

This I Wonder
- Spiritual Journey of a Wondering Heart

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Introduction

During the past academic year of 2017-2018, I interviewed 12 people to understand their spirituality and worldviews. They are either already my friends or people I got to know through my friends and other connections. These narrators are from different age groups: 20s, 30s, 40s and 60s; from different cultural backgrounds: British, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ugandan, Irish, Senegalese, Norwegian and American; from different religious backgrounds: Christian (Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox), Muslim, Native American, Buddhist, Wiccan and irreligious. I met up with each narrator for a pre-interview session usually days prior to the interview, and occasionally on the same day as the interview was on. A typical interview session lasted between 1 to 2 hours long. I conducted the interviews many of the interviews in narrators' personal space such as their apartments and offices, and conducted a few others in my dorm at the time. The interviews follow a typical life history interview, and start off with narrators' early childhood memory, and then proceed chronologically to locate important moments and memories on their spiritual journeys. These interviews aimed at first, better understanding narrators as human beings each with their unique personalities and backgrounds; two, understanding how they arrived at their current spirituality and belief systems and how they handled challenges and doubts towards their spirituality and belief systems if they had experienced any.

My thesis started off as a nonfictional writing piece but landed on the shape of a performance, which is called *This I Believe Wonder – Spiritual Journey of a Wondering Heart*. I realized that I needed to include and use my own spirituality and belief systems as a thread connecting and making deeper meaning of the interviews I conducted. This process will be shared more in details in the reflection essay.

The thesis performance is a staged monologue on struggles and transformations along my own spiritual journey with aural landscapes of places I traveled to and stories from three of the

narrators I interviewed. The performance is divided into five chapters: “start of a wonder”, “end of a wonder”, “couldn’t help but wonder”, “allow wonder” and “still wonder”. It goes from my childhood memory to the beginning of my journey as a baptized Christian, to my trip in India which challenged me to appreciate people from other religions, to interviews I conducted last year and then to my credo and manifesto of what I believe and what I wonder at this point in life and then the performance ended with a prayer.

I was able to borrow a classroom at Union Theological Seminary. I designed the look of the stage for each chapter of the performance. For example, I had an ocean wave projector projecting colorful lights to the ceiling for the first chapter. I had a high table with coffee cups, two chairs and coffee shop posters to create the environment of a café in the second chapter. There was a mosquito net, Indian clothes hanging, cardboard, pillow and other props to create the scene in India. I also recreated a smaller version of my actual prayer room on the stage as well. Each scene was located in different parts of the room, and as I moved my body around the stage, I also changed the lighting in room and sometimes I also changed my clothes to indicate the change of geographical locations. The audiences were able to engage their bodies as they readjust the direction they sat. I had blankets on the floor, and encouraged people to sit on the floor with me to create a more intimate space of story-telling. There was still the option of seating on the seats. Besides changes in props, lightings and clothes, I also had an actress (a classmate) acting out one scene with me, and each scene was accompanied with audio sounds, such as different ambiance sounds, interview clips and music.

I performed twice at classroom A-36 in Union Theological Seminary on Dec 9 and Dec 16 of 2018. The performance started at 2:30pm and went on for around one hour. I also led short group discussions about the performance right after it each time.

Since my thesis was a performance to be experienced, I encourage you to go to <https://yiyi956.wixsite.com/this-i-wonder> to listen/watch it. A rough script of the performance is included in the next section.

Script

This I believe Wonder
– the spiritual journey of a wandering heart

Author and Producer: Yiyi
Acts

start of a wonder
end of a wonder
couldn't help but wonder
allow wonder
(light, wind, bird)
still wonder

Start of a wonder

(mini discussion first)

audio A

Now here is my story

“What’s your earliest memory?”

yeah, what is your earliest memory? Think about it. How old were you? Where were you? What were you doing? Sometimes our earliest memories tell us a lot about ourselves, about what has always been important and essential to who we are.

My earliest memory? It was still 1993 probably, when I was a few months old lying in my cradle. I remember seeing these toys hanging above my head in different colors and shapes. Red, green, orange, rectangular, round ... I remember stretching my little short arms and legs trying to touch them. And when I touched them they made this sound, B1 toy that I had never heard before. I reached over; and I touched them again. They made that sound again. I relaxed back to the cradle, but then I **wondered**.

I wondered why I was intrigued by the sound and why I had the desire to touch them/
I wondered if I **should** have that desire?

if I **should** have I acted upon it? I wondered if I was somehow controlled by that desire? This process of self-questioning, self-doubting; and the desire to believe what I should believe and do what I should do has never changed. In that sense, I've never stopped wondering.

B2 China noise

One day, when I was around 9 or 10 years old, my mom was driving me home. I was looking to the outside of the window, I saw traffic lights, buses, directional dividing lines on the road.

So I asked,

妈妈·为什么红绿灯要带黑色的小帽子？

“mom, you see the traffic lights, they wear little black caps, why?”

“mom, how does the bus driver know when to close the rear door?”

“mom, how do they decide on how far each dividing line should be away from one another?”

To all my questions

my mom always had that one and simple answer: 你哪儿来这么多问题

How in the world do you have so many questions?!

So in that car, I **wondered** again, (look to the negative space)

I wondered if I shouldn't have that many questions,

I wondered if I should stop questioning

Should I? (to the audience for 3 seconds)

Can I?

(getting up)

Spot light down

C

End of A Wonder

(lamp goes brighter next to a high table and two chairs,
with two cups of hot coffee on the table, going towards the table, wear sweater)

“Can you tell me what being a Christian means? I'd like to know how you define it. ☺”

It was Feb 7 2013, when I was a junior in college, I was asked by a good Christian friend to define the term “Christian” at a café when we were both students at Oxford University. She was not only a good friend, but more importantly, my spiritual mentor. I met with her often to discuss questions about Christianity. By that point, I already read the Bible for two years, did my prayer to receive Christ, and attending two bible studies besides going to church. But she knew the

questions I still had, and the conversation wasn't the most pleasant that day, and it made me I wondered maybe, I wasn't enough to claim to be a Christian.

