritual health that I want to explore, so colonialism and missionary work are placed on the back burner, merely ideas that I don't anticipate resurfacing.

However, in the present moment, I sit here more aware of my presence in Cato Manor than ever before. Here I am, a white, Westernized Christian, asking a Zulu Christian about his spiritual health in the comfort of his own home. I become very aware of my privilege and the history of my skin. Obviously, I was able to write off colonialists and missionaries as irrelevant

and distant from my project; I am not a victim of their history. Growing up in a predominantly white, rural area of Pennsylvania made me somewhat oblivious to the power dynamics rooted in the world's racialized past. It is one of the reasons I wanted to come to South Africa, to expose myself to diversity and conversations I'd never seen or had before. Msizi's tone isn't accusatory, suspicious, or angry, but I realize this dichotomy as I leave his house, taking his stories with me.

Does
my skin
remind them of
history book
pages

when
I ask
to talk about
ancestors and
God?

Makayla Lagerman



Busisiwe

I call Busisiwe on the phone. "Is it okay if I come over now?"

"Yebo. I'll see you soon," she responds. Busisiwe graciously agrees to speak with me after her long day at work.

She opens the door as I arrive and gives me a hug.

"We do the interview now?" She is excited to talk to me; I can tell by her strong initiative.

I nod my head and she leads me to a room. Busisiwe motions for me to sit on the mattress next to her, and I plop down. Leaning intently toward me as we sit side-by-side on the edge of a bed in her home, she asks, "What is your project?"

As I explain again the details of my ISP, I dig my feet into the fur of a goat skin rug on the floor, the remnant of a ceremony her family had performed a few months prior. I feel like her stories about her ties to traditional Zulu customs will be interesting.

We jump straight into conversation. Busisiwe's excitement to share her strong beliefs in both God and the ancestors burst out of her. She talks for several minutes at a time when I ask her a question.

“What are your most important beliefs in life?”

She responds regarding the compatibility of the two transcendental entities she holds dearly in her life.

I believe in Jesus. Nobody else. Another thing, I believe in my ancestors, too... They can work together because the Bible said the time Jesus Christ came, he said, 'I'm not here to delete your things or conceal your things or rituals. You have to continue where you are. I'm coming to fulfill your things, not to cancel your things...' So why do we not continue with our rituals? Why not? We also find that there is a connection between our rituals and our God because the spirit is depending to God.

I've never heard of that Bible verse. I'll have to look it up later.

I ask her more about her relationship with her ancestors since I don't have a personal understanding of their role in a person's life.

Our ancestors are helping us to show us, to warn us, to give us maybe luck. That is what we believe in, that our ancestors sees behinds because they passed. They are died already. They are a stage that is passed. Me, I'm not in their stage. I have to die first before I can see many things. They can see more than me. They see things before I see. They can tell me more, the things that I can't see because they jump to the stage. Maybe they can tell me about more things that are coming, go this way, do this way. But if you can't listen to them, things will hit you.

It's interesting that she says her spirit is dependent on God but also speaks about her ancestors. Her ancestors can protect, warn, and punish her. Meanwhile, she strongly emphasizes during our conversation that God is the owner of her spirit because she and all humans are made in His image. This Bible verse makes me smile; it's mentioned frequently at my home church, and it's always been comforting to me to know I have a special connection with God because of it.

Busisiwe agrees. “There is a relationship between me and God because He put his spirit in my flesh.”

When I struggled with self-image and poor eating habits during my teenage years, this idea was continually brought to my attention. In a sermon, one of my pastors said she has the

words “You are the one Jesus loves” written on her mirrors. That day, I went home and wrote this in big block letters on my mirror with a dry-erase marker. How could I be so critical of my body and mind when they were made in God’s image? If I hated myself, was I also hating God by association? I was pretty angry at the world at the time, and it probably did keep me from a relationship with God. It took years to soften the anger and self-criticism that shaped my personality, and eventually I grew into acceptance of my body and self over time. Now, the verse is taking on new meaning to me in showing the intimate connection I have with God.

“How did you become a Christian?”

She explains that her understanding of Christianity comes from the Roman Catholic church she attends and the message of missionaries she heard as a teenager. “Another mention of white Christians influencing my participants,” I think. I really must dive into this later.

Now that I know where her beliefs came from, I wonder aloud why she believes in Jesus.

“I have a relationship with God because of the word of God, because of His promise. That’s where the relationship started. If there was no promises, what is the use of relationship between me and God if there are not promises?”

What types of promises? Several come to my mind that are important to me such as meeting God in heaven and unconditional forgiveness and love, but I ask her, “What are the best promises that God offers to you?”

Busisiwe draws out her voice in a sing-song manner as she talks about the promise that her soul will go to Paradise. This is a big promise for me as well.

She continues on with more tangible expectations from God. “There are a lot of promises when you believe in Him. You will no hungry. You will live a good life. You’ve got beautiful things... I like to have some money sometimes, if there’s money that’s coming in, I feel like ‘Eish, God you love me!’ I feel that happiness.”

These are all very earthly things. I was always taught to be thankful to God for tangible blessings but to never expect them. However, my ideas of tangible blessings are luxuries compared to the food and money that Busisiwe probably dreams of. Cato Manor, the township in which she lives, has a median income of R14,600¹⁰ (eThekweni Ward 29 2011). Busisiwe has a job, but her home is one of the more austere government-provided homes in the neighborhood.

¹⁰ Equivalent to less than 1200 USD

When I ask her about a time that she was spiritually unhealthy, she shares a story about her job loss before her husband's death even comes to mind. When I think about the significance of money to Busisiwe, I understand why she holds God's promises of fullness, wealth, and abundance so dearly. Even as a college student from a poorer area of the country indebted with loans for tuition, I have never lived with the same kind of monetary uncertainty that Busisiwe experiences.

"I become very happy if I see the blessings. I feel like I can smile and go to church. I want to talk about it and stand up and talk about my blessings. If I received the blessings to tell everyone that I'm blessed. That is why I like blessings."

"I like blessings, too," I respond. We laugh together, and she seems especially joyful thinking of the promises God has with her. She thanks God and her ancestors for the chance to be self-sustaining and the hope they provide her. For this reason, I give her the name Busisiwe which means "blessed" in isiZulu (Arshi 2017).

As the evening settles in, I call an Uber on my iPhone, a device likely worth a large percentage of Busisiwe's family's yearly income, to pick me up from Busisiwe's home. Pulling away from Masxha back towards my cushy apartment in Windemere, I wonder how to come to terms with the fact that we're both made in God's image but receive such different blessings from Him. I sigh, happy after talking to Busisiwe but frustrated by the inequality in the world.

Journal entry

March 30th, 2018

I've been very anxious lately because, on top of doing work for my ISP, I also have to find a new internship for the summer because the one I earned fell through. My fingers are crossed and I'm saying many prayers. I think it's easy to have an artificial, exclusively beneficial relationship with God if I'm not careful. Asking for His help alone without thanking, praising, and asking for forgiveness makes me susceptible to this. Honestly, sometimes that's all people use God for- for things. I don't know how to feel about that because He *is* all-powerful and a provider, but He also is a lot more than that. I feel like seeing people's faith in God in Cato Manor has shifted my ideas about this, though. It's kind of a privilege to feel as though I can pray to God without necessarily needing anything from Him. In Cato, some people need so many things. It's like the basic level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs must be fully satiated before people can or realize

that they can pray for more spiritual things. I'm blessed in so many ways, and I know I'll find work to do this summer regardless of whether or not I like the position. I will be able to make money. I'll have access to my own space and food and job during my summer break between years of my incredible education. However, my homestay family may not get to look forward to that. My neighbors in Masxha may not be blessed with all their basic needs. They turn to God in times of struggle and praise Him endlessly when they continue surviving despite their hard circumstances in life. They seek His blessings almost because they need to. When they have nothing, they still have their faith in Him. That's definitely something I can learn from my time here. Ngithanda abantu futhi abantu uthanda uGod.¹¹



Nokuthula and Nofoto

Nokuthula's home rings with cries of a baby and conversations filled with laughter. I hesitantly approach her door since I've never met her, and I don't want to interrupt the chaos of a home.

I knock and call out, "Sawubona!" to the busy house.

"Yebo!" I hear a few voices call back.

A young woman holding a baby greets me and invites me inside. She has a calming, motherly presence, and I am at ease in her home.

"Please sit down," she welcomes.

"Oh, yes. We can be friends," laughs a second voice. I turn into the living room and notice another young woman in a solid green dress seated on the sofa next to where Nokuthula gestures for me to rest. "My name is Nofoto."

I explain the terms of my informed consent form, emphasizing the confidentiality component. However, both women desire to do my interview together, saying, "It's fine. You can do both of us."

I take a deep breath and shift my mindset. I feel awkward asking Nokuthula's friend to leave since she was here visiting for the evening when I arrived. I don't necessarily want her to

¹¹ Translated in isiZulu: "I love the people and the people love God."

leave, either. Maybe this could be a good chance to create a dialogue between two Zulu Christians.

I ask about their churches, and Nokuthula goes to an independent Christian church while Nofoto attends a Zion church. I don't know much about independent churches in South Africa, but I remember reading that Zion churches were well-liked by their congregations because they were seen as "African churches" (Anderson 1992). Both women identify as Christian, and they tell me that they also communicate with ancestors through traditional practices.

As these women talk, I notice an extreme misbalance in communication. I focus on trying to manage Nokuthula's quiet, agreeable personality on which I based her name that means "peace" and "tranquility" (Arshi 2017) with Nofoto's more opinionated, dominant one. It's honestly quite tiring to be so engaged with both.

We speak about the contradictions in rules of the church, specifically the judgement associated with having sex or getting pregnant outside of marriage and the taboo topic of ancestors in church.

If they are this aware of problems in the church, I wonder how their faith and spiritual health are impacted by them. "How has Christianity shaped your identity?"

Nofoto answers after a brief pause. "It changed many of us from believing in our culture. It took us away. It changed us."

I wasn't expecting to hear that answer during my interviews with Christians.

Nofoto emphasizes the separation that she understands to exist between religion and the traditions and the role that her ancestors have as messengers of prayer to God and as autonomous, supreme beings.

I notice that Nokuthula nods her head in agreement as her friend speaks. She has been overpowered by Nofoto's answers recently, so I repeat my question and address her directly.

Nofoto is quiet for the first time in a while as Nokuthula speaks. "Being a Christian means a lot of things," she says. "It means I have to trust in Him whenever I feel down. When I feel sad, I have to go to Him. I have to do whatever He wants. I have to talk to Him. I have to please Him."

