Hall, E. R. (2017). *“Maybe Jesus was suicidal too”: A qualitative inquiry into religion and spirituality in suicide attempts.* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

*Jeremy was a research participant in Ryan Hall’s dissertation on the role of spirituality in near-lethal suicide attempts. At the time of the interview, he was a white, 33 year old, heterosexual, with an M.Div., ordained in the United Church of Christ, who works as a hospital chaplain.*

*Below are excerpts from Hall’s dissertation, describing his story. Double lines between paragraphs indicate the next section of the dissertation where Jeremy is described.*

Jeremy was…nurtured by the church of his childhood. The year he was born, his “spiritual but not religious” parents moved to a new state and put a lot of care into finding a church with a theology that “felt right.” They chose one 45 minutes away within the United Church of Christ (UCC) tradition. Despite the long drive, the family attended every week as far back as Jeremy can remember. He recalls “running around the church [and] crawling under the pews during worship, scaring people” as a child. The church was the setting for countless special memories: being baptized with his three brothers on the same day, receiving his first Bible when he was in third grade, being taught by “lots of wonderful teachers” in Sunday school, avidly participating in youth group through high school, preaching the Father’s Day sermon with his confirmation mentor, and receiving an influential letter from a congregant encouraging him to become a minister.

After his parents divorced when he was in middle school, Jeremy spent “a lot of time struggling with what love meant and yearning … to be loved in a way that I saw, or perceived that I saw, other families love each other. Being at the church offered me, um, love in a way that I didn’t find at home; at home was often very stressful.” This affinity for the United Church of Christ would remain with Jeremy till present day. “It’s a place of home and belonging,” he says.

As alluded to above, Jeremy never relinquished the UCC church of his childhood, though he did spend a couple of months attending an “evangelical church” while in college as an effort to “differentiate” and “distance” himself from his twin brother and try a denomination with a very different theological stance. “I was tired of people just helping me ask questions; I was ready for some answers!” he said. According to Jeremy, the fundamentalist church, in contrast to the United Church of Christ, “had all the answers: you know, ‘Here’s God’s plan for you: A, B, and C. You do all these things, you’re gonna have a great life.’” The relief such definitiveness engendered, however, wore out fast, as the answers the church gave turned out not to be satisfactory. In fact, “it turned out to be a very horrible church that was oppressive to women, and I’m like, ‘I’m done.’ I had to go!”

His stint with the evangelicals, combined with another significant experience, was enough to show Jeremy that his optimum theological environment is a progressive one. The second experience occurred when he was a fresh graduate with a bachelor’s in theater and was asked by the UCC conference to be a temporary minister for a small-town church that was between pastors. He did it, enduring a baptism of fire along the way, such as having to officiate a funeral in his first week and being “painfully” confronted with the problem of determining his pastoral identity as a worldly-wise young adult with a “college mind frame” in a rural town. Vowing not to do it again, he caved soon after when he was asked to do the same thing in an even more challenging place: “tough-town Wyoming.” Jeremy says he is proud of his work “help[ing] a dying church *not* die” but found himself at odds with the popular ideologies there.

What it did was it amplified all these liberal theological ideas in me, because I was like, “No, that’s not who God is!” I would go to these clergy meetings with, like, evangelical and other Protestant ministers who would talk about crazy theological crap (laughs). I’d be screaming in my head, “Aaaaah! What am I doing here? This is *not* the Church; this is not what I believe Jesus—God—is about.” And, um, so it really made me stand up and take some more vocal action about social justice.

After Wyoming Jeremy was invited to work in a leadership position at his childhood church, which was initially “refreshing” but, after about a year, started to grate on him emotionally for two reasons. First, he felt he was not being taken seriously by a large portion of the church who had seen him “run around in diapers” and remembered him preaching a sermon as a teenage confirmation student. Second, on a near-daily basis the male secretary in the church office would say sexually suggestive comments to Jeremy. Confronting the secretary about it, then eventually meeting with senior leadership, proved fruitless. Jeremy felt ignored, disrespected, and invalidated as both a professional and a person. Those two factors along with depression and a strained relationship with his then girlfriend exacerbated Jeremy’s emotional “unravel[ing]” to the point that he made an attempt on his own life.