(start café sound)

D

“Can you tell me what being a Christian means? I'd like to know how you define it. ☺”
(someone else says)

“ “ (to her)

(to the audience) She gently smiled at me. I slightly opened my mouth and said nothing for that second. I felt trapped. I felt pushed to say something I didn't want to say. I was scared of where the conversation was going.

(She softly smiled at me.)

(someone else) “I was just curious to know what you think the word Christian means to you. Don't feel stressed.”

(breath) (take a deep breathe, reposition posture on the chair, look into the blank space)

“well, I think I know where this is going. But to answer your question, I think the definition is that to believe that there is only one God, to believe that he created the world and loves the world; to believe that he came down as Jesus into the world and was crucified and rose again for our sin and salvation. And Jesus is the only way.”

“mhm, mhm,” she nodded and still smiling, “and do you believe in all of them?”

(breath) “I .. I am willing to believe! I've been going to church and attending bible studies. Isn't that enough?”

I desperately looked her and she was smiling.

I continued, “I guess I don't know. I don't know what it means to say that I believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, something happened 2000 years ago. How do I believe in it and know it for sure?”

“and that's okay! It's okay if you don't know it for sure now. You can ask God to help you”, (she smiled gently)

“But I honestly feel uncomfortable with that question. I feel like you are forcing me define the term Christian and to create two categories, Christian and non-Christian and I feel like I'm pushed to the non-Christian category. ”

“oh no, I’m sorry if you feel that way. I didn’t mean to do that. But I think it’s important to know where you are at and ask God for help. I’m here to help and I will be praying for you.”

(café sound fades away, take backpack with me, slowly walk to the center of the stage)

Later that evening, I was supposed to be writing my paper, but I just couldn’t focus.

Spot light on to where I stand

I was on my knees and crying next to my bed.

“God, why is it so hard for me to believe? I don’t know how long I can keep praying for, for whatever I should believe. Some Christian friends say that non-Christians are non-Christians because they didn’t try hard enough. God, I will try my very best before I give up. I don’t want to be told one day that I didn’t try hard enough. But I really don’t know how much longer I can keep trying and keep praying for. *This* can my last prayer. Please reach out to me before I give up. Please give me faith to believe in whatever I should believe. Please, Please, please”

(I squeezed my folding hands even tighter against each other, finger against finger)

“please, please, please please please please ”

(stand up, and look to the spot where I kneed)

tears slid down my face, to my clothes, along my fingers and to the floor
I felt as if there was a round hole on a thick wall. I would be called a believer if I could go through that hole. But my head was a cube. No matter how hard I tried, my head didn’t fit through the hole. I was banging at the hole. I got scars on my edges. Still banging.
I backed off a few steps and ran towards the hole, banging even harder, again and again.

On May 8, a few weeks before my baptism, I wrote (writing on the journal, sitting)

“Dear Heavenly Father,
I don’t know why but when my pastor was reading that Bible section to me, I cried. It’s interesting since I really felt like I was making a life commitment to my husband. And this reminded me the analogy of baptism with wedding.
Thank you for being so good. Thank you for answering my prayers. Thank you for putting so many Christians to work in my heart when I didn’t know you. Thank you ...”

In Chinese, I wrote to myself “remember that the you in the past had never dare to want to be a Christian. It was God working in your heart from October last year when you had the courage to do salvation prayer. The fact that even though you had been through doubts, questions, and you are still on this journey *proves* God’s existence and love, again and again. No matter what happens in the future, do not forget that what God did for you. It sufficiently proved his existence and love. Look, the sun is rising again as usual. God is faithful and God is always good. Lord, I’m willing to give to you my whole life. Please protect my heart away from being

shaken by the storms. Please clearly show me what to do and how to live my life. I pray these things in Jesus's Name. Amen"

(Stand up) On June 2, I gave a testimony and was baptized by my local Anglican church in a river at Oxford. I was filled with joy, hope and faith.

I thought it would be the end of my wonders, questions and doubts.

But it was just another beginning, now, as a baptized Christian.

(spot light off)

E

(4:30 mins, so in total 8mins)

couldn't help but wonder

("couldn't help but wonder" appears on the screen, and disappear.)

(once you see me finish changing, and settled down, you can play the next audio)

F India

writing journals on the mattress

(spot light on India corner)

That was the sound I heard every day in the summer of 2016 in India. Trains, autos, rickshaws. It was hot, humid. No air conditioning, no hot water, no cell phone, no entertainments except counting how many bugs my mosquito net collected each morning or be surprised by finding another ant in my hair. I guess people call it volunteering poverty. I signed up for a mission trip to India. I wanted to understand how to help the poor. I wanted to know how to best share my faith with people from other cultures and religions. I wanted to know what's wrong with Hinduism. But the first a few weeks, I was filled with frustrations, not just because the living condition, but also because I was never able to have alone time, and I was never informed about local religions or was allowed to share my faith.

Until one day, I finally got permission from the team leader to walk around the neighborhood on my own. I saw a little Hindu temple on the street. Like probably this big. I remember it was painted in sky blue color. The fence was open.

I remembered some stories I was told by local Indian Christians.

"Don't visit Hindu temples. Don't go inside. One time my team and I went inside to take a look, and when I went out from the temple, I was almost ran over by a car."

“My sister had good friends who were Hindus, and they always invited her over to their gatherings and offered her food they used in their rituals. She always kindly rejected her friends’ offering. But one time, she finally ate the food her friends offered her. And she went nuts afterwards and never recovered before her death.”

I wondered, should I go in, or not?