These two people answer this question so differently that I'm a bit surprised. I thought they may be influenced a little bit by one another's thoughts, but they seem so different.

We're about thirty minutes into the interview, and Nokuthula leaves for a few minutes to take her baby to a different room. Meanwhile, I ask Nofoto, "What does being Christian mean to you?"

I can't say I'm a Christian or such because I'm not sure about God. On the traditional-wise... Ancestor-wise, I can be sure because my great-grandfather, somebody saw him. He was alive, and someone saw him. God. Nobody's alive and saw him. My great-grandparents, they have pictures and can prove that they saw him. She knows him. She's his daughter or something. Nobody has seen God... I do believe in God sometimes. I also do believe in ancestors sometimes. There comes a situation where I tell my heart that this for sure needs God. Then this for sure needs my ancestors. It needs traditional things. There comes a time like that. The reason why I'm saying sometimes God and sometimes ancestors is I have this thing that nobody's sure about God. Nobody's sure about the ancestors. Nobody's sure about everything... (Nofoto 2018, April 8).

My mind goes blank and I try to keep my expression neutral despite my frustration. This interview is ruined now. I've spent so much time with these two women, and one of them doesn't necessarily believe in God. I specifically sought out Zulu Christians to be interviewed. Is this my fault? Did I put words into her mouth for the past half an hour? Did she ever actually tell me that she was Christian? No, she must have. She told me about her church and how she communicates with God and her ancestors. She did talk about Christianity pulling people away from their culture, though. Should I have seen this coming? How do I continue with this interview? I can't neglect Nofoto entirely, but I'm not sure if her answers will help my project at all. What *is* a Christian, anyway? I'm so confused.

I don't have much time to think about all of this because I must continue the interview. I take a deep breath. Keep going. You can handle this. I ask her to elaborate a little as Nokuthula comes back to the room.

Nofoto admits that her doubt stems from unanswered prayers and the loss of her granny. Nofoto, which means "like her grandmother" (Arshi 2017), was very tied to her granny because she was raised by her. She blames God for taking the woman on whom she depended away from her, leaving Nofoto to fend for herself.

I can understand that. I, too, have blamed God in difficult moments in life. Amid my parents' divorce, I wondered why I was alone. I felt betrayed and disappointed by both my parents and God. Why would God let this happen to me? I went to church weekly, followed the rules, got good grades, tried to be a respectable person. It seemed at the time that God had forgotten about what I needed for stability in my life and left me alone as a result. I can't be

upset that she just threw me a curve ball with her answer. Maybe this will be valuable to think about later.

Nokuthula tries to comfort her friend while validating the difficulty experienced when losing a loved one. She says, “Anytime we pray, we can feel that He is there. Sometimes you pray but you cannot feel that something is happening. Maybe after a year or what and you see happen, and you say ‘Oh, that is the thing that I was praying for.’ They say that God takes time to answer your prayer.”

However, Nofoto interrupts her. “If they say God takes time, my question is, how many times has my mother prayed for me? If it takes time, all the time that my mother is praying for me, and I got born and I’m praying, why is it not happening now?”

I hold my breath and hope that this doesn’t turn into a fight between the two friends. I feel relieved as Nokuthula retorts lovingly, “He’ll answer one day, but we have to be patient.”

This back-and-forth dynamic is so interesting to see. It reminds me of the importance of community. The two women talk to one another, and it sparks new ideas one hadn’t previously considered until the other mentioned it. They disagree politely, comfort one another, and give long-winded answers when they were each passionate about a certain topic. I believe connecting with others is an important part of spiritual health. I helped lead a Bible study this past semester at my school, and I learned so much from others’ insights. Different verses stuck out to different people, and sometimes a key meaning was noticed during the study that I hadn’t found during my preparation. It was intriguing to hear everybody’s thoughts, and it was beneficial in developing my understanding of religion and faith, too. This outlet to speak about spirituality seems beneficial to Nofoto and Nokuthula and to me as an outsider learning about their culture.

I direct most of my final questions about Christianity towards Nokuthula, but I encourage Nofoto to answer if she wants. We conclude the interview, and Nokuthula runs to grab her baby again before handing the child over to me. I am surprised, but she seems excited about me holding her. I look down at her tiny face, and I can’t remember the last time I held a stranger’s baby. These women must really trust me, and I feel empowered by this idea as a researcher and a human. My heart is happy even though my thoughts are a jumble.

I leave their home after the interview excited by our conversation, slightly overwhelmed by the action of balancing two different people’s input in an interview and questioning the definition of Christian because of Nofoto’s thoughts.

Journal entry

April 8th, 2018

What does it mean to be a Christian? I'm so confused right now by Nofoto's answers, but it also makes sense in a way. When I was younger, I went to church and followed the rules and was a good girl. I thought I was a Christian. In high school, I attended Youth Group and drove my brother and myself to church when I got my license and got brunch with my pastor regularly. I thought I was a Christian. When I got to college, I joined InterVarsity and sang up front during large groups and didn't drink or go to parties. I thought I was a Christian. When I went to Chapter Camp, my understanding of "Christian" changed. I made the adult decision to follow Jesus. Is this different from being a Christian? Should it be? When I realized I didn't know God but only knew about Him, I decided to commit to developing a relationship with Him. This is what it means to me to be a Christian today. Should I apply this definition to everyone? Does my new definition of "Christian" invalidate my identity as a Christian when I was younger? Does it cast judgement on people like Nofoto who have a different understanding? Is being a Christian about the institution of Christianity? What would my spiritual health look like if it wasn't dependent on God? I don't know how to answer these questions. In fact, asking them only generates more questions and uncertainty. Is it fair to create a definition of "Christian" or "spiritual health?" Is it fair to Christians to *not* have a definition? Ugh. I don't know what to think about this.



Reverend Anele

As Reverend Anele is not from Cato Manor, we agree to meet at Circus Circus near my home on North Beach. I am sitting at a white picnic table with a canary-colored umbrella that blocks the beating Durban sun. I glance up from writing in my journal, and I see a young man dressed in a crisp white button-up shirt. He's a few minutes late, but I don't mind because I have plenty of time.

"I apologize. I just came from a prior meeting," he says.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I appreciate you coming to talk to me."

He is a busy man with a lot of responsibilities, so I'm very appreciative that he carved time out of his schedule to speak with me as a sort of "expert" on Christianity in South Africa. I ask him about his time limitations, and he says he must leave around 2:50 pm. I look at my watch. Perfect. I think we can squeeze a lot into 45 minutes of talking.

Reverend Anele is not Zulu; he hails from the kingdom of Swaziland. However, he tells me that he serves two different Anglican congregations: one mainly Coloured population, and one mainly Zulu population. These two populations have very different cultures, so that must be very interesting for him.

Aware of our limited time, we dive into our interview. I ask several questions about his views and how he teaches his Zulu congregation specifically about ancestors. He approaches them lovingly with his ideas, careful to not make anyone feel attacked in their views.

"While you are trying to hold ancestral worship and Christianity in a creative balance, it means you have not grown or learned to understand He is all-sufficient. You're still trying to find your way." For this reason, I give Anele his name because it means "sufficient" (Arshi 2017).

The Reverend tells me how he found his way in life. He grew up in family that was very involved in their church, but he felt disconnected.

In the middle of a long monologue, the words "drug addict" hang in the air. I look at his face, and it doesn't seem pained sharing this deeply vulnerable story from his life. He chronicles his many poor decisions leading to and during his first year of university "thinking that these things will give me sense of peace and spiritual health," but he "never found it there."

I've heard stories like this before. People who are on the wrong path of life, making poor decisions, falling into the wrong crowd, sometimes getting in trouble with the law until Jesus makes an appearance in their lives. I think of a man who volunteered as a waiter for an InterVarsity camp I attended; he later shared his testimony about being near death as a heroin user, finding Jesus, and getting clean after finishing jail time. It's an impactful story, and it certainly shows the power that spirituality can have on a person's life. I don't ever think I've heard a pastor share a story like this with me personally before, though.

Like the server I met at camp, Anele was free from the turmoil in his life when he turned to Christianity, saying, "I've never been so happy in my life from that moment when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." On top of serving two congregations, he also mentors

young people in tertiary school who are interested in pursuing a career in the church. It feels so easy to talk to him. The ease of conversation makes complete sense considering this fact; he shares information about Christianity and himself regularly with people my age.

I check my watch and realize we are quickly approaching the end of our time together. Because I know he attended seminary, I take advantage of his knowledge of the Bible to talk about the Gospel of John. I've been reading the Gospel of John daily during my time in South Africa, reflecting often on its implications for my life.

“What insights do you have about the Gospel of John?” I inquire, and he chuckles.

“Do you have anything more specific? I could write a whole thesis on John.”

I narrow my question to what he finds is important about spiritual health in the Gospel, and he responds with one of Jesus' most popular stories, the parable of the vine.

In chapter 15 of John, there is word picture that John is using: that of the vine and the branches. Jesus says, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. I appointed you, speaking to John and his crew- the apostles, to bear fruit.' See now, we're talking about spiritual wellness. The fruits of the vine connecting with the branches in our instance, the emotional and spiritual health could be referred to as the fruit. Where does it come from? It comes from that intimacy between the branches and the vine or the stem. You can't separate the two. Once you separate the two, you won't have fruit. In fact, the branches will die. Good as dead. That is what John wants to put through. It's interesting that you found John interesting given your topic. That is what comes through for John. Not just any relationship. An intimate relationship with the Lord which he even uses a word picture of a vine and its branches to bear fruit.

It seems like Reverend Anele thinks I chose to read John because of its relation to my project. However, I picked the chapter before coming to South Africa based on advice from the Intervarsity website that John is a good book to read following Mark, the only other book of the Bible I've read in its entirety. It has been quite relevant to my time in South Africa, and I wonder if it subliminally influenced my ISP topic choice.

To think of spiritual health as the fruit on a vine that represents God is a new way to frame my topic in a Biblical light. It represents the intimate connections we have with God. Anele said, “Spiritual wholeness comes from that intimacy with the Lord. The spiritual health, the well-being, the tranquility, all of that comes from an intimate relationship with Him.” Being in church, reading the Bible, and checking off deeds from a list of seemingly Christian tasks do nothing for us if we aren't striving for a relationship with God; I've been guilty of this mindset too often in my life.