When Jeremy discovered that he had survived his suicide attempt, he knew he needed to make a substantial change to his current situation. He applied to a theological school in another part of the country and got accepted. Before he went, despite feeling thoroughly alienated from God, he took a job at a UCC summer camp that had employed him in the past—a momentous decision, it turned out, because that is where he met Emma (name changed by Jeremy), the woman he would later marry. Emma would help repair and transform Jeremy’s relationship with God, in effect also reviving his joie de vivre and sweeping away his self-doubt (which will be discussed more fully in the next section). In the meantime, at seminary, Jeremy was “celebrated as this *amazing* student who was just thoughtful and brilliant,” but he “wasn’t doing the internal work.” It was not until his first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education as a hospital chaplain that he began to “connect it to my heart”—that is, his intellectual exploits began to take root emotionally and spiritually.

Today spirituality imbues Jeremy’s life. Since his interview he has transitioned from being a chaplain to getting ordained and serving as senior minister at a UCC church in his home state. He says he never left the denomination because he never felt the need to: it is familiar as family to him, and the Christocentric theology works for him. He reasons, “Who else teaches me about love … or forgiveness or self-acceptance and challenges me in the way that Jesus does?” At the same time, Jeremy feels that no one is of “strictly one particular faith” in a globalized society; as we cannot help encountering other belief systems, we also inevitably borrow from them. Such an open-minded point of view is condoned by the UCC, which is yet another reason he has stayed in the tradition. Ultimately what is very sacred to him is being able to say to someone, “I see you, and I hear you, and I know what you are really about”—that is, making a space for people to tell their story. After all, he points out, Jesus was a storyteller … and a story*hearer*.

With an advanced theological degree, [Jeremy, of all of the research participnats] has perhaps the most articulated concept of God, as he was required to spell out his entire constructive theology in his master’s thesis, an undertaking that took nearly two years. The rather chummy personal relationship that Jeremy has with God today, however, was not always the case. He developed a revised conceptualization of God after his suicide attempt out of a desperate need for a deity that was big enough to accommodate his existential protests, nihilism, doubt, self-denigration, and anger—sentiments captured in the following monologue:

I was acutely aware of all the suffering in the world…. I [had recently visited an] art gallery at this homeless shelter, and they were auctioning off these photos, and one of them was a picture of Dumpsters with a *crucifix* in the Dumpster. And [I remember] just thinking about “Yeah, even in the midst of trash there’s—there’s *God*, but, like, there’s the trash, and there are people who are sick and ill and people who are poor,” and, you know, I was struggling with my own finances at the time; I … could barely afford *rent*, and there were a couple of weeks where I had to go to the homeless shelter food pantry to get … hot meals…. So I spent a couple weeks just eating with a bunch of homeless people and being like, “What is going on in my life where I c—I can’t afford to do this work, and … I’m not good enough to go to *seminary*, but if I go to seminary I can be better at what I do”—just this internal *wrestling*…. I blamed God that, like, “If God is good, and Jesus is good, then why do we live in a world that just hates so much?” … I remember sitting in the mental health hospital [after the suicide attempt]; I’m like, “There is no God. There is nothing. There is no meaning or reason, and if I die it’s just a body in the ground. And I don’t—I don’t have a soul or anything like that, because it doesn’t *mean* anything! There is no love and there’s no real community that can support me.” I was just—the meaning of life had been completely lost for me, and I was really *struggling* with that!