I thought “ I came all the way here to understand Hinduism”, so I took off my shoes, took a tiny step, slightly opened the fence,

G FENCE

another tiny step, closed the fence. When I got inside, I saw white tiles on the ground. And then I saw an inner chamber, little statues of the gods and goddesses were lining after one another, probably 30 of them, and I saw a lady wearing sari sitting there doing her ritual and her child around 3 years old was also sitting there. She noticed my presence. I felt sorry and intrusive. But she gently smiled at me, waved her hand as she nodded her head side way, inviting me into the chamber with her. I shook my head sideways quickly, and she knew I’d like to stay where I was at. She smiled, and continued her rituals.

She rang the bell,

H Bell

pour the water from a golden pot into a golden bowl with flowers inside, sprinkled the water to the statues. she was chanting as she was doing the rituals.

Afterwards, she took some food offered to the gods to her son, and the child ate it. And then she turned around, took some food and offered to me, still with that gentle smile.

“should I take it?” I hesitated, but I reached out my hands.

A date, a piece of rock sugar and a slice of butter.

I looked at what I received, these little gifts, full of her prayers and kindness, I smiled back to her, and exited the temple, just the way I entered. With the food on my palms.

I felt warmth.

Maybe it was from the food. Maybe it was my hands. Maybe it’s from somewhere else.

The butter started to melt.

I **wondered**, “should I eat it?”

(wear my shoulder bag)

I rain

A different day. It was a rainy day. Roughly 1pm in the afternoon. I had been sent out by my team leader to be homeless that day. Two of my teammates and I were out since 7am with only 7 rupees on each one of us.

We were exhausted, frustrated, aimlessly walking on the street with empty stomach. At first, I was scared to greet strangers, but gradually I learned to smile and give a head nod. As we were passing by a slum community, one younger and one older Indian ladies saw us and smiled at us. We smiled and waved at them. They got very excited and invited us to their home. It had corrugated iron sheets as the roof. We took off our shoes and I had to tilt my head to enter.

It was a bit dark inside. There was a home shrine of Krishna and other two gods nailed to the wall in the left corner. A large bed took 2 thirds of the room against the wall away from the door. A TV playing some Indian old drama on the right side. A teenage girl, two younger siblings were inside. They were amazed by us, these other-worldly creatures, the younger ones giggled, the teenage girl was shy but she was the only one who could speak a few English words. Her name was Shampa. Her father also ran over and saw us, smiling at us. The younger lady in the room was Shampa's mom and the older one was her grandma.

As we were playing with the kids and trying to talk with Shampa, this family all of the sudden got busy. Her father went outside to get us tea and biscuits. Her relatives also came to see us. Someone started to stir fry spaghetti with potato outside of the house on a gas stove. We were overwhelmed by their hospitality and started to feel guilty of our presence. But another part of my heart just enjoyed being there. Playing with the kids and their little tiny hands, watching TV with them. Shampa's mom and grandma were just there sitting in the room, smiling.

We were about to leave. The family suddenly got anxious and begged us to stay a little longer. Someone in the family ran out and came back with boxes of jewelries. They handed them to us. How could we possibly take this much gifts and love? We were floored by their love, and wanted to do something in return. So I turned to Shampa, and said "prayer?", I asked her if I could pray for this family. She understood and translated. They were all really happy, and so we formed a circle and I held Shampa's hand, and prayed a few simple words in Bengali (yisu tomai balobasi) and the rest in English, thanking God for their hospitality and prayed for blessings over them. When I finished praying and opened my eyes, I saw the light in the shrine twinkled a few times. And then I noticed the grandma, she had tears all over her face. I reached arms to her, hugged her, and prayed more. I wiped her tears. I felt love for her. I felt loved by her.

I wondered, what happened during that prayer

I wondered, what she experienced

I wondered, if she had more love and faith than I did

I wondered, if I could count that as God's presence, when we love and embrace one another?

I came into the summer praying for so many questions. But instead of answering my questions, God flooded me with love, and left my heart with more room to wonder.

J

allow wonder

I'll be carrying a chair and putting a jar of light,
you can play the next audio when the guitar music is done

K

That is a recitation of the verse of light done by Omar Hisham Al Arabi. The verse of light is the 35th verse of the 24th sura of the Qur'an. One translation is

God is the light of heavens and earth
His light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp
the lamp in inside a glass,
a glass like a glittering star, fueled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west
whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it
light upon light
God guides whoever He will to his light
God draws such comparisons for people
God has full knowledge of everything

This verse of light is also Professor Bachir's favorite verse for meditation.

I took Professor Bachir's class on Islamic Philosophy last year. I'll always remember the power and passion he conveyed philosophical ideas in class. One time, he talked about philosopher Al-Ghazali's idea on the state of fallenness or despair. He said,

L _ Bachir

"I probably had myself someone who helped me understand that fully could be my father. I'm not sure now where I got that reading from. But that is the only way in which it can make sense to understand fully the way in which the philosopher Al-Ghazali came out of the state of fallenness as we might call it despair even. He describes his state as a state of despair where he was so engulfed in **doubting everything, doubting himself, doubting his capacity to find anything stable or true in his life, that he could not even speak any more. And so his own state became a cry for help.** In other words, this is the moment when he's *being* itself became a prayer. You do not need to utter it anymore. **You are, you become a prayer.**"

I remember the days and nights when I cried out for help, for grace to be away from my doubts and wonders yet not able to do anything. But even in that despair, I could see that state of being as a prayer? I don't need to utter a prayer. My being is the prayer.
Suddenly, I felt that despair and frustration that captured me was lifted up.
And I remember thinking that I wish I could study the Qu'ran under Professor Bachir's guidance.

Or should I think like that as a Christian? I **wondered**

Wind

(fan on, change the object on the chair to plant)

I interviewed DeVanté who was a student in the Spirituality Mind Body Institute at Teachers College last year. DeVanté is American but speaks perfect Mandarin because of his love for China. He lived in China and studied martial arts there and he always wore flowy pants that capture the direction of the wind. He always seemed to take everything at ease. The interview took place in Sakura park last summer.

