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Exploring Ancestral Trauma and Healing:
Laying the Groundwork for a Documentary Film

Master's Project

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1. Theoretical-Methodological Overview

1.1. Introduction

In the fall of 2021, while wandering around the streets of Tallinn, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, I knew that I needed to make a documentary. Like most times my intuition speaks to me, it seemed random, totally unexpected, and a little crazy, but there was such a strong feeling in my body that I knew it was true. I knew that the documentary had to have something to do with my roots—my family history—and I also knew that to do this story justice, it couldn't be told like, "This is what happened," or as a summary. It needed to be told in a way that people could understand what the experience was like. I also couldn't help but wonder, *Why would anyone care?*

In the spring of 2022, I got my answer. I could see the entire film in an instant: what it was about, who to interview, what to talk to them about, how to shape the storyline. It was clear to me that the film needed to be about healing ancestral trauma, and that there were a number of storylines and ideas that I needed to weave together to create the film, with my journey being the main thread. I recorded voice memo after voice memo to capture everything that was coming to me.

When I say I want to make a film about ancestral trauma, I know what that means to me, but it doesn't convey my understanding and experience to others. My ability to articulate that knowing is critical not only for the success of the documentary itself, but also for steps along the way: securing funding, getting interviewees on board, and building a team aligned with the vision and mission for the film.

To that end, the purpose of this thesis is to put my understanding and experience into words. It's to answer the question: How do I explain the idea for this documentary to others? It's to explore what ancestral trauma is and what it means to

heal. It's also to document the backstory—the context required for the audience to understand the main thread—and use storytelling to illustrate ancestral trauma through lived experience.

This thesis is the first proof of concept on the journey to bring this film to life.

1.2. Ancestral Trauma & Healing

Before we talk about ancestral trauma, it's important to understand what trauma is, as it can be hard to define: “The term “trauma” is ambiguous, even in formal academic literature” (Blehm 2024). This isn't surprising, given that trauma is experiential and therefore somewhat subjective. What complicates things further is the fact that experiencing trauma isn't something that a person who has experienced it can necessarily identify, in the same way that they could identify that they have a headache or other physical symptom. Although definitions of trauma vary, there are underlying commonalities that point to an experiential understanding.

“Trauma is not what happens to you but what happens inside you,” according to Gabor Maté (2022). In other words, it isn't based on external events, but the resulting internal impact. Psychiatrist, author, researcher and educator Bessel van der Kolk describes it like this in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015): “We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present”. Kimberly Ann Johnson, who wrote *Call of The Wild* (2021), agrees:

We tend to think of trauma as a specific event—like a car accident or a death or an abusive relationship—but it's not the events themselves that are traumatic. It's

the way that we metabolize the events, or don't, that determines whether they linger in our system as unprocessed material causing record skips and literal or metaphorical indigestion. That's why two people can experience the exact same thing and one is deeply affected and the other is not. Two people in the same situation can emerge differently, one perceptibly altered, the other unscathed. It is also why, from the outside, we can never decide what registers for someone else as traumatic and how traumatic it is. (p. 36)

If the same experience can result in no harm for one person, and trauma for another, the difference must lie in their capacity to process the experience, or to metabolize the experience fully—the thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations associated with the event—and move through it instead of holding on to some of it, albeit unintentionally.

In *My Grandmother's Hands* (2017), Resmaa Menakem describes trauma as something that happens in the body when something is too much, too fast, or too soon—when something is beyond the body's capacity to process the experience. He agrees that trauma isn't an event or emotional response and points out that it isn't a flaw or weakness. He goes on to say that trauma is a protective measure of the body to prevent potential damage from things that it perceives as dangerous, and thus is a tool for safety and survival—regardless of the level of accuracy of that perception.

It's interesting and empowering to consider trauma as a survival tool and a form of protection against danger. That makes it seem as though it's a self-preservation mechanism to keep the body safe from the part of the experience that's too much. But that unprocessed experience doesn't just disappear—that energy stays with the body and creates a new way of operating in the world as a result.

Trauma isn't what happens; it's what happens as the result of what happens. When the body is unable to fully process an experience, it alters the way the nervous system operates. Threats aren't just based on current circumstances, but the body's memory of dangers from the past. It's important to note that this response isn't a choice—it's the body's automatic response. It's its way of signalling danger and protecting itself from further damage.

That signal can be passed from one generation to the next. Ancestral trauma, also known as generational, transgenerational or historical trauma, refers to trauma that isn't from direct experience, but the result of what an individual's ancestors experienced—it's trauma that's inherited or passed down generation to generation. Ancestral trauma has been studied in the descendants of Holocaust survivors (Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2025), Indigenous communities (Slaubaugh, 2023) and African Americans (Wallace et al., 2023). It can be transmitted in various ways, such as through DNA, genetic expression, a mother's stress during pregnancy, or after childbirth, as well as through family and cultural elements such as language, values and beliefs (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Fear can be passed down generation to generation (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Anything that seems like a threat can register higher levels of stress in people impacted by ancestral trauma. As an example, the descendants of Holocaust survivors showed greater psychological distress as a result of the war in Ukraine (Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2025).

Given that the stress response occurs in the body, the body is the path to healing. Healing often means facing the pain that you've been avoiding—going into it directly, experiencing it fully, and in so doing, freeing yourself from it (Menakem, 2017). Resolving trauma requires a deeper relationship with the body and being able to perceive what's there without manipulating it (Johnson, 2021). The processing required

for healing is mostly done in the body, not through thinking (Menakem, 2017). According to Bessel van der Kolk, “For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present” (2015). And since all bodies are different, when it comes to healing, there is no formula—every individual must find their own path (Maté & Maté, 2022). There are many different healing tools and practices to explore—I’ve tried quite a few (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Healing Tools & Practices I’ve Explored

Source: Author’s Creation

The healing journey needs to proceed at the pace that is appropriate for the body. In my experience, that journey is ongoing—healing is something that happens layer by layer and is never really finished. It’s more of a direction than it is a destination: a movement toward wholeness (Maté & Maté, 2022). It’s a good strategy to go slow (Menakem, 2017) and to proceed at a pace that allows the body to process challenging experiences bit by bit without creating overwhelm (Johnson, 2021). Alternating between a challenging experience and one that feels pleasurable can build the body’s capacity so

that eventually it can handle the full range of emotions and experience, all while feeling safe (Johnson, 2021).

Safety isn't theoretical or circumstantial—it's experiential. It's based on the nervous system's stress response, so it's something that you can feel in the body. When you reprogram what the body perceives as dangerous, you can show up in the world in a new way.

For me, a sign of healing is a new experience of safety in a situation that previously felt like a threat. It's the result of processing that unprocessed experience: metabolizing the thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, and in so doing, allowing the nervous system to restore its normal function so that the body no longer acts as if the things it perceived as dangerous in the past are real. Since that shift is internal and individual, it's possible to increase the experience of safety in the body—no matter what is happening in the world.

Beyond feeling safer in the world, one of the potential benefits of healing is a new relationship with the past. When you hold on to anger and grief about what happened, whether it was to you, your ancestors, or anyone else, you keep that energy stuck in the body. Eckhart Tolle describes that negative accumulated energy as something that occupies both the body and the mind and calls it the pain-body (1999). You drag that pain along with you as long as you have resistance to the past—but the past can't be changed, the only thing that can be changed is how you see it in your own mind (Maté & Maté, 2022). You can keep spending energy upholding the prison of the past, or you can choose to do the work and set yourself free, and in so doing, choose not to pass down the pain, creating a new legacy for