My first year of college, I got involved in InterVarsity because I wanted to meet people who didn't drink or do drugs, followed the rules, and were kind. Unfortunately, at the time, I was very judgmental towards people not fitting this mold. Clearly, I naïvely thought, Christians would fit these standards. While getting involved in the chapter, I joined the worship team. I had never listened to popular worship music before because my Lutheran church sang hymns and my family wasn't religious outside of church. However, I started because it seemed like something all Christian college students did. I sang up front with a senior who was very strong in her faith, and she always closed her eyes and lifted her hands when singing because she felt moved by the music. It felt unnatural to me, but I followed her lead because I thought it was what people expected of me as a worship leader. Looking back, I'm embarrassed that I put my worth in arbitrary deeds and judged others so harshly for actions I viewed as sinful. I thought my mindset was favorable in God's eyes, but it destroyed my spiritual health. I didn't know God at all, and I didn't really know myself either because of it. It wasn't until I accepted that Jesus loved me regardless of my actions that I was spiritually whole; my intimate relationship with God was responsible for it, as Anele said.

I check my watch yet again because I'm aware that Reverend Anele has a time limit. He also looks at the time of 2:55 in the afternoon. I feel so terrible for keeping him late, but he offers to stay for another 15 minutes or so. His full attention is on our conversation, and I am humbled by the fact that he's giving so much of his time to a stranger he just met. He adds his final thoughts about spiritual health before taking off.

"Can I buy you a drink or a dessert for the road? I feel bad that I kept you over your time, and you didn't order anything!"

However, he politely refuses my offer. I thank him again as he departs, and I sit back down at my white picnic table.

Digging through my backpack, I find my Bible, its navy cover well-worn from the 13 years it's been in my possession. I thumb through the pages to chapter 15 of John to read about the parable of the vine. I love the interconnectedness and decide I want to somehow include a simple picture of a vine in my autoethnography. Following the analogy of the vine and the branches, Jesus speaks these words: "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you should bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:7-8 NIV). I smile and realize that

God was in the midst of my conversation with Reverend Anele. This verse was shared during a worship team practice my sophomore year of college, after I became comfortable with my relationship with God and stopped holding myself to arbitrary expectations. I had long forgotten about it until reading through this section of John while in Cato Manor. It stuck out to me so much that I wrote it on a Post-It note and taped it to my wall, one of the few things adorning my plain bedroom.

Here I am again, reading about words and wants and bearing fruit. I lean back in my seat feeling a sense of peace wash over me. I close my eyes, smile, and pray.

Journal entry; John 15:1-17

March 6th, 2018

Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches that can be fruitful because of the life He gives to us. What does it mean for me to be fruitful? Showing God's love to others? How do I best show God's love to others? Music? Telling people about Him? Working with kids? Writing? Hopefully my ISP will be good fruit in whatever soil I'm in. It's kind of cool how a vine, branches, and fruit are so interconnected. We get life from God. Jesus connects us to God. You can be really fruitful one season but bear very little the next. That gives me a lot of hope because I feel like I was in the latter for so long. Sometimes I would feel really connected to God and would have a lot to show for it, but I would still feel like I'm missing out on something in my relationship with God. This passage says that God's joy completes our joy, and that's a beautiful concept. I finally got a little glimpse of this and being fruitful on the mountain in Nzinga. I hope I can continue growing closer to God.



Funani

I meet Funani and immediately notice his calm nature. He's relaxed, leaning back in his chair with his ankles crossed. He speaks softly but surely and seems to have a good idea of his place in the world.

When he tells me that spiritual health helps guide your purpose in life, I ask, "And what is your purpose?"

Based on the way he moves his head backwards, I think he's slightly startled that I care enough to ask.

"To influence people positively. Whatever walks of life they may be from."

His openness and accepting attitude becomes even apparent in his melding of Christianity and Zulu culture and his interest in learning about other religions.

I'm Catholic, but I'm also Zulu, so there's different teachings. They can also merge together. In what I've been taught, because I've been brought up in a Catholic family and I went to a Catholic school, but then again, I've also been brought up in a Zulu family. So, the teachings that you're taught in a Zulu family are to be able to get by in life as a man and just have some dignity. Be respected within the community. Do what's right. In all that I do, I find a way to do what's right. I just grew up with a family that told me to do things right.

He says both Christianity and Zulu culture played a role in instilling this value in him. He leans back and tells me about his general opinions on spiritual health, life, and healing.

His answers are vague. None of his stories are specific examples from his life; instead he shares generally about his perceptions and how they are a result of his own experiences. It's different than how my other participants have answered, and I want to know more about Funani's story. Since he doesn't share many details or concrete stories, I don't feel very connected to him during the interview.

Despite being guarded, which I realize isn't necessarily a bad thing or something I can fault him for, Funani explains his faith well. "It all boils down to belief. If you don't believe it will happen, it probably won't happen. But if you trust and believe that it will happen, then it will happen." He puts this faith in both his ancestors and God while recognizing he also must work to accomplish what he wants.

When I ask Funani if he is spiritually healthy, he replies, "Not yet."

I'm taken aback by this answer.

He elaborates a little further. "Not yet. I'm still heading there. I'm still in the process of building character."

He defined spiritual health at the beginning of our interview as "a way that you individually connect with your inner spirits and inner self. It's how you connect with the world, not just your perspective of what you think the world is like," so I wonder if his answer about his own spiritual health must relate back to his connection to his inner self and the world.

He's a young guy. His response seems somewhat profound and mature to me. He says he will know when he is spiritually healthy "once I feel that this is what I believe in and this works for me, look where it's gotten me."

This answer seems to show that certainty and experience trump faith and expectation for Funani, which is why I give him a name meaning "search" or "want" (Arshi 2017). I think about my own journey to spiritual health on the car ride home. From growing up in a Lutheran church and placing value in deeds to developing a close relationship with God in college, from my parents' divorce to poor mental health, from feeling distanced from God at times to being so aware of His presence on a mountaintop in Nzinga, I realize that God has taken me many places. If I measured my spiritual health on where God has "gotten me" during life, I don't know when I'd be able to stop, reflect on my life, and be content enough to say I made it.

Journal entry

March 29th, 2018

How much of faith is precious? How much of it do I want to keep to myself selfishly so that I can celebrate my own personal relationship with God, and how much does God Himself expect me to share our relationship with others to show them the beauty of a life with Him? These are things I've been wondering recently: the preciousness, the purity, the selfishness of faith and how it can make you feel. As far as spiritual health, when you think about it for yourself- you're usually thinking about it for yourself. I've very rarely or actively considered other people's spiritual health or spiritual wellness, but I like to think that when I live out my own and I'm spiritually healthy that I'm giving hope to others who aren't hopeful at the time. I hope that I am a positive influence in the life of people who need to or who are working on their spiritual health or who are working on or asking for it to be worked on by God.



Nonjabulo

Nonjabulo and her radiant personality consume the room we are in. Her name itself means "happiness" (Arshi 2017). I sit across from her, drawn to her continuous smile.

"Can you tell me about a time when you were spiritually healthy in your life?"

She tells me about the past few months during which she's had a job. She smiles thinking about it. She prefaces her story with moments of being spiritually unhealthy. Life has not always been full of this vibrancy for her. My heart sinks into my stomach as she shares feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness that used to cycle through her mind and deeply affect her spiritual health; I can relate to them all too well. Memories of sitting on a wooden bench, dialing the number for the Bucknell Counseling and Student Development Center on my phone, and breathing irregularly while trying to hold back tears seize my mind. I had put off this call for months because of being too busy or too tired or not depressed enough to warrant an hour-long appointment. However, I was also too busy and too tired to continue managing the feelings of emptiness and blankness that I felt all day, every day.

"It's like stress, but it's not really stress. It's like you're not right in your mind or in your heart. Even prayer is not helping at some points. When you lost faith and you're in a point of suicidal thoughts, and you feel hopeless. I don't think that's healthy."

I question whether to include this segment in my ISP because I don't want to violate her confidential medical information. However, I did tell her several times that I don't want her to share anything about her personal health with me, and she seems very comfortable telling me. She quickly jumps back to the joy she's experienced recently, giving me an indication that she has moved past her struggles being spiritually and mentally unhealthy.

She found purpose in her life through her job "I was able to smile not just from the outside, but the inside too. I was able to eat whatever I wanted. I was able to laugh more. I felt free. I felt like now I was in a happier place in my life."

Her words resonate with me. A change of scenery impacted my mental health, too, as I left college to return home for winter break. During this break only a few months ago, I was in my boyfriend's kitchen making guacamole when a new, catchy Maroon 5 song came on the speakers. We stopped mashing avocado for a dance interlude, doing motions that reflected the lyrics of the song. I dropped to the floor attempting a move and failed horribly. I sprang back up, and we both looked at each other before bursting into laughter. My heart was full, and I thought, "Wow. This is what it feels like to be happy again." It was exciting and overwhelming, and I never wanted to lose the feeling again.

Nonjabulo continues, saying that putting her faith in God helped her overcome her sadness. She trusted in him even when it felt as though prayer was not working.

“What were you thinking during that time?” I ask. Maybe her thoughts will relate to the frustrations I experienced when I struggled with depression. I prayed to God out of desperation, asking Him for help and happiness. Eventually, when my prayers weren’t being answered, I stopped saying them and sank into a deeper depression. I resented God for letting me suffer, and I didn’t want to seek Him for help if he had forgotten me anyway. It wasn’t worth the energy.

“Prayer is powerful, Makayla. Prayer is very powerful. God doesn’t answer you the time. Not your time, but God’s time. And God’s time is good time.” On the other side of the struggle, I can see how she can realize this. However, during difficult times, this thought was not on my mind at all.

She tells me that prayer is her favorite way to connect with God, and she hopes to follow in her mother’s footsteps and one day learn to speak in tongues. “You can speak the language He understands, nobody else understands. Like, mmm. You won’t understand. It’s a relationship you have with God that’s so special.”

I remember a time when I visited a new church near my college with some friends. We arrive, and the people are so welcoming. We sit down near the front because those are the only seats left. About an hour and a half into the service, we get antsy. The bulletin shows that there are still quite a few songs and segments left, and we must get back to campus for an event. At this same time, a woman behind us starts speaking in gibberish. I can’t make out a single word she is saying during one of the pastor’s prayers. I don’t understand what’s happening. I’ve never experienced something like this during church. We quietly make our way out of the church to head back to campus. My friend asks, “Was that woman speaking in tongues?” I look at her inquisitively. I don’t know what this means. I’ve never heard that term before in a modern setting, but upon my friend’s explanation, it seems like that’s what the woman was doing. I think, “How odd,” but don’t really think about it again until this interview with Nonjabulo. I still am skeptical of this type of communication and find it odd and mysterious, but I respect Nonjabulo’s views and make a mental note to read more about it later.