As mentioned previously, not long after his suicide attempt Jeremy worked at a summer camp where he met his future wife, Emma. As their relationship deepened, he came to know virtually unconditional love from her, inspiring a profound change in his worldview. One day he confessed to her that he was not sure if he believed in God. The emotional conversation that ensued not only reassured him that Emma was not going to give up on him but also paved the way for years of collaborative “rebuilding and reconstructing [of] God in a way that was meaningful for both of us.” This re-conceived God, formed out of Jeremy’s experience of boundless love from Emma, was pure affirmation, “that thing that says *yes* in the universe, that doesn’t dismiss, that doesn’t ignore … who we are, but that *calls that forth* from us!” The shame Jeremy felt in his youth, culminating in his suicide attempt, was wiped away by this force of radical acceptance. The most crucial change is that he now feels seen, heard, and loved by God—far removed from his feelings of isolation, worthlessness, and rejection prior to his attempt. “I’m a person who believes very deeply about God,” he said. (Note his use of the preposition *about* instead of the commonly used *in*, which, unfortunately, I did not ask about and he did not explain.)

Though it may sound like Jeremy has a well-established understanding of God today, he is quick to admit that he does not. He recognizes that his notions are subject to change—or perhaps God itself is essentially dynamic, and his ideas are just following suit! Thus, Jeremy refrains from assigning too many, or very rigid, characteristics to God. For instance, he says that God “is beyond physical manifestation,” and the question “What are the qualities of God that we appreciate?” is more productive than inquiries about who God is, definitively, or what God looks like. “I love Paul Tillich: ‘God is the ground of all of our being.’ We’re *all* a part of God.” Jeremy expressed. “So when you ask how do I picture God, I picture the word *ultimate*: ultimate concern, ultimate being.” Yes, he acknowledges, it is frustrating not to be absolutely certain about what God is, but he tried a Christianity that professed a theology with no wiggle room and quickly knew it was not right for him. In the end, “believing in something that you have no idea about” is the crux of faith for him. “And I think every minister or theologian—every person of faith—is struggling to have that firm assurance that we *know God*, when in fact we know very little and can’t say anything for sure.”

Jeremy asserted that fighting for justice can be a hallowed act and is certainly among their spiritual practices. Illustrating his “hope and passion around justice,” Jeremy stated,

One of the healing parts in me is thinking about small ways that I can contribute to, um, shining light on the injustices in the world around us: signing an online petition for gay rights or something like that, or donating to Planned Parenthood, or writing a letter to someone that I feel has been *marginalized*…. Maybe I can be prophetic in that way…. [By] contributing in some small way I’m *engaging* that and I’m not just ignoring it or disregarding that other people hurt!

As was the case with the rest of the participants, Jeremy experienced marked depression as he was growing up and, as a result, “had these moments throughout my life where … [I was] trying to figure out ‘How do I make this sadness stop?’” He was vaguely aware that his family had a history of depression. His father had attempted suicide twice; Jeremy remembers his dad’s absence for a month for psychiatric hospitalization when Jeremy was in middle school. Because his family was “not very good about talking about our feelings,” though, they were reticent about both suicide in general and suicide within their own family culture. Consequently, “I was never able to process it and figure out what did that mean for me.” Moreover, Jeremy did not receive any guidance on suicide from the Church. In the countless hours he spent within the walls of UCC churches while growing up, he never heard mention of suicide, whether from a theological, dogmatic, pastoral, or didactic standpoint—even though, he points out, the entire faith is based on a celebration of Jesus’ “willingly going to die”—arguably a passive suicide—as “this ultimate act that is *glorious*.” This phenomenon that loomed large in both his family and his religion, then, went unacknowledged—the elephant in the room that encroached more and more on Jeremy’s psychic space.

The circumstances leading up to Jeremy’s attempt to end his life at age 27 were a veritable perfect storm for a person who had known lifelong melancholy and at least implicit endorsements of suicide as an option. Recall from Chapter 4 that his attempt occurred after he had taken a job at the church of his childhood, a repository of pristine memories of camaraderie and belonging. He was now the prodigal son who had matured and changed through college education and work in other states and then come home to a virtual time capsule. In his opinion, the church members still saw him as one of the twins who had scampered around the sanctuary as boys. “They wanted to remember the past and how things were,” he explained. On top of that, he was dating a girl who did not seem to share his feelings and was “hesitant” to advance the relationship in the way that he wanted to, and he was the daily target of indecent behavior from the secretary in his office. In a word, Jeremy was trying to stanch a flood of demoralization and dismissal. “I began this dark, depressive decline because of all these aspects,” he said.