M _interview audio

(interview audio)

I **wondered**, if I could have that connection with the nature as well.
I wondered, I should think what I just thought.

Bird

(fan off, change the object on the chair to cape)

Rozanne was my classmate in Oral History program. She always had great wisdom and insight to share in class, and I had always felt that she was very spiritually charged. She often encouraged me in my own thesis pursuit. I loved her warm presence.

She is a descendant of the Chickasaw Nation. She wrote her anthropological thesis at Columbia University about her great great grandma whose name is Mourning tree. MOURNING So she and her daughter went to her great great grandma's grave to give thanks for letting her using the story for academic pursuit.

She wore a soft sweater cape on the day when I interviewed her. (here is the interview clip)

N _interview audio

“So we went to say thank you Lee. Interesting thing about mourning trees, grave is that this is huge marker in this old cemetery, um, and it's toppling like this. And then my mom had taken me to see it many times. Well is because there's this huge tree that's growing out of it that's displacing the marker. This is gigantic cedar tree. And I said, and its roots are completely embedded within her body and absorbed her bones in her earth into its being. There's no question because it's just like they're, um, and I think that's really magical and not magical at the same time. You know, it's very physical science-y, but it's also magical. So we went to say thank you. And um, we, we arrived at the cemetery gate. There were thousands of starlings at the gate before you go through this, this arched gate you go through. And I was like, oh my God, this is crazy. I got out of the car walking around and they're making that noise, you know, if this massive birds. And I wasn't scared, it was just like the energy. And so my daughter and I are like, OK, OK, this is cool. And so he drove into cemetery and we parked the car and we walked over to the grave site and we started our ceremony, you know, just giving things

for the history and for um, being a part of this and all of these birds, like immediately flew and just sat in this tree. They have thousands of birds in these trees, right by us. Not her tree, but a neighboring tree just making this noise, you know, have their chatter that was, became like a, um, a rhythm, you know, just like all started melting together. And it just became like this throbbing sound of a murmuration, you know, and Margaret and are just looking at each other going, oh my God, this is really incredible. And, and then I thought back to my experience with those crows and I said, these are my ancestors.

And they all at once flew up into the sky and off, except for one. And that one just sat there and watched us as we did our ceremony. And I was like, that was where my ancestors, they were meeting as here.”

(I **wondered**, if I could have some connection with my ancestors as well.)

(When I stand up and move to a different spot)

O guitar

Still Wonder

(when the guitar is finished, and I look like I am ready, you can play the next one)
P ocean

Still wonder,
Yes, after all these years, I still wonder
I still wonder what I should believe, and sometimes wonder what I do believe

My friend Iain who was a PhD student in Philosophy at Columbia shared with me, what he thought to have faith meant during our interview. He said,

“Doubts will go through a believer's mind, all their lives. A faithful person does not fail to have doubt. Who knows? Christ might have been doubting all his life, but also doing things that he did. Faith isn't the one that shuts up all of doubts, faith is the one that listens and saves and helps and heals. and answers if it can. Faith isn't like the knowledge of every answer of those things. Faith is. Faith is like. The bottom of the ocean. Water pass over. The bottom is just there. Being the bottom, just being there”

So you want to ask me, what do I believe?
What do I believe?
One day, I could be lifting up my hands, on my knees, praising God
I could feel like I was found and I was loved;
the next day, I could feel like I was lost again

You say faith isn't about your feeling, it's your decision?

Well, one day, I could still make myself praise God in the midst of suffering;

I could make that decision
the next day, I couldn't

Sometimes I wonder if faith and doubt co-exist
There was one day, I was leading someone to pray the salvation prayer, at the same time, I was seriously doubting if I believed in the exact prayer I was leading her to pray

Sometimes I am willing to sacrifice *everything* to follow God
Sometimes I am not,
Sometimes I don't have willingness, but I want to be willing and pray for willingness
Sometimes I don't

If to be a believer, is to be able to firmly assert propositional claims at all time,
Like the round hole in the wall
I wonder if I will ever fit it completely

But I wonder, I wonder if the hundreds of pages of prayer and countless tears could suggest that it is enough
I wonder if doubt can be seen as a *wonderful* companion on the spiritual journey,
not something that one should suppress or hope to get over with one day

I wonder if you can accept me just as I am
I wonder if you can accept everyone just as they are

Go to prayer room, and pray... Amen (finished praying)

I'll be collecting the jar of light and the plant, when I look like I am centered again
You can play this
Q guitar

Lyrics
So lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face
Oh wanderer come home
You're not too far
Lay down your hurt lay down your heart
Come as you are

Reflection Essay

In or Out of a Box?

I felt so light.

Monday Dec 10, the day after my first performance, I was carrying a backpack with my 13-inch laptop, its charger, 600-page *Sources of the Self* by Charles Taylor, two notebooks, three theses written by previous OHMA students, and other miscellaneous items such as my water bottle, glasses and earphones.

My backpack was probably heavier than what it normally would be.

But, I felt so light.

I felt as if a heavy burden was taken off my shoulder, off my whole body.

Why?

Maybe it is because I cried a lot towards the end of the performance, and that I was able to release some emotion and burden that I had to keep to myself for the past six years.

Maybe it is because many of my friends and classmates came to watch my performance and their round of applaud made me feel truly heard and loved. I bowed down 180 degrees again in the applaud, and then there was another round of applaud.

I cried again.

What did I come with me to OHMA? How did I come to where I am? How did my thesis find its form? What am I trying to achieve and what my contributions to oral history field are? This reflection essay aims to answer these questions to my best ability.

Locate Myself, Honor Myself

“My name is Yiyi. It sounds like double E. I grew up in Beijing, China. I don’t know what my thesis is going to be yet. I have a range of wide interests, such as stories around poverty issues, Muslim communities, faith journeys and the relationship between Japan and China since world war two. I hope to share stories to bring more understanding and compassion to the world. I also look forward to learning from all of you and to know better about myself,” I introduced myself in a loud voice as I smiled at everyone.