When it comes to supreme beings, she has a relationship with God alone. She does not practice Zulu rituals or speak to her ancestors. She tells me this is a common view of born-again Christians, and Nonjabulo made the transition to this type of church from the Roman Catholic church when she was sixteen years old. “I visited, and I saw that’s where my heart is. I believe the words that they preach.”

How does her church's views on ancestors affect her identity as a Zulu woman? I think this often throughout her interview because she is a born-again Christian, but she also lives in Cato Manor surrounded by other Zulu people.

She tells me, "Being Zulu makes me proud, especially when I'm in my Zulu attire. I feel a sense of belonging. I know I'm Zulu. When I'm stubborn, I can say it's because I'm Zulu. When I'm stubborn about something, that's my defense: 'I'm Zulu. Zulus are like that.' Zulu has helped me love my Zulu culture by doing Zulu dance, the reed dance, virginity testing. I just love it."

Her Zulu culture gives her pride, though she does find faults in the "the men that take advantage of our culture. There are things I would like to change about my culture. There are things that Zulu women are believed to be like that I don't want ever. They tell you a Zulu woman is supposed to be conservative, submissive, you know." She also does not partake in rituals or communicate with ancestors. Her culture gives her standards like keeping her body free of tattoos, not wearing short skirts, and avoiding boys at her age. The Western feminist in me cringes internally, especially after having experienced the fervent cat-calling in Durban from Zulu men, but I ask her to continue.

"Every time we'd start being just youth and living young, wild, and free, my Zulu kept me grounded," and she accredits her culture and religion for helping her "be a better woman."

The way she speaks about her Zulu culture and God make me realize that she has strongly embraced both identities. I listen intently as she describes that, despite how her culture and religion encourage her to be a good person, she still recognizes her faults.

"I'm not 100% spiritually happy" because of certain actions that she sees as negatively impacting her. If she would give up these deeds, "maybe I feel like, I could be more faithful to God."

This view is one that I have held in my life, but I feel much freer when I believe that God wants to have a relationship with me regardless of what rules I've followed and how many good deeds I've done. I thought about this during Anele's interview, and now the theme returns. I understand that some things keep us from God, though, and whatever these negative actions are for her, they impact her spiritual health.

At the end of the interview, I walk away humbled to have been shown such a vulnerable side of Nonjabulo. I reflect on my struggles with depression and celebrate overcoming it. It took

time and a change of scenery to open myself again to God. Coming to South Africa has renewed my spiritual health, and I'm thankful for this conversation with Nonjabulo to recognize this. My story mirrors hers in many ways, and I am happy that we are both in places of greater spiritual health than we were previously. An image that I've doodled in several locations, on notes, on my white paper on my wall, in my journal, that represents my journey to spiritual health and wholeness in South Africa pops into my head as I leave. I smile to myself and think, "Ngiyaphila¹²"



This doodle holds much significance. The word, the mountains, the star and its subtle nod to the story of Jesus' birth all relate to the importance of Christianity in my life and the discoveries about spiritual health I've made in South Africa.



Sibongile

I enter Sibongile's peaceful home on a hot April day. Worship music streams from the speakers in her living room, and I hear her faintly singing along.

"This music is lovely, but would you mind if I turned it off for the interview? My recording might not turn out well if it's on." I feel bad asking this because the music really does sound nice. She agrees without hesitation, but the thread of music carries through our conversation.

"How can you improve your spiritual health?" She answers that singing bolsters her spiritual health tremendously.

¹² The literal translation of "ngiyaphila" from isiZulu to English is "I am alive." This word stuck in my mind from the first day that I learned it in my isiZulu class with SIT.

“The way I’m praising God is to sing, dance. I can fly. It’s music. Worshipping. That’s what I’m using the spirit on my side. It makes me feel better. I feel happy.”

“What is your favorite worship song?” I ask. I probably won’t know it, but she seems so excited about music that it feels rude of me to not ask.

She sings a small phrase in Zulu to herself, but she can’t remember the name of the song. For several minutes in the middle of our conversation, she searches for the name of her favorite worship song on her phone. I try to continue the interview while she’s looking and insist that we can search for it after the interview, but she is stubborn. It’s almost comical how awkward I feel sitting in silence with her while she’s on her phone. She realizes after ten or so minutes that, unfortunately, her grandson accidentally deleted it. I wasn’t able to hear the song, but the fact that she searched for so long emphasizes the importance of music in her life even more.

When speaking of her family, Sibongile’s face lights up. Even when she talks about her grandson deleting her favorite song, she smiles as she says, “He’s naughty. Very, very naughty.” She shares that she and her son attend church together, making their relationship very strong.

Sibongile surprises me by saying her family life growing up was different because her parents were not Christian. Her mom attended church, but “she just goes as if everybody is going to church, so she has to go. She didn’t understand what is happening there. The God thing.”

This is my childhood as well. I grew up going to church because most people did, and my family insisted I attend as well. “The God thing” didn’t click for me until after my first year of college, and I often wonder if my parents have this same understanding of God, or if they are simply going through the motions of religion like I used to. I’m curious about how our relationships would improve if I felt fully comfortable talking to them about philosophical and religious questions, especially because talking about God and attending church with my brother has strengthened our relationship. My brother understood the importance of having a relationship with God at a much younger age than I did, and it made me feel oblivious in retrospect that our identical church experiences produced different ideas about God for him than I had when growing up. We used to bicker and fight when we were younger but sharing stories about our spirituality made us much closer.

Sibongile found the importance of God in life when her husband passed away; she said people came mourning and told her, “‘You’re very young. The only thing that can save you in this mess is God.’ Then I understand them. I can’t live my life without God. That’s the thing.

Everything I do, I have to thank God. It's God. Whether it's bad or what, God will help with that."

Since that moment, Sibongile sees God working in good and bad moments of her life. When her husband passed away, she put her full faith in God as the people suggested she should. "My son was so small. My husband was the only one who was working. The only thing that can help me go forward to go to church. Whatever you do, you must put God first. Then your things will go up. Then, that was my life that I took when my husband passed away."

I am shocked by this bittersweet event in her life. "Thank you for sharing that with me," I say. "That must've been so hard for you."

She confirmed the difficulty it presented. She says she found a job to support herself and her son. At the time, she was also practicing cultural traditions. One day, her manager called her to tell her that her contract was voided. I think back to the start of the interview when she took several minutes to review my informed consent form. It made lots of sense in this light.

Her job loss made her reevaluate her beliefs. "When I'm doing that culture things, the job is finished. I said no. This is not me. There is somebody else. The only person that can help me on this mess is only God," and she discontinued her cultural traditions.

It intrigues me that she kept her faith in God despite one difficult time but relinquished belief in ancestors during another. I wonder if she lost part of herself or her culture because of this. It sounds like a difficult decision to make, especially because I've never been faced with this sort of ultimatum before.

I love talking to her. She's so connected to God, and I'm satisfied finishing my ISP interviews with such a spiritual woman. She had walked the paths in life of not knowing Jesus, practicing Christianity and Zulu rituals, and worshipping God alone. She, like most other people I've interviewed, is not judgmental towards people on a different path than the one she is on.

Sibongile is a woman solid in her godly foundation. Her name means "we are thankful" (Arshi 2017) which fits perfectly. She doesn't answer one of my questions without giving Him credit for everything in her life. She accepts my offer to pray at the end of my interview, and she gets down on her knees to begin.

I turn Sibongile's music system on before leaving. The song fills the air as I head out the door thankful for God, with hope for the future, and with the knowledge that my ISP had only just begun.

Maybe
for them.
But it didn't
work for
me.

Makayla Lagerman

Who am I?

I sit crying in my room. Post-It notes of Bible verses are taped to my plain, spackled wall. The phone is ringing. My tears are hot and brimming, my eyelids a delicate levee damming the emotional reservoir that's been filling for the past few weeks.

“Hey Makko. How's it going?”

My boyfriend's¹³ voice reminds me that, wow, I miss home. It's the first week with my homestay family, and I'm still politely tiptoeing around their space, afraid to make a bad impression or disrupt an unspoken balance in the house.

“It's going. I need help making a decision... Do I stick with doing an internship, or do I start an ISP?” I've never been good at choosing between two good options. At this point, I've weighed the pros and cons, and I need a second opinion.

So, we talk.

Mostly he asks me questions and I talk. He tries to feel out if I've made the choice already and am looking for validation or if I'm completely lost.

It's the latter.

“I don't know, Mak. Just remember, you told me your goal for going to South Africa was to find yourself again. I hope that helps.”

He has to leave for class, so we say our goodbyes and hang up. And just like that, a single hot tear rolls down my face.

¹³ Informed consent to include this and other conversations with my boyfriend, Matt, was obtained electronically on April 29, 2018.

This conversation doesn't help me decide, but his reminder imprints in my memory. Life continues on, but the question sits dormant within me: Who am I? It reappears with an answer towards the end of my time in South Africa.

The climb

Zulu culture is closely tied to spirituality; the word “Zulu” literally translates to “people of heaven” or “God’s people” (Washington 2010, 25). I noticed the importance of spirituality to my homestay family during my first night with them. A Bible sat on the coffee table in the living room in which we sat talking about my family’s ancestors.

The strongest difference between the Christianity and African religions or Africanized Christianity is the presence of an ancestral dimension. Western Christians speak to God through Jesus Christ. This is the Christianity I grew up knowing. I learned to bow my head, close my eyes, fold my hands and pray, “Dear God...” finishing with “through Jesus’ name we pray, amen.” It was not until interacting with South Africans during my ISP that I realized there could be another option.

Literature said that, like Jesus’ role in my beliefs, the ancestors act as a liaison between people on Earth and God. They are celebrated rather than worshipped by followers of the religion (Mokgobi 2014). This is an important distinction because ancestral worship clashes with one of the ultimate tenants of Western Christianity: monotheism.

Because African religion reveres and holds God in the highest regard, worshipers do not speak directly to Him. Their prayers and wishes are communicated to Him through the medium of the ancestors. This is often aided by enlisting the services of a traditional healer who advises on how to communicate with the ancestors... (Mokgobi 2014, n.p.).

Talking to God is such an important part of my faith. I can complain, praise, ask for guidance, confess sins, and more through communicating with Him. When I initially learned about this Zulu communication channel, I was a bit judgmental of the incorporation of ancestors into Christianity. It was so different than everything I’d been taught in church: You shall have no other gods before me. You can speak directly to God.