To make matters worse, when Jeremy confided in both his psychotherapist and his family about how he was feeling, they did not take him seriously either. In fact, his suicide attempt occurred mere hours after he had seen his therapist and told her of his plan to overdose on pharmaceutical drugs, and she did not intervene to protect him.

When I went to people to ask for help, I was like, “Someone see me and acknowledge that this is happening,” and I felt like that wasn’t there…. I was surrounded by people that I thought cared about me, and I felt like I was completely alone and isolated…. My heart and my spirit were broken.

It seemed to Jeremy that everywhere he looked, including within, he saw suffering, and the God he had grown up loyal to not only seemed to be doing nothing about it but even seemed to be the author of it. He describes the despair he felt at that time as “go[ing] down this very dark tunnel that it was hard to see out of.” The only perceived way out of the tunnel and therefore out of all the suffering was death. Being brushed off by the people who were supposed to care about him added impetus to flee the miserable tunnel. Jeremy was ready to go. “So, I went and did middle school youth group that night, led the youth group, had fun, kind of tidied things up maybe a little extra than I usually do, and then went home and tried to overdose.” After discovering that he had survived the attempt, he was enraged to find that he was still alive … and the tunnel was still there.

On at least 14 occasions, five of the participants used the adjective *done* to describe feeling so exasperated and dissatisfied by something that they abandoned it temporarily or for good. Elizabeth and Harrison were “done” with organized religion at different points, Jeremy was “done” with the evangelical church he attended for a short time, Stern was “done” with smoking marijuana after realizing it was causing him more harm than good, and so on. As evident in the various stories, doneness can also go hand-in-hand with despair. Four of the five participants used this adjective to denote their psychospiritual state accompanying marked suicidal ideation or preceding a suicide attempt…

This part of me—the [Jungian] shadow part—was like, “You’re hurt, and you’re wounded, and you’re poor, and no one loves you”: it’s that *shadow*, but it wanted to be *seen*. And here I’m like, “Oh, this is horrible! I need to just get rid of it and kill myself and—” … I wanted to, uh, cut the shadow out of me, even if it meant killing myself. I just—I needed to be **done** with this dark part of me that was so unbearable and so suffering! (Jeremy)

Two additional participants assumed that they were not living up to others’ expectations when they contemplated ending their lives. Twice in the interview Jeremy mentioned that prior to his suicide attempt, the belief that he was “not good enough for seminary or to do this ministry” added fodder to his self-despising.

Suicide, then, far from bringing condemnation onto the person who died, would be exonerative, removing not only that person’s suffering but also the suffering of those who cared for him or her. Jeremy talked quite a bit about this notion, which he experienced in full force in his most dismal states of mind. According to him, when many people are suicidal, they conclude,

“I’m taking myself out of your life so you don’t have to worry and care for me. It’s one less thing that is dragging *you* down, and now you can go live your life and be happy without me moping around and being sad”—which, in the middle of you being very sad, makes complete sense. I remember writing a journal entry about how I felt like I just wanted to die, and the image of me being this ship—um, a sailing ship in the ocean; I would die, and the ship would sink into the ocean, and, resting on the bottom of the ocean, the ship was dead, but it brought forth more life. So, coral and fish began to live in the carcass of the ship at the bottom of the sea, and in a way, like, I was trying to describe how that was a very beautiful thing. Very poetic to me. Like, “If I killed myself, think of all the life that could emerge from that; all the opportunities for other people…. Maybe I can teach these people something through this death.”

Further pursuing this line of thinking, Jeremy was reminded of Jesus Christ, the central figure of his religion, and the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ death.

I was able to add that Christ story—the crucifixion—onto my own experience; like, “Well, **maybe Jesus was suicidal too**.” I mean, he didn’t stop! And look what it did for the world; … in the midst of it happening, it didn’t change the hearts of the people that were *there*, but [ultimately] it did! Like, it taught people, “Here’s a person who loved people so much he was willing to give up his life for them.” And in a way, I thought, “Well, maybe that’s what *I* was trying to do.” … It was never thought out, during or before, that this was a religious act, but I think *later*, as I was reading some materials and hearing some authors talk about suicide as a salvific act, I kind of got this idea that, like [in the case of] Jesus, you know, dying was an act of redemption.