I still remember introducing myself roughly like this during the first day of class. I was wearing a traditional Chinese silk blouse embroidered with a bird under a purple dress. I sweated a bit because I was running late for class and was literally running a few minutes earlier. I was excited for this new journey ahead of me though I had no idea what was going to happen.

To focus on this journey on my thesis, I had no idea what my thesis was going to be as I said honestly in class. My first three interviewees were all Muslims because I made my goal about amplifying other people’s voices, and I think Muslims’ voices needed to be heard given both the political atmosphere and misconceptions or stereotypes many Christians have towards Muslims. I feel the need to record their stories and share beauty of Islam and many Muslim’s sincerity of faith to Christians, especially as a Christian. I focused on interviewing Muslims at first not because I was only interested in their stories, but just because I thought I needed to have a demographic focus on my interviews to make it a legit thesis project. But I quickly realized that I was interested in people who are not just religious, but people who are deeply spiritual, who have intense spiritual or so-called supernatural experiences. And I was interested people who have spent much energy and effort in figuring out what they should believe and deal with challenges and doubts along the way, whether they were religious or not. I wanted to know how they actively acquired their current belief systems through not just their upbringings, but also their own intellectual questionings, their mystical experiences and so on. As a result, my initial focus on a particular religious community did not work for my deepest interest. It was not until many weeks later, during Amy’s office hour, I came to know that I did not have to have a focus on one single demographic focus (such as ethnicity or age or religious affiliation) in order to

produce my thesis. It was a huge relief for me to know that I did not need to fit my interest into a box that I thought the academic world acquired.

That was the first invitation to step out of a box I thought I should fit into.

Then Jerald Albarelli (Gerry) invited me to step out the second time. I took Gerry's class on Literary Narrative in Fall 2017. At first, I liked the writing exercises such as the one early childhood memories. But then I gradually lost incentives to write over time. Over two months into the semester, there was one particular week when I could not come up with anything to write about according to the prompt. I went to Gerry's office hour and told him how I felt honestly. He seemed to be concerned and asked sincerely,

“So what do you want to write about? I don't want you to write something you don't want to write about it. Is there something that you'd like to write?”

“Can it be unrelated to the interviews I conducted?”, I timidly asked.

“Yes it can!”, he warmly affirmed me.

So I started writing about my experience in India during the summer of 2016 when I participated in volunteering poverty. It was a summer that transformed my life. I remember after coming back to New York, I experienced very intense sorrows sporadically each day to the point that I called counselling service on campus for help the first two months. Even it was a year after that summer, I still needed to process my emotions through writing down the memories. Gerry liked my writing and gladly approved me to continuously write about India for the rest of the semester. I wrote over 30 pages in that three weeks.

I thought I had to write according to particular prompts to finish a class well, but Gerry was gracious enough to not only respect, but appreciate my deepest desire. And he helped me with my writing skill based on what I wanted to write the most.

I had always felt like I needed to fit into different boxes to be accepted – I needed to write in a particular structure with usually defining my terms in the beginning in philosophical

essays; I needed to always listen to my parents and not ask them questions to be considered as a good kid; I needed to affirmatively assert my beliefs in order to be seen as a Christian.

But in this past year in OHMA, I learned to locate who I am, and honor who I am. This does not mean whatever I do and believe should be accepted as correct, but that I need to acknowledge and accept who I am and my deepest desires. And I am lucky and blessed enough to be given the permission to pursue my strongest passion and deepest desire through my coursework in OHMA again and again. For me, OHMA was not just an academic program, it was a year of learning and asserting who I am and what most important things are to me – to share spiritual journeys of non-protestant people to protestant Christians in relation to my thoughts and struggles along my own spiritual journey. For the past 6 years, my identity as a Christian came to be the most important and essential part of who I am, yet I had gone through serious identity crisis often because of my inclination to not deny other religions as false paths. My understanding and appreciation for non-Christian paths grew more and more each day as I lived in different countries and interviewed people from various background. I rarely see any Christians around me share the same desire to understand other paths and wonder if people would change their black and white understanding of what faith and salvation are if I share some of the stories I heard. I wonder if I share these stories out, I would be less lonely in my Christian communities. And I want to share these stories not just for myself to be understood, but for my friends who are hiding their voices and opinions in church, and for thousands of people who had left the church because they did not have a way to process their wonders and struggles.

Of course, there are things I had to compromise as well in OHMA. For example, I used to say, “I didn’t like history growing up”. I came to study oral history and interview people because I was interested in their life stories, their personalities, their childhood and their worldviews, not in a particular historical event. But I learned to like history more because I realized that history is part of everyone, and if I am interested in understanding them, I am interested in understanding history. Also, I came to identify my interviews as situated in the post-modern era in which many people question and have lost traditional ways of interpreting their lives. I am interested in how people make sense of their lives and why they interpret in the ways they do, whether by choosing a traditional way, like an organized religion, or by choosing to embrace a new way.

Locate the Shape of Thesis

“Yiyi, this is not about your writing. Your writing is good. You know it. But I think you should stop writing and just throw away everything you’ve written so far, and ask yourself this question, ‘What really am I trying to express? And what do I want my audience to receive?’”

Nyssa told me this advice sincerely as she swiftly moved her arms all to one side to express the word “throw” physically. She had her intense gaze on me. I could not simply ignore her question. That was October 23 2018, a Tuesday after class, a week before my thesis draft was due.

It definitely was not the easiest thing to swallow and process at the moment. By that time, I already wrote over 50 pages in a word document called “thesis_try”. It literally was just a “try” or a sketch of something that is too massive to be finished in a week realistically. I went to my bible study group after the meeting with Nyssa. After discussing and praying with two friends, I decided to throw away my writings and focus on producing a creative presentation, which later became a more developed performance.