Once I recognized my viewpoint without considering it “correct,” I began truly listening to my participants and recognized the validity of each person and culture’s realities. This allowed me to understand the intersections of the ancestors and Christianity. Five Zulu participants spoke about the importance of their ancestors in their lives.

In our belief, we've got these rituals thanking the ancestors who, we believe, if we seek for help, they are the closest people to God. So, we basically, our ancestors are basically the messengers to God. So, when we pray to the ancestors to deliver messages to God. And vice versa. Just like how Jesus is the gateway to heaven, and that's how we're communicating with God through our ancestors That's how much respect we have for them. I think that's how the relation comes about. Personally, I don't know about other people. When you really want to connect with God, and you really feel that things aren't going well in your life regardless of your prayers every morning, then you would probably deliver the message through your ancestors. I think that's the time where you feel that, 'Maybe God's not listening to me. Let me deliver the message to my uncle or my grannie. Then maybe they'll deliver the message, and He'll be more attentive to me' (Funani 2018, April 10).

Because I try to seek balance in my life, I hoped to hear some different views on the ancestors. Some people shared that they turn to God for certain parts of their lives and to their ancestors for others. "I do believe in God sometimes. I also do believe in ancestors sometimes. There comes a situation where I tell my heart that this for sure needs God. Then this for sure needs my ancestors. It needs traditional things. There comes a time like that" (Nofoto 2018, April 8).

In addition to these ideas about the relationship between God and ancestors, another person was entirely unsure about their communication. If some people are very aware of the roles the ancestors played in their lives, there must be some people who are conflicted. Contrarily, Msizi was unsure of the connection between his ancestors and God. This surprised me because he seemed to have a lot of knowledge about his religion. "For Christianity sake, when a person dies, in my denomination, we believe they go to three places: heaven, purgatory, or hell. So, when it comes to the ancestral, like how did you become ancestors, when you're in those places? It's quite confusing like if they talk and stuff like that. I wouldn't know if they do talk" (Msizi 2018, April 8).

This idea of an ancestral realm confused me as well. My understanding of Christianity is that the ultimate goal is to one day join God in heaven. Is family so well-respected in Zulu culture that joining the ranks of the ancestors is seen as superior to entering heaven? Is it seen as an equivalent? In African indigenous religions, the aspiration of adherents is to reach the spiritual realm of their ancestors be revered by their earthly family and descendants (Adamo 2011). However, I'd already seen that people had differing understandings of their ancestors, so I'm not sure if the literature best represents ideas of Africanized Christianity.

To best consider how Zulu customs are merged with Christian beliefs, “it is imperative not to overlook the cultural differences that are expressed in different religious beliefs if genuine dialogue is to be achieved” (Adamo 2011, n.p.). These cultural differences, if not at odds, can become mutually beneficial in a new Africanized Christianity that seems to be practiced by the participants that spoke about the importance of both traditional and Christian values in their lives.

Two systems may merge to become one when the boundary between the systems is uplifted and the heterogeneous elements can be called elements of a new encompassing system... The encounter between different systems can also lead to the arising of new elements by which the system concerned transforms itself (Berner 1982 in Kleinhempel 2017, 652).

Zulu cultural elements and Western Christianity can blend together to form a unique, Africanized Christianity. This is not desirable to everyone, though; some wish to keep the two separate. Harmonious relation can occur where two systems coexist without direct competition (Kleinhempel 2017), and this could be ideal for individuals who practice only Zulu traditions or only Christianity. Born-again Christians are known to denounce communication with ancestors. I kept this notion in the back of my mind as I spoke to Sibongile, a born-again Christian. I was somewhat expecting her to criticize her neighbors and Zulu people who practice Africanized Christianity, but I was surprised to hear something slightly different. She said, “You can’t mix that. If you’re a Christian, you’re a Christian. Nobody can tell you what you do in your life. It won’t work to mix them. I’ve been there. It doesn’t work for me. I don’t know for somebody else, but it doesn’t work. Maybe for somebody else. I do not know. But it doesn’t work for me” (Sibongile 2018, April 13). I have an instinct that her refusal to mix traditional practices and Christianity is a result of her church’s teachings, but she recognizes that ancestral communication and Zulu rituals may be valid for somebody else.

Every participant acknowledged the subjective nature of an individual’s experience with spiritual health. During a successful dialogue about religion, “every participant recognizes the right of the others to deny and contradict the truth to which they hold and to speak their own mind” (Gort 2008 in Adamo 2011). The same is true for what I consider to be a healthy mindset when thinking about others’ religions. The following quotes struck me as best representing the respectful tolerance I experienced during interviews:

To be spiritually unhealthy, to us as Christians, is when you don’t believe in God. But, those who do not believe in- let me not say God, because they also call that one they believe in ‘god.’ Those who are not

Christians, they also think that we Christians are spiritually unhealthy because they believe in what they believe (Thobeka 2018, April 4).

Others were even more accepting of differences in ideals. Nonjabulo, a born-again Christian who doesn't connect with her ancestors communicated about her support of others.

When you go to church, they be like, 'Culture and that and that, slaughtering animals.' But I don't go home and diss that, what they believe in because they also believe in God. They also know some things are from God, but sometimes they believe that something is from their ancestors, which I'm like, 'Oh yeah, continue that' (Nonjabulo 2018, April 10).

Msizi described how his Roman Catholic church is becoming more tolerant of African religions over time.

You even had the Zulu bangle. You know when we have like ceremonies when there was a goat or cow, from its skin they will snip it and braid, and it becomes a bangle. So, when you went to church, they would take a scissors and snip it off. Really. They would say like, 'You only believe in Christ. It's not about the ancestors.' But now it has become more considerate that these are Africans. Let them be Africans. They are doing what they believe in while also believing in Christ. It's in their African roots and stuff like that (Msizi 2018, April 8).

Beyond even the religions and practices that he knows, Funani saw the importance of learning about other religions.

All I've known is Christianity and God and Jesus. Once I had grown up, I started to figure out other religions just for the knowledge. I can't just stick to one religion and know one religion. As much as I may not believe in other religions, I need to have information about it (Funani 2018, April 10).

Though Reverend Anele did say regarding Zulus' animal sacrifice to the ancestors, "When they sacrifice, it is more than remembrance" (Anele 2018, April 10), he did also recognize the importance of honoring people of the past.

We come to the place that even the church is where it is because of the people that have gone before us- the apostles, the people who were with Jesus. That is how we inherited our faith. And then, the generations and the generations. Some, we do recognize their contribution in the faith. The heroes of these stories which you find in the Bible who walked with the Lord, the apostles, even before them, the prophets, Abraham. People in our recent generations, people we can remember in our own churches, people we can remember and recall in our families who have walked faithfully with the Lord. We do acknowledge we learn from their perseverance in the faith because one's faith is always tested (Anele 2018, April 10).

This had a large impact on me during my project. Every person that I interviewed was accepting of others' views. This was a breath of fresh air from my own experiences in the United States where religion is often shoved down resistant people's throats.

Even after conversations with a Christian peer on this program, I found myself questioning whether they thought I was a “good Christian.” They bluntly shared their views with me while subtly trying to discredit my own personal beliefs in God. I journaled and prayed about this for a long time.

“Does this person think I'm a bad Christian because I don't believe the Bible word for word? Does my pastor? Does God? Who are these people to judge my religion? Does my potential to be ‘wrong’ about Jesus and the Bible and my interpretations mean that I'm missing out on the holy grail of spiritual truth and wellness? If I'm wrong, what have I been experiencing this whole time?” (Personal journal, 2018, March 29).

It's disconcerting to feel like you must defend your views to someone who should understand them. Though I am firm in my faith, their subtle condescension still made me feel poorly about my ideas. I found myself trying to rationalize my beliefs. This is only a small example of criticism I've experienced from this person, and we believe in the same God. A few weeks after this journal entry, I heard their claim through the grapevine that they were “the only real Christian on this trip.” That hurt. I devoted so many hours of this program to talking about religion with friends and vulnerably opened my heart to do an entire ISP that related to my religion and spirituality. I was angry to have my beliefs be made inferior. It seemed completely unfair to me.

On a broader scale, it made me think about colonialism and missionaries. I can't imagine what South Africans must have felt upon colonialist and missionary arrival. Core African values and beliefs were scrutinized and ridiculed, and many of them turned to the accepted Western Christianity as a result. In trying to preserve their culture, they made an Africanized Christianity that could represent their belief in a new God and their traditions of ancestral respect and rituals. Some scholars say that “the ultimate power of Christianity in South Africa is enshrined in the fact that it took many decades for blacks to cast aside the language and ideology of the mission” (Gerhart 1978 in Comaroff and Comaroff 1986, 18). This struggle had the potential to make Zulu Christians empathize with others who were judged for their religion or traditions. Could this be one of the deeply seeded reasons why my participants were so accepting of other beliefs today?

When it comes to colonialism and missionary work, I've always been aware of the historical impact on people across the world, but I've never been confronted with the resulting personal stories. I did not investigate African indigenous religions themselves during my ISP, but

they influence and compliment Zulu customs and beliefs, making them relevant and worth mentioning.

African indigenous religions have been suppressed in South Africa, and I rarely heard ancestral beliefs or Zulu traditions referred to as a religion in and of themselves. When colonialists began arriving in South Africa, they discriminatorily regarded Africans as “heathens” and “pagans” for practicing “primitive religions...as a result of inherited prejudices developed by past colonial theology and the feeling of superiority” (Adamo 2011, n.p.). African religions were misunderstood and judged by many white colonialists because of their unfamiliarity with African indigenous practices. General characteristics of African religions include the belief in one supreme God, strong ties to ancestral spirits, and the importance of sacrifice among other tenants (Adamo 2011). When colonialism arrived in South Africa, Christianity was also introduced. The religion was Africanized by incorporating the Christian God into African monotheism (Washington 2010).

One narrative that really struck me from my interviews was Busisiwe’s experience with missionaries. I knew this woman well from my time spent in kwaMasxha. I’d always regarded her as a faithful, strong woman of God. I asked about how she became a Christian, and the story starts with her as an 11th grader.

The Christians used to come to where I was living. I was living in the mission. The Christians used to come three times a week. They used to come and pray and praise to God. I didn’t know. They said they are believing in Lord in God in Christianity. Then I started to know maybe I love this. They are preaching the word of God. You never go anywhere if you not believe in Jesus. Always saying, ‘You will never go anywhere if you don’t know Jesus. Just accept Jesus in your life to save your life in order that you’re going to go to a right place, in order to receive a good life, in order to receive good things, to receive a good man. Now you have to accept that man Jesus.’ They are always preaching. One day, I choose to accept this; I believe in this because now there are good things that are found in this (Busisiwe 2018, April 8).