In particular, both men pointed to the possibility of something inside them that clicked on when they were faced with extinction. Jeremy stated,

I think there was 99% of me that was like, “I just—I need this to end. I need to stop suffering, and I wanna die.” And there was a small (pauses) voice—maybe it was my shadow; maybe it was something *inside* of me, the part of me that wanted to be seen and heard—and said, “No, not yet.” ’Cause I—I think I did everything I could consciously to *kill* myself, and then there’s this … conscious moment where I’m on the floor in my bathroom calling on my cell phone! That I *know* I hid somewhere in the house and tried to get rid of, and locked! But here I am, calling for help, telling the person that I thought didn’t want to listen to me—my therapist at the time—“Yeah, I took a lot of pills [to] kill myself, and I just wanted to say goodbye.” … I wanted to be loved and cared for; I wanted someone to see me. And maybe that was kind of a manipulative thing to do, in some regard, but I had these lifelines in that phone call … , and something inside of me knew that I could call and reach out.

That call to his therapist, the very person who had seemingly disregarded him earlier in the day, ostensibly saved his life, as she was the one who contacted the paramedics who took him to the hospital. Jeremy recognized a more arcane phenomenon, though, that also served as a lifesaving intervention: the remaining 1% of himself—his “shadow”—cried out to be illuminated. And when Jeremy heeded the cry, the part of himself that he found “unbearable,” shameful, and worthy only of extermination turned out to be his savior. Paradoxically, only by “embracing that part of me that hurts so much” rather than “cutting it out and dismissing it because it’s causing so much pain” did he find the key not only to surviving his suicide attempt but also to assuaging his psychache.

As for the *purpose* of Jeremy’s survival, it is also connected to “bringing that part of me that has been so hurt and wounded out into the light.” Over time he began to share his suicide story with trusted others such as fellow chaplains. Through owning that part of his past by “engaging and processing it,” he came to see that “talking about suicide is actually healing,” both for himself and for others. “If we bring light to that darkness,” he declared, “we actually help remove that commitment to *want* to kill yourself. It makes it harder to go there, because now someone sees you.” Thus, the growth and learning that Jeremy has derived from surviving his suicide attempt imbues his pastoral care. In an emulation of God as he sees God, he extends affirmation to others, “seeing” them and “hearing their story”—especially those attempting to snuff out their shadow.

Even more common among the participants was empathy for those experiencing suicidality—including themselves, past and present…Jeremy, for instance, described suicide as an act that one must commit *to* rather than *commit*:

I think that’s what suicide is: it’s a thought-out commitment. I think it’s very hard to kill yourself by suicide on the spur of the moment. I think it’s long and planned out. It takes time to prepare mentally for that. And in a way I think you have to be very (pauses) hurt but a very strong person to get to that point where you’re willing to do that kind of harm.

Moreover, evident in the insight they demonstrated as they related their suicide stories, all eight have confronted the reality of having one or more suicide attempts as a part of their personal history. A major way they have done this is by disclosing these stories to others, at least three of them to the general public through speaking or writing. (“My story is powerful,” said Jeremy, “and [telling it] has transformed me.”)…

Jeremy had an abrupt “wakeup call” regarding suicide and a more gradual awakening regarding his spirituality. The former occurred two weeks after his suicide attempt, when, feeling dejected, he impulsively swallowed a handful of ibuprofen. “The next morning I woke up,” he explained, “and I’m like, ‘I can’t do this to myself anymore. I need to *change*.’” As for the latter, it was aided by boundless love from another person, as it was for Abby. The “amazing heart-to-heart conversation” Jeremy had early on with Emma would lead to their mutually reimagining God as an affirming ally. During that time of spiritual metamorphosis, Jeremy would have powerful experiences as a hospital chaplain in his first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. “I feel like my life kind of got back on track then,” he said.