To this day, I am still deeply grateful for Nyssa’s question on “what do I want my audience to receive?”, because it shifted my attention from trying to write something that would take probably my life to finish writing, to something that I can present to others realistically. Realistically speaking, the form I am most comfortable with is not writing, nor is it short film, nor is it podcast, but it is my own voice – I believe in the power of my story-telling in person and I have experience in that. Also, I was reminded that I did not want to produce a written thesis because I was not confident how many people would actually read it. I wanted to do a thesis that was accessible to the public, so I decided to not only do a performance, but do it twice so I could accommodate more audience.

As I mentioned, at first, I was only thinking of using some audio clips accompanying my story-telling like a presentation. However, as I started writing the script, I realized that it was

impossible to shorten the whole story to less than 30 mins long, and it would be very boring to hear someone just telling a story for that long time. So, I started to imagine ways that I could make the story more engaging. I added stage design, and then change of costume and lighting, and then role play, and then refreshment, and then discussion questions. I wanted to engage audience physically, audibly, visually, intellectually, emotionally and even with their sense of smell, which the help of Indian chai and biscuits. It became more and more massive but at the same time, I tried hard to ground myself to what I could achieve realistically. I had friends and professors looking through my script and giving me feedback. I even had a director meeting with me in a café while I was traveling as a tourist in New Orleans. I had a dozen of friends helping me to move stuff from my room to the classroom and set up the stage and clean up each time. Until today, I cannot quite believe that I did my thesis as a performance without any previous experience in script writing and other things related to performance. And I am thankful that I have a long list of people that I need to thank in acknowledgements.

Outcomes

I had roughly 50 people attending my performance. I was really nervous and had to have the script in my hand the first time when I performed. Thankfully I became more and more present during the performance and I was able to genuinely pray and cry towards the end of the performance. As I mentioned in the first paragraph, I received a warm round of applaud from the audience as I was weeping tears off my face. I bowed 180 degrees and received another round of applaud and saw everyone smiling at me, and I cried again. I thanked everyone and said with tears and laughter that, “as you can see, it is a struggle that I am not finished yet. I am still struggling to accept myself”. I had roughly 30 people attending the first time, but because I felt the pressure to clean up and empty the classroom as soon as possible, I asked people to stay around for discussion if they are interested. Many people congratulated me and shared with me their quick feedback in person during the cleaning up time, but I lost the majority and had less than 10 people who stayed for the discussion. Even so, we had very productive discussion around topics such as our immediate reactions to the performance and what having faith could mean.

Amy joined for the first performance and also stayed for the group discussion, and then she gave me feedback the next week. Accordingly, I made many changes, such as adjusting audio gains of each audio and incorporate more short group discussions. I started by asking people to turn in pairs and share their early childhood memories and if they don't have early memory, they can share what kind of kid they are growing up. I told the audience to remember what they shared and thought about whether they had changed from who they were when they were young, because my story started from my childhood memory and it was about who I became as I grew up. By starting in this way, I aimed at making a connection between the audience's own story and mine. After the performance, again I asked people to share their initial reactions in pairs and then came back to share in the big group. And then asked them to share their thoughts on my struggle and if they had struggled in any way whether in a religious context or not, first in pairs and then in big group. I remember three different Christian girls sharing that my struggle with accepting myself and identifying with other Christians resonated with them. An older guy who is not religious shared that he was surprised in a good way that I remain as a Christian despite my struggles, because he used to think people are religious just because of the comfort religions bring to them. Many of my friends who are not Christian or religious expressed that they could relate to my story in different ways. One girl said that she related to my story the first time, and she related to my story in a different way the second time when she saw it. Many Christian friends also said they were grateful for me sharing vulnerably about my own struggles. I learned a lot and thought we had a great time in both discussion times. But thinking back to them, I could have asked questions to better focus the discussion. For example, I could ask "having watched this performance now, do you think I changed or did not change from who I was when I was younger? Do you think I should change or not? And how about you? Did you change? Should you change if you have changed?" after the performance.

Aimed Contributions

1. From Theory to Action; From Paper to Experience

I did my B.A. and first M.A. in philosophy which was six years of writing

philosophical papers adding together. In that six years of training, I learned how to express opinions persuasively and construct logical arguments clearly, but I also came to see more and more the limitation of expressions just based on logical reasoning, and often times, it is a lot more effective and appropriate to communicate and arrive at knowledge via other ways, such as *experience*. For example, when it comes to persuading someone the beauty of a sunrise or a piano piece, it is more effective to take that person to watch the sunrise or to listen to a piano piece than to describe it verbally and argue for the beauty within logically.

In my philosophical essay *On Tolerance*, after traditional theories such as those provided by Locke, Mill and Rawls, I argued for tolerance and compassion between moral agents. I wrote, “Epistemic modesty comes from identifying one’s limited epistemic capacity and willingness to reconsider the validity of beliefs which one adheres to. This epistemically modest attitude helps agents become tolerant naturally.¹ To cut out all my theories and put my thesis in simple everyday language, I argued that we need to listen to each other more and as we listen more, we will recognize how limited our existing understanding is and therefore be less judgmental towards each other.

To simplify the thesis again, the “trick” to becoming more tolerate and compassionate is to listen more. Instead of keep arguing for my position, I decided to practice what I argued for – to listen deeply, and also created a space for listening to stories that can challenge one’s existing opinions and beliefs. My thesis project is a practical extension of the philosophical theories I was boxed into.

This thesis performance is not only a practical next step from my philosophical theories, but also ideas I read in oral history.