Though as a Christian, I am beyond happy that she could learn about God and bolster her faith and trust in Him over the years, this story left me unsettled. Though I believe and know that God is real and working in our lives, why am I so bothered to know that she discovered Him through people promising her things? Christianity is often criticized for its missionary practices, providing basic needs to people for their verbal commitment to God. “Missionaries were attempting to change far more than religious alliance, acting as emissaries of modernity and economic transformation” (Elbourne 2003, 442). I also find fault in this system, but I had never

met someone personally affected by it. She also shared with me that her belief in Jesus is rooted in His promises. Initially, I empathized with her. I, too, look forward to the promises of peace and life with God in heaven. I then asked her about the promises God offers to us.

He will bless us going in and he will bless us going out. He will bless my family. He will bless everything that I touch. He will bless me. I will not be hungry again. He will double my blessings, so I like those blessings. I like blessings, really. If the blessings don't come, there is something wrong that doesn't go well. Where are the blessings now? God, You promised me blessings. I can even kick my door. Where are the blessings now because You promised me! Why am I going to church and praising Jesus and praising everything? It's because You promised me good life, not a poor one, not poverty. How can I become poverty if you promised me to give me blessings? I need that blessings. It's not that I want the blessings; I need them (Busisiwe 2018, April 8).

I was left her house with a heavy heart and transcribed tearfully later in the day. She wasn't seeking exuberance or luxuries or wealth from God; she was seeking survival. Do we need good spiritual health to do this? Does it make the idea of surviving more bearable when our spirits are healthy? It appears God's promises of provision were highlighted to her somehow, and I can't help but imagining it was the missionaries she came to know in her teenage years. She believes in God because she needs to. I wept at the idea of this. There's no good way to describe the injustice in the world, but coming face-to-face with it makes me feel an odd sense of guilt for being part of this often oppressive system. This made me consider how I came to believe in God and why.

As I sat in the driver's seat of my car in my driveway beside my younger brother, I was bubbling with life. Things were going my way: good grades, the potential for a new relationship, lots of time spent with friends, and a good connection with my brother. We sat in the driveway for an extra ten minutes singing and dancing to songs on the radio before my mom came out and beckoned us inside. She seemed more tense than usual, so Nick and I gave each other a look before following through the garage and into the house, turning left to walk into the fluorescently lit kitchen. My dad was seated at his normal spot- across from me at the head of the table in a position well-situated to see the TV when we were eating dinner. My mom sat next to him, to his left and my right, on the longer side of the oval table. My brother sat next to me and across from her. My dad didn't speak, which was a new phenomenon for my brother and me. He was usually yelling at a sports game on TV or singing about our dog or announcing our names in a sing-song way. Tonight was different.

My mom started with, "Guys, your dad and I have to tell you something." He remained silent. She took the lead, not making eye contact. "You can probably tell that we haven't been very happy with each other recently." I hadn't noticed anything in particular. My parents fought about money- credit card bills and spending too much on groceries- but all parents did that, right? My mom complained about not getting enough help with the laundry or cleaning or receiving small gifts of love, but every mom complained about that, didn't they? "We were talking, and we're going to separate." I don't know what kind of legal nonsense that is, but I'm pretty sure my parents just told us they're getting a divorce. "So, you're getting a divorce," I announce. I don't even question it. My voice is flat and unemotive. "No, it's just a trial separation for now." For now, I see. That means that they haven't started the paperwork, yet. Or maybe they're actually going to try to fix things. I truly hope so. "You know I will always love your dad because he gave me you two."

At that point, I didn't know who to believe or blame, and I didn't know what to do about the deep knot in my diaphragm. I grabbed my keys and my phone, scooted my chair back quickly, got in the car with my brother again, and drove.

I drove the well-known path to my friend Matt's house in the dark through dense tears. I stood, foot tapping and knocking repetitively on the side door of his home, with my brother trying to collect myself. The door opened to Matt's mom. She had clearly been told something weird was happening, and I entered their mud room with swollen eyes and a wobbly voice. Matt who came trotting down the stairs. He saw my face, grabbed my arm and asked, "Makayla, what's wrong?" I broke down yet again as I managed to whimper, "My parents are getting a divorce." He was shocked, uttering, "Oh my gosh," and embracing me tightly as I wept. He and his mom encouraged us to go up to his room. I sat next to Matt, my brother sat to my left, and Matt's mom sat with her legs crisscrossed on the floor. They listened intently to our story and asked us careful questions. I was being physically comforted, but my brother sat diagonal from me uncomforted and seemingly alone. We only had one another in this instance.

Matt's mom said, "Would you mind if we prayed for you?" I was surprised that I hadn't thought of this; I was Christian, you know? I accepted and wept as Matt and his mom's words filled the room. I don't remember a single word of what was said, but I do remember a sense of deep wrenching combined with a small sense of peace. This was the first time anyone had offered to pray for me in a difficult time, and I remember reeling afterwards. Was this how

prayer was supposed to work? Did God make me feel better, or was I just happy to hear someone I loved validating my deep distress? Where was God in this situation? Where was God in my parent's marriage? Why hadn't He been around to help before this? Why me? Why now? These questions looped through my brain as I drove home.

Along with the ruminating thoughts of my parents' separation and the signs I didn't but should've noticed, I kept coming back to this idea of prayer in difficult times. I had been taught when younger that prayer was the response to happiness and sadness and confusion, but I'd never actually utilized it outside of church or the holiday dinner table. Today, I look back on this moment as a defining one in my life and faith. My parents eventually did get divorced, and its messiness sent off a domino chain of chaos in my life. However, it was the first of many times God was given to me in a difficult situation, and His presence in my life was more apparent during the ensuing mess than it had been any time prior to this night. Busisiwe was given God by the missionaries with whom she lived, and she was promised a better life because of it.

I'm all too aware that I could have resented this moment for myself. Why go to God if He's the one who let this happen? Something greater was moving inside of me, though. This raw, vulnerable moment spurred my pursuit of God, but initially, I questioned God and his purpose in my life. The doubts I had about God were stirred by questioning that resulted from this time, and they warred with the stories I knew about His love from growing up in the Lutheran church. I fought with these ideas until I came to have a real relationship with God during my first year of college.

Seeking God for the first time during an emotional crisis is not unheard of. "Numerous studies have suggested that a degree of psychological unease and trauma can act as a catalyst for religious change" (Gillespie 1973 and Rambo 1993 in Maruna, Wilson, & Curran 2006, 170). During my interviews, my own spiritual catalyst came to mind several times. People shared struggles with job loss and death of a loved one that made them turn to God in a similar way that my parents' divorce forced me embrace my Christianity for the first time.

When I came to God, I said now this is the way. This is the life. I am the way I am because of this man. I lose my husband when my son was four years old. We were two. Me and my son in this house. The only thing that can help me go forward to go to church. Go to church, go to the Christian. All mothers said, you know what the life is? Only the God can help you. Whatever you do, you must put God first. Then your things will go up. Then, that was my life that I took when my husband passed away. It was very hard. I was not working. My son was so small. My husband was the only one who was working. My life with God, I was

having everything. That is it. God is the only. Even if you don't have food, you don't have anything, you must ask God, "I don't know what is happening. I know you are the One." I won't sleep without food, but God makes a plan. You can see the things are happening. The only thing was getting to be a Christian when my husband passed away. That is when I decided myself that this is my life. This is my everything. Whatever I do, I have to remember this is God. If my house, my husband didn't pass away, I don't know. But because I trusted God and I go to church and I read the Bible, read the Scripture, they tell me what life what sweets of the God I will get. This is the life I will live for (Sibongile 2018, April 13).

Sibongile's story of pain impacted me when I was interviewing her and reading through her narrative while transcribing and spending time with my data made me realize why. When her husband passed away, she turned to God. Her whole world had shifted in an instant, but she trusted in God throughout the transition.

My life shifted as well; moving into new houses, living on a new schedule because of custody agreements, and working as a liaison between my two families impacted my identity and my life significantly. "Individuals are generally considered to be more receptive to religious ideologies during periods when their self-identity is questioned, placed under strain, or threatened with annihilation" (Lifton 1961 in Maruna, Wilson, & Curran 2006, 170). During my parents' divorce, Matt and his mom gave God to me as an option, and I resisted at times because I wanted to be self-sufficient as I had before. Even today, I often wade through deep, murky waters before getting to the place of clarity that God provides because of a longing to hold onto my past identity. Nofoto shared similar feelings, and she admitted she's not quite at a place of spiritual health because of it. She was very blunt about her struggles with God and her ancestors after the passing of a loved one.

If ever I come across a problem, my question is, I'd say that if only she was here. My spirit just gets affected thinking that I'm not sure if she was around that things would work out. But because she's not around, she's the only person that could help. If only she was around. If ever I'm happy, I also consider if only she was around to share the happiness with me. If only she was around, she would have understood, she would have helped, she would have advised. You do ask yourself all that stuff. If you think of somebody who has died, I don't think the spirit goes to a good mood... There comes a time when you begin to blame God. Like when I lost my granny, I blamed Him for many things. You blame God for many things when you lose someone you love. You blame your ancestors. Trust me. You say that after a time, after a while. You ask God because you're too crushed, 'I depend on her. What am I going to do? Did you even think about me when you took her?' You blame God for that. But, when things turn out okay, you also give thanks to God. If you believe in traditionals, you thank them. You thank both of them (Nofoto 2018, April 8).

Hearing Nofoto question God's existence then talk about thanking Him was odd to me. She needs to see "God Himself" to fully believe He exists, but she still adheres to Christian practices. One new question brought to my attention when writing by Clive one day was whether religion is about knowledge or faith. As a cell biology and biochemistry major, I have always based my thoughts in hard evidence. Professors at my home school have taken points off for flowery writing and making too many extrapolations from too little data.

For me, knowledge was power, and evidence to support that knowledge made my belief indisputable. I read the Gospel of John throughout the semester to learn more about Jesus. Quite honestly, I did this because the Bible is often politicized, and I wanted to effectively contribute in conversations about it. I searched for validity of the Bible and Jesus' life by reading "The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel. This knowledge has been helpful for feeling surer of God, but the author says at the end, "If the evidence points strongly in this direction, it's only rational and logical to follow it into the experiential realm" (Strobel 1998, 378).