The last chapter featured a section on interviewees’ explanations for how and why they lived through their suicide attempts. It revealed that more than half of the participants either explicitly attribute their survival to an extrasensory or supernatural cause or allow for its possibility. As they see it, spiritual forces conspired to foil their death, actually intervening to keep them from dying rather than simply stopping them from going further with the attempt. Half—Gabriela, Jeremy, Harrison, and Phil—conjecture that a self-preservation instinct was operative deep within them. This instinct could be regarded as purely biological and inborn in all living things; in fact, Joiner’s interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior includes the notion that in order to kill oneself, one must acquire the capacity to overcome this supremely powerful impulsion toward staying alive (Bender, Anestis, Anestis, Gordon, & Joiner, 2012; Joiner & Silva, 2012; Van Orden et al., 2010; Van Orden, Witte, Gordon, Bender, & Joiner, 2008). Alternatively, some researchers (e.g., Jallade, Sarfati, & Hardy-Baylé, 2005; van Praag & Plutchik, 1985) have explored and found support for the “cathartic” effect of suicide, which is manifested as a spontaneous diminishing of depressive symptoms soon after a suicide attempt; perhaps such a catharsis, if it occurred mid-attempt, could rouse a dormant will to live. However, the instinct could also be accorded a metaphysical, non-biological, or divinely-evoked quality, which is how these four individuals regard it. Jeremy, for example, interprets his last-ditch effort to save himself by somehow locating his phone and calling his therapist as his shadow’s desperate wish to be illuminated…Furthermore, religion/spirituality permeates the “turning points” in the participants’ narratives: pivotal moments or periods when suicidality lost its grip on their psyche (described in Chapter 5). For Jeremy, Elizabeth, Stern, and Phil, the process of re-envisioning God as a loving, affirming force was the catalyst for their revolution.

Jeremy also knew the pain of having important questions go without satisfactory answers, although his tribulation had less to do with interpersonal struggles and more to do with internal philosophical and theological grappling: “Who is God?” “Why am I a Christian?” He would go through periods of feeling decidedly forlorn and knew in the back of his mind that his father had attempted suicide, yet no one important to him was talking about any of it, sincerely engaging with his suffering, or really “seeing” him. When he returned to work at the church of his youth, he felt utterly disregarded, which was made worse by embarrassment from being sexually harassed by the church secretary. Meanwhile, the hero of Jeremy’s religion, Jesus Christ himself, had set a patent example of giving himself up to die in order to effect goodness—a death that has had, of course, profound repercussions for millennia. The circumstances of Christ’s death, especially its voluntariness, were infixed in Jeremy’s psyche.

Religion also turned out to be inconsequential in another manner. The narratives in this study point unambiguously to the likelihood that once a person has “committed to” the act of suicide (as Jeremy termed it)—a period in time that my study did not determine but could be the subject of future research—he or she becomes so focused on it that thoughts of much else, including religion/spirituality, fade away.

I can think of no better way to close this paper than with the words of one of the people who entrusted me with his story. When asked at the end of the interview if there was anything he wanted to add, Jeremy first paused to consider the question. Then, gently, he said, “I think a prayer would be fitting.” In tender, measured tones, he offered the following prayer:

Oh God, you see *us*. You see *me*, and you see Ryan [the author] and her work, and in my work. I offer you thanksgiving for the journey that each of us has taken, for this opportunity to have our journeys collide here in this triangle[-shaped] room, with light, um, that is shining on some darkness. In the depths of that darkness there has been healing. Um, certainly in my life there is still healing to be had, and—and in—in Ryan’s life there is still healing to be had, and in this world there is still darkness that needs more light. May you bless this work that we have committed to here; that it may bless the lives of the people that it touches. May Ryan’s work here be prophetic. Inscribe in the hearts of the people that she presents it to a sense of story, and belonging, and of being heard. This I pray, to you, a still-speaking God, a still-listening God, a God who says yes (pauses) despite all of it. Amen.