In *Yarning Up Oral History*, Anderson, Hamilton and Barker argued that, “[y]arning and *Dadirri* bind people together and nurture spiritual wellbeing through the

¹ “On Tolerance” by Yiyi Zhang

expression of life experience. As a result, knowledge may be passed on by absorption, experience and deep listening rather than through a western notion of pedagogy” (175).²

I really appreciate this idea of seeing *life experience as a way of knowing, a source of knowledge*. It is not a surprising idea; after all, we probably acquire more of our opinions and beliefs through life experience than through logical syllogisms in reality. I do not remember even once when I felt I could use life experience as a source of knowledge in philosophy.

Experience is not just source of knowledge, it can be a trigger of memories. For example, in one part of the performance, I wore a cardboard box on my head and ran towards a circle I draw on the wall. I hit my head hard on the wall. I backed off a few steps, and banged my head on the wall harder again. The box-banging-the-wall movement conveyed my inability to conform to what I was told a Christian supposed to believe and expressed the frustration and pain I felt in the process. To read about this scene is completely than to be an audience and watch the scene. They saw how tense my body became, heard the sound and maybe even felt the vibration banging made. It was a physical, visual and audible experience.

One audience shared that she was shocked by my movements at first, but then all of the sudden, she was reminded of an incident that she had gone through which made her decide to leave the church she used to attend. She realized that she was still bothered by that incident subconsciously, and my performance inspired her to reflect on how she could have dealt with that incident and if she had been avoiding the issue and not solving it by stop going to church.

2. Show the Sphere of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

Luisa Passerini in her book *Memory and Utopia* wrote, “I realized that intersubjectivity was also the basis of interpretation, and of the performance of the

² “Yarning Up Oral History” by Anderson, Hamilton and Barker

interview, in that narratives and their meanings are produced through interpersonal exchanges” (4)³

Through my performance, I hope to not only show this sphere of subjectivity and intersubjectivity during oral history interviews, but also its on-going influence in shaping one’s interpretation after interviews.

When I played the audio clips from interviews, I did not hide in the darkness. I was on stage and had low light, so audience could see me listening and reacting to the narrators’ stories with them. One time I interacted with one interview clip by repeating the parts I thought to be important with the narrator Professor Bachir together.

(Professor Bachir) “**And so his own state became a cry for help.** In other words, this is the moment when his being itself became a prayer. **You do not need to utter it anymore. You are, you become a prayer**”.

(me) I remember the days and nights when I cried out for help, for grace to be away from my doubts and wonders yet not able to do anything. But even in that despair, I could see that state of being as a prayer? I don’t need to utter a prayer. My being is the prayer. Suddenly, I felt that despair and frustration that captured me was lifted up.

And I remember thinking that I wish I could study the Qu’ran under Professor Bachir’s guidance.

Or should I think like that as a Christian? I wondered

I said the bolded parts with Professor Bachir together to show that they jumped out to me at the moment I heard them. I explained initial reaction and why they mattered to me. And then I shared my skepticism about my initial reaction to the story. Through it, I tried to show that the sphere of subjectivity and intersubjectivity not only exist during the interview, but it can constantly influence one’s interpretation.

3. Challenge the Culturally Christian Notions Taken to be Axioms

The two culturally Christian notions I aimed to challenge are (a) a tendency to hide

³ *Memory and Utopia* by Luisa Passerini

struggles considered to be serious and (b) a binary opposition between faith and doubt, belief and unbelief.

(a) Tendency to Hide Struggles Considered to be Serious

Sometimes I hear Christians sharing their testimonies, and their testimonies usually follow a certain paradigmatic narrative, which is “a representation of the ideal life course within an institution” according to Charlotte Linde in her essay *The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story* (621).⁴ For example, a Christian ministry said, “there are five basic parts to your story: the opening, your life before Christ, how you came to Christ, your life after Christ and the closing”.⁵ It is encouraging to me that this ministry warns people to be realistic and not to make life seem to be perfect after conversion, but it also warns people to not “dwell too much on ... past sin struggles”. The expectation is that you should focus on the positive changes conversion made. Of course, it is a reasonable expectation, but when positive changes become the only narratives welcomed, there would be no room for honest sharing about struggles. Even when I hear people share about their struggles, it’s usually in the past tense, that they have overcome the struggles, or that they are struggles to be considered normal, common and minor such as struggles with anger and selfishness. Even another common struggle with regards to lust, seems to be too embarrassing to be openly shared; let alone, other struggles they are considered more serious, such as depression and, in my case, struggle to affirmatively assert creedal statements. I remember when I felt depressed before, my initial reaction was why would I feel depressed if I were Christian. It shows that I had never heard any Christian share that they struggle with depression. During that time, I found a book called “Christians Get Depressed Too” which was published in 2010. Just the mere existence of such a book title hints that there had been a prominent Christian culture of not sharing struggles and problems in life, especially the ones that are stigmatized.⁶ I shared my struggles

⁴ “The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story” by Charlotte Linde

⁵ <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/share-the-gospel/evangelism-principles/preparing-your-personal-testimony.html>

⁶ A note to potential Christian readers: to justify my position for my potential Christian readers, even our beloved Apostle Paul shared that “therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a

openly hoping that it could slowly build a culture of not be afraid of struggles but embrace struggles and accept ourselves and each other as we still struggle.

I remember one Christian audience said that he appreciated me sharing because it helped him to see that he had been trying to hide the struggles he went through not just from others but also from himself. My story helped him see his struggles not as something that he needed to run away from.