I'm aware that some people don't have access to the knowledge about Christianity, so they must rely on faith. That's difficult to do, and it's a large reason why I have sought information about Jesus for myself. I hadn't had a strong feeling that God was present in my life for a long time before coming to South Africa, so I supplemented my sometimes-diminishing faith with information. Are churches teaching facts about God? Or do they speak only to faithfulness? Do most people care about knowledge, or do they rely on spirituality to be reaffirmed in their beliefs? Nofoto shared her doubts about God with me.

Nobody has seen God and I don't even know who wrote the Bible. The person who wrote about the Bible, did they know about writing? They used to write on stones. Where are those stones? I question myself that. Who wrote down what God was doing. God did not write. He only did. Who survived and saw every part that God took. Every healing and everything that God did. Who is that person? Why is he not mentioned? Somebody who dies... Because he was a hero and he was next to God. He saw God die. She saw everything. Where's that person? Do I think they're question themselves? Who continued writing if they died? Who knows when God stopped this? When he died? When did he start writing the other person?
(Nofoto 2018, April 8).

I listened to her speak these words frustrated because I had recently read information that could answer her questions, but I was playing a role as a researcher and not a missionary. Other people spoke fervently about their own faith as the dominant part of religion. "I think the power that we have in believing in God, that's precious" (Nokuthula 2018, April 8). Msizi explained,

“To me, being a Christian is believing in Christ. Although I have not seen Christ, but yet I believe. When I look at where I’ve been in life, all the things my family went through, here we are. We’re still surviving” (Msizi 2018, April 8).

I’m still surviving, too. Despite all the challenges that I’ve been through, I still believe in God, and He has gotten me through. During the past three semesters, I struggled with depression. It got to the point where I would pray but feel no connection to God. I did it out of habit before falling asleep until I lost the habit itself. I stopped attending large groups, I didn’t read my Bible, I didn’t pray, and I certainly didn’t think about God other than to blame Him for this state of ruin I was trapped in. I resented people who suggested I pray about my situation or hardships in my life because I was skeptical about the power of prayer. Napping for four hours in addition to sleeping over eight hours each night became my new normal. Antisocial, isolated, confused, and blank, I wanted to wallow in my own sadness, and I was too exhausted from life to try to dig myself out of the pit.

Eventually, friends and counseling helped put me back on track. My spiritual health started growing. I started picking up my “Christian” habits again. I was leading a Bible study. I was going to some large-group activities with InterVarsity. However, I still didn’t feel God actively working in my life. It wasn’t until coming to South Africa, hiking the mountains of Nzinga and swimming under the stars in the Indian Ocean that I realized “ngiyaphila.” Maybe I was distracted at home. Maybe I wasn’t putting enough faith in God. Perhaps there were evil spirits working in my soul. Either way, God’s power has shown this semester in South Africa because he has transformed my mental health and stabilized my spiritual health. I interviewed several other people who related to the story as well.

There are people who have dark things that they might not, one day just gets them sick and nothing will be found in them. It’s like stress, but it’s not really stress. It’s like you’re not right in your mind or in your heart. Even prayer is not helping at some points. When you lost faith and you’re in a point of suicidal thoughts, and you feel hopeless. I don’t think that’s healthy. During the day, you just are around people and you try to smile. When it’s quiet for a moment, you want to cry so much. It’s just like you want to cry and you feel worthless. You see no reason for living. You take it one step at a time. You open up your mind and your heart to say, “God, please help me.” I need some spiritual healing. God does give me it (Nonjabulo 2018, April 10).

It’s heart-breaking to hear words like this, especially when they resonate with some of the thoughts that have floated through your own mind. Nonjabulo said her spiritual and mental

health had improved over the past few months because of her job. She felt that her days had purpose, and she was healed through the power of prayer. On the other hand, Nofoto was still stuck in the loop of negative thoughts Nonjabulo and I had both experienced in our lives.

I know my spirit isn't healthy. It's not healthy probably because I'm stressed. I'm thinking a lot. I'm questioning a lot of things. My mother died when I was young; I hardly remember her. If ever I come across a problem, my question is, I'd say, 'If only she was here.' My spirit just gets affected thinking that I'm not sure if she was around that things would work out. I'm questioning God. Why don't I get this? I question my ancestors. Why are you not there for me? You know when you left me, you knew how things were. So, right now, it's just not healthy (Nofoto 2018, April 8).

Nofoto was the participant who shared her skepticism about the reality of God. She seems to think that this uncertainty plays a role in her poor spiritual health. I related to this a lot. During the lowest points of my depression, I 'believed' in God, but I wasn't actively seeking a relationship with Him. This allowed me to question God's existence more, clearly impacting my spiritual health. It was a negative feedback loop that affected me until I was able to remove myself.

When speaking to Reverend Anele, at the end of our interview, I asked if he had any other important information about spiritual health that we hadn't touched on. As a knowledgeable clergy person, I expected him to say yes, but I didn't fully expect what he shared.

There is an aspect of spiritual health which is very key. I have not always been exposed to it, especially in my Anglican tradition, which is deliverance. Healing goes with deliverance. One can have an intimate relationship with Christ, and it is expected that from that intimate relationship with Christ one would be well. One would have that peace. One would be able to stand well. But, it's not always the case with other people especially because, in some instances, the church, especially mainline churches have overlooked that aspect of ministry that we call deliverance. We tend to turn a blind eye on the fact that a person can be demonized. You can go through the Bible, it's all right here in the Bible, that there are evil spirits. Good and bad. There is light and darkness. These are always at your guidance. So now, being a Child of God does not make me immune to Satanic attacks or demonization. Hence, if you grow in the Lord, you need to be able to put on the full armor. There are weapons with what we call spiritual warfare. We engage with and cast out demons (Anele 2018, April 10).

I personally had never engaged with ideas of demonization or "witchcraft" (Anele 2018, April 10), but it seemed to be something worth thinking about, especially because Sibongile mentioned it as well. "I believe in that because my pastor heals people because they believe in God. They can say, 'In the name of Jesus right now, this demon must get out in the name of Jesus Christ. Out!' That is spirit of the word of God. It makes me to believe that nothing can

happen without God” (Sibongile 2018, April 13). The reverend gave an example of the power of this spiritual warfare that resonated with me.

I've laid hands on a certain man who in one of the churches that I minister to was stressed and on medication, depressed. He was counting a couple of years. Some people who are depressed, their soul is so bad that it's just demonization. But other people's is real matters which need to be dealt with. When I heard his story, I said, "No. We need to pray." We prayed, and I laid hands on him. Apparently, I was just a caretaker priest in that time. They didn't have a priest in that time, so I just go there only on Sunday and to do services for them and that's it. So, then a year later, he came to our church because he was invited. We had a Patronal First event. It was kind of like a celebration. I saw him. He was well. He was glowing. He said, 'Hey Father!' He came all the way running and there was many people. 'Pray your words!' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'You remember the time I came to your office? I made an appointment with you? No, after that prayer, I was well. I'm not on medication. I'm not depressed. My marriage is happy.' That is the aspect of healing that I'm talking about where we engage in a warfare and we confront forces of wickedness head-on (Anele 2018, April 10).

Though I've never had hands laid on me for healing prayers and I've never had a demon exorcised from me, I related to this man. Reverend Anele shared this story with me because “it's part of healing” (Anele 2018, April 10), which is related to health. In my life, healing hasn't been about exorcisms and spiritual warfare that was described, but it has been wholly spiritual. God took me from depression to hope with the love that He has for me, and He has healed my mind by improving my spiritual health. Healing has been about journaling and therapy sessions, crying over the phone to my mom and choosing to breathe deeply during stressful situations, singing worship songs on a mountain peak and hugging friends in the Indian Ocean at midnight. My spiritual health has improved thanks to spontaneous dance parties in my apartment, the promises of bearing fruit and finding complete joy in Jesus found in the Gospel of John, and my willingness to be vulnerable with others and with God.

What I've learned about spiritual health is that there isn't an “ah-ha!” moment when you feel healed. Instead, it's looking back and reminiscing on stories that slingshot you ahead to where you are now. For my participants, no clear pattern emerges regarding spiritual health. Instead, it seems to be a deeply personal experience. It's the journey that you're on with yourself, others, divine beings, and the universe and how aware you are of that journey. Thank you for joining me for a piece of mine.

Revelation

Dear God, thank you for loving us. Thank you for the incredible opportunity to come to South Africa, to do this ISP, to find myself again. You've always been here for me, and I'm sorry that I haven't always recognized Your presence in my life. I'm so happy. Happy to be alive, to be learning, to have found a deep connection with You once again through my ISP. I pray that you look over my participants, my host family, and my friends as I return home. May you give them their basic needs and bless them abundantly with the things they want. I pray that they don't know hunger because they know You. I appreciate their willingness to share their stories with me, so I could understand that the relationship between Christianity, ancestral communication, and Zulu culture is largely personal but sometimes influenced by conflict from the community and church. When it comes to their ancestors, I ask that You calm the conflict some of them feel inside. I pray that they can make sense of their identities as Zulus and Christians. God, I thank You for carrying so many of us out of the Valley of Death. I was in darkness for so long, and You were there as the light I needed. I pray that nobody has to experience the numbness and blank feeling that Nonjabulo and I felt in our lives. When I felt Your presence in Nicaragua, in Nzinga, in Margate, in so many places, I couldn't help but have hope for my future and mental health. Continue to give hope to all people. I pray for everyone's spiritual health, that they may be aware of it and find ways to nurture it. I pray that whoever reads my ISP in the future connects with the words and the stories I've shared in a way that improves their own spiritual health. God, You are good. You care and want the best for all of us. I pray that I can carry the stories and lessons learned from my ISP throughout my life in order to better connect with myself, others, and You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Taking in the view

Wearing leggings, a sweatshirt, and a windbreaker feels out-of-place in South Africa since it's typically so hot, but here I am, donned in layers upon layers. The weather is a cloudy mist, and my hands are already white and clammy after 30 minutes outside.

I look around me, my friends climbing the mountain by my side and chattering away. There is no path, just aloe plants and boulders dotting the landscape of our ascent. My feet follow the steps the person in front of me takes while being aware of loose rocks and thorns

along the way. It feels as though the peak moves farther as we get higher up. I continue because of my friends' encouragement and my strong desire to reach the top.

We reach a grassy hill, seemingly the end section of our hike. I take off running up the hill, my legs itching for speed and my spirit longing to experience the peak. Though my body is drained of energy at the top, I look out over the view and I feel renewed.