(b) Binary Opposition between Faith and Doubt, Belief and Unbelief

I want to challenge the existing and widely accepted binary opposition between “faith” and “doubt”, and even between “belief” and “unbelief”. I have consulted many I have consulted many Christians on my spiritual journey as I struggle with beliefs and doubts. Many of them tell me to not worry, because my doubts would go away when I became more mature in faith. I would not need to struggle with beliefs one year or two years later. I felt like doubt or lack of belief is something I had to get over with one day, but because I was never able to for a consistent period of time, I could not accept myself and struggled with my identity over the years. People tend to distinguish between “Christians” and “non-Christians”, “doubters” and “believers”⁷, “believers” and “unbelievers”⁸. Even when these words are not mentioned as binary oppositions, they are clearly distinguished from each other. But I question if these words are that easily distinguishable. As I wrote in my script, “there was one day, I was leading someone to pray the salvation prayer, at the same time, I was seriously doubting if I believed in the exact prayer I was leading her to pray”. Was I doubting or believing? I want to present the complexity of human experience through my thesis performance and break the

thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me”.⁶ Paul was not just someone who was bold to rebuke others, he was also someone who was willing to be very honest about the struggles that he went through. If we (Christians) don’t give a proper space to be honest with the on-going struggles, the ones we consider as too serious to share, I am afraid we will just keep having people stop going to church because they did not have a space to process their struggles properly and still feel loved and accepted.

⁷ *Doubt: A History* by Jennifer Michael Hecht, xv

⁸ *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, 8

existing categories and neat dividing lines between them.⁹

Afterward

“How do you feel now?”

“It went well I think, but I sort of wished I had cried again. But I didn’t.”

“It means you are healed!”

After the second performance, a friend of mine told me that I didn’t cry because I was healed from the years of burden I had been carrying on me. Am I healed?

I felt as if a burden was physically taken away last week, so it was definitely a good sign, but I guess complete healing will still take longer.

I actually don’t know what to feel and how to feel at this point a few days after the second performance. But looking back, I just feel deeply grateful and very loved. Again, because of OHMA, I received a permission to be myself and pursue what is the most important to me personally in an academic program. It was a process of helping me identifying the boxes and circles I drew for myself or allowed myself to be trapped in the past. At the same time, like a friend of mine said after watching my performance, “Why would you want to be a circle? I think it’s cute to be a cube?”, meaning that it is fine just to be who I am – someone who wonders and questions my existing frameworks to understand the world a lot. In this sense, I am both set free from boxes and circles, but also accept the cube head I still have.

2018 Dec 20

⁹ A note to potential Christian readers: To briefly justify my point to Christians, “Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). It seems quite clear to me that the Bible leaves room for “belief” and “unbelief” to co-exist, and for “faith” and “doubt” to co-exist.

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This I Wonder
– the spiritual journey of a wandering heart

Author and Producer: Yiyi Zhang

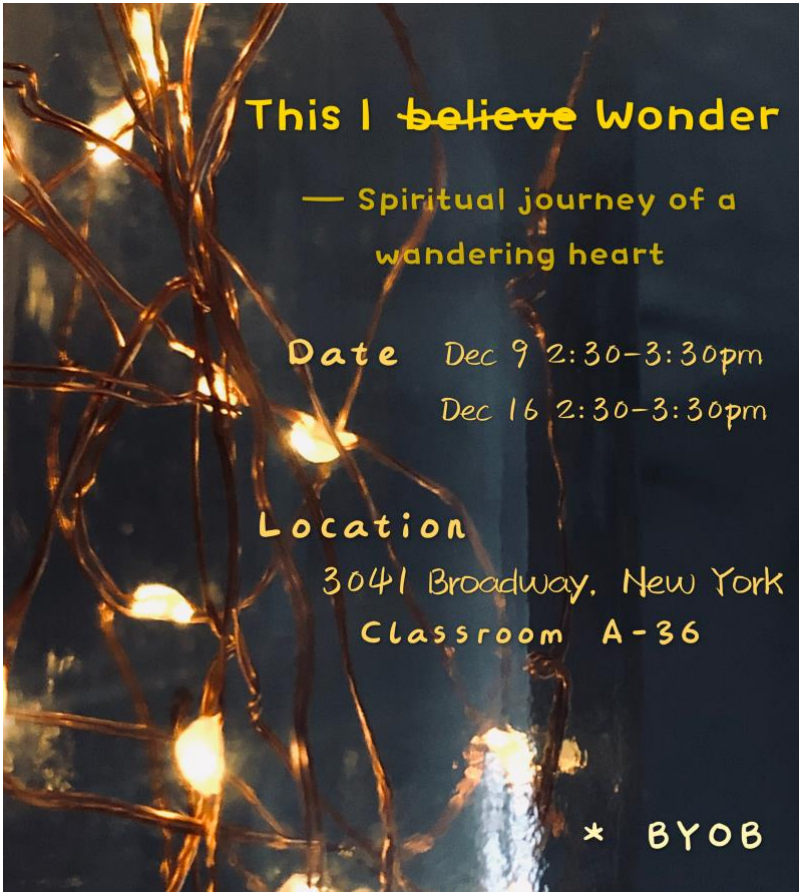
Chapters:

1. Start of a Wonder
2. End of a Wonder
3. Couldn't Help but Wonder
4. Allow Wonder (light, wind, bird)
5. Still Wonder

Synopsis

This performance begins with the narrator's childhood memory in 1993 and continues to tell spiritual defining moments in chronological order and ends in 2018. Chapter 4 "Allow Wonder" uniquely consists of three interview segments from three people whom the narrator had interviewed. You will be on a spiritual rollercoaster ride with the narrator together to her deepest pain and joy, despair and hope. This is autoethnographic work based on real stories. Please turn off your cellphone during the show.

- (1) Drop off your coats and bags
- (2) Have some tea and biscuits
- (3) Find your spot on the floor (or on a chair if you prefer)
- (4) You are here! Relax
- (5) Oh, please turn off your cell phone during the performance, thanks!
- (6) Want more instructions? Here are a few questions you can reflect on
 - What is your earliest memory?
 - What does "faith" mean to you?
 - What do you believe in and how did you arrive/acquire your beliefs?
 - Has anyone or anything ever challenged your beliefs?
 - Have you ever felt like you don't fit into a group?



This I believe Wonder

— Spiritual journey of a
wandering heart

Date Dec 9 2:30-3:30pm
Dec 16 2:30-3:30pm

Location
3041 Broadway, New York
Classroom A-36

* BYOB