I look back at my friends and scream, "I'm on top of the world!" Though I know this isn't Mount Everest, it certainly feels like I was at the top of my own little world.

The peak wasn't a point at all; it was a flat, grassy field that extended forever. I take in the color and am overwhelmed with beauty. We take pictures with the scenic backdrop before retiring to our own spaces on the mountain. I walk myself towards the edge of the plain and sit. I stare out into the distance and feel tears on my face.

"Why am I crying?" I worry. The past few months, tears were a sign of sadness, loneliness, pain, and frustration. I don't understand how I could be feeling any of those emotions right now. It occurs to me that I'm not. These are tears of joy.

I sit there by myself but realize suddenly that I'm not alone. God is here on this mountain with me. I whisper to myself, "Ngiyaphila," and I finally start to believe it for the first time in the past few months.

I trek down the mountain in awe of what I've experienced there. I want to feel that way every day, and now I know that it's possible. The happiness stays in Nzinga, but the memory of joy travels with me. The next few days, I hit a low point in my mental health on the trip. I know I'm not quite healed, but I'm on my way, and I can rest in this truth.



We're staying in Margate. It's late, but we're all awake buzzing with conversations fueled by red wine. Somehow the idea to visit the beach comes up, and people pile on the bandwagon. We slide on flip-flops and make our way down the rocky driveway. After crossing the road, we take off running to the sand. We stand around looking at the coast line, dimly lit by street lamps from local restaurants.

"Well... what now?" one person asks.

A splash is heard from the distance, and one of us is in the water already.

"I guess that's our answer," someone else responds.

We all run, giggling about the prospect of being in the Indian Ocean at midnight. We float and laugh. I feel so free and so loved. Someone calls out and convinces us to all gather together. We stand in a circle, arm in arm, and someone says, “Look up!” My chin tilts upward, and my eyes are captivated by the vast starry sky. My heart swells thinking about the grandness of the universe. In the grand scheme of life, I am just a single story. Yet, I am part of a much bigger network of tales, ones that God is writing constantly. I look around at the faces of people in my group and realize they are now part of this story being written about me.

“Ngiyaphila,” I announce, and everybody knows the feeling.

This feeling is one that I hadn’t experienced with this type of impact since my last time looking at a clear star-filled sky on the mountain in Nicaragua. I had a glimpse in Nzinga, but I knew it was fleeting. In both Margate and Nicaragua, God’s painted night sky captivated me along with His desire for me to be whole. I recognized this spiritual wholeness in Him yet again while staring up at the expanse of outer space.

My mission for studying abroad flashes to the forefront of my mind. Finding myself again was my intention for coming to South Africa. In this moment, staring at the stars, surrounded by my new friends, and reminded of God’s love for me, I was able to find myself again by finding God again. Who am I? I am a child of God, and that is enough for me. Finally, my spirit is healthy and whole once more.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

Demographics

- What is your age?
- What is your Christian denomination?

Health

- How do you define health?
- How do you define spiritual health?
- What is it like to be spiritually healthy?
 - What are the effects of being spiritually healthy?
 - Can you share a time when you were spiritually healthy?
- What is it like to be spiritually unhealthy?
 - What was a time when you were spiritually unhealthy?
- How can you tell if someone is spiritually healthy?
 - Can you guide someone to having better spiritual health?
 - How can you improve your spiritual health?

Identity

- What are your most important beliefs?
 - What do you value about Christianity?
 - What do you value about Zulu culture?
- How did Christianity shape your identity?
- How did Zulu culture shape your identity?
- What is the relationship between Christianity and Zulu culture?
 - What is their relationship in your life?

Christianity

- What does being Christian mean to you?
- Tell me about your journey with faith.
 - How did you become a Christian?
 - What do you do to practice Christianity?
 - Describe your relationship with God/Jesus.
 - What makes you feel connected to God?
 - What does it feel like to be connected to God?
 - How has the Holy Spirit worked in your life?
 - Describe a time when you felt God's presence.

Other spiritual components

- What are other things important to your spiritual health?
 - Tell me about your relationship with your ancestors.
 - What are your opinions on traditional healing?
 - What are your thoughts on faith healing?

- How do these things affect a person's spiritual health?
- How does God help our spirits?
- Is Christianity important to Zulu culture?
 - Why or why not?
- Why is Christianity important to you?
- Do you think you're spiritually healthy?
 - Why or why not?

Prayer

- Would you like to finish our interview with a prayer?
 - Would you like to pray with me?

Appendix B: Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)

SIT Study Abroad

School for International Training



Student Name: Makayla Lagerman

Email Address: makaylalagerman@gmail.com

Title of ISP/FSP: The mountain stands: an autoethnographic inquiry into Zulu Christians' approaches to spiritual health

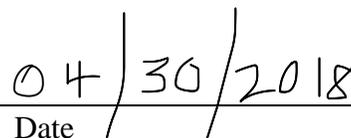
Program and Term/Year: Community Health and Social Policy- Spring 2018

Student research (Independent Study Project, Field Study Project) is a product of field work and as such students have an obligation to assess both the positive and negative consequences of their field study. Ethical field work, as stipulated in the SIT Policy on Ethics, results in products that are shared with local and academic communities; therefore copies of ISP/FSPs are returned to the sponsoring institutions and the host communities, at the discretion of the institution(s) and/or community involved.

By signing this form, I certify my understanding that:

1. I retain ALL ownership rights of my ISP/FSP project and that I retain the right to use all, or part, of my project in future works.
2. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may publish the ISP/FSP in the SIT Digital Collections, housed on World Learning's public website.
3. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may archive, copy, or convert the ISP/FSP for non-commercial use, for preservation purposes, and to ensure future accessibility.
 - World Learning/SIT Study Abroad archives my ISP/FSP in the permanent collection at the SIT Study Abroad local country program office and/or at any World Learning office.
 - In some cases, partner institutions, organizations, or libraries in the host country house a copy of the ISP/FSP in their own national, regional, or local collections for enrichment and use of host country nationals.
4. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad has a non-exclusive, perpetual right to store and make available, including electronic online open access, to the ISP/FSP.
5. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad websites and SIT Digital Collections are publicly available via the Internet.
6. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad is not responsible for any unauthorized use of the ISP/FSP by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.
7. I have sought copyright permission for previously copyrighted content that is included in this ISP/FSP allowing distribution as specified above.


Student Signature


Date

Appendix C: SIT Study Abroad Statement on Ethics

(Adapted from the American Anthropological Association)

This document must be read, signed, and submitted to the AD prior to ethics review meeting.

In the course of field study, complex relationships, misunderstandings, conflicts, and the need to make choices among apparently incompatible values are constantly generated. The fundamental responsibility of students is to anticipate such difficulties to the best of their ability and to resolve them in ways that are compatible with the principles stated here. If a student feels such resolution is impossible, or is unsure how to proceed, s/he should consult as immediately as possible with the Project Advisor and/or AD and discontinue the field study until some resolution has been achieved. Failure to consult in cases which, in the opinion of the AD and Project Advisor, could clearly have been anticipated, can result in disciplinary action as delineated in the “failure to comply” section of this document. Students must respect, protect, and promote the rights and the welfare of all those affected by their work. The following general principles and guidelines are fundamental to ethical field study:

I. Responsibility to people whose lives and cultures are studied

Students' first responsibility is to those whose lives and cultures they study. Should conflicts of interest arise, the interests of these people take precedence over other considerations, including the success of the Independent Study Project (ISP) itself, for if the ISP has negative repercussions for any members of the target culture, the project can hardly be called a success. Students must do everything in their power to protect the dignity and privacy of the people with whom they conduct field study.

The rights, interests, safety, and sensitivities of those who entrust information to students must be safeguarded. The right of those providing information to students either to remain anonymous or to receive recognition is to be respected and defended. It is the responsibility of students to make every effort to determine the preferences of those providing information and to comply with their wishes. It should be made clear to anyone providing information that despite the students' best intentions and efforts anonymity may be compromised or recognition fail to materialize. Students should not reveal the identity of groups or persons whose anonymity is protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Students must be candid from the outset in the communities where they work that they are students. The aims of their Independent Study Projects should be clearly communicated to those among whom they work.

Students must acknowledge the help and services they receive. They must recognize their obligation to reciprocate in appropriate ways.

To the best of their ability, students have an obligation to assess both the positive and negative consequences of their field study. They should inform individuals and groups likely to be affected of any possible consequences relevant to them that they anticipate.

Students must take into account and, where relevant and to the best of their ability, make explicit the extent to which their own personal and cultural values affect their field study.

Students must not represent as their own work, either in speaking or writing, materials or ideas directly taken from other sources. They must give full credit in speaking or writing to all those who have contributed to their work.

II. Responsibilities to Hosts

Students should be honest and candid in all dealings with their own institutions and with host institutions. They should ascertain that they will not be required to compromise either their responsibilities or ethics as a condition of permission to engage in field study. They will return a copy of their study to the institution sponsoring them and to the community that hosted them at the discretion of the institution(s) and/or community involved.

III. Failure to comply

When the AD(s) feel that the student has violated this statement of ethics, the student will be placed on probation. In the case of egregious violations, students can be subject to immediate dismissal under the conditions of the SIT STUDY ABROAD dismissal guidelines.

I, Makayla Lagerman have read the above Statement of Ethics and agree to make every effort to comply with its provisions.

Date: 03/22/18

Appendix D: Local Review Board form



Human Subjects Review LRB/IRB ACTION FORM

<p>Name of Student: <i>Makayla Lagerman</i></p> <p>ISP Title: <i>An Autoethnographic Approach to Zulu Christian Perceptions of Spiritual Health</i></p> <p>Date Submitted: 23 March 2018</p> <p>Program: Durban Community Health and Social Policy- Spring 2018</p> <p>Type of review:</p> <p>Exempt <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Expedited <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Full <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Institution: World Learning Inc. IRB organization number: IORG0004408 IRB registration number: IRB00005219 Expires: 30 June 2018</p> <p>LRB members (print names): John McGladdery Clive Bruzas Robin Joubert</p> <p>LRB REVIEW BOARD ACTION:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved as submitted <input type="checkbox"/> Approved pending changes <input type="checkbox"/> Requires full IRB review in Vermont <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproved</p> <p>LRB Chair Signature: <i>[Signature]</i></p> <p>Date: 23 March 2018</p>
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Form below for IRB Vermont use only:

Research requiring full IRB review. ACTION TAKEN:

approved as submitted approved pending submission or revisions disapproved

IRB Chairperson's Signature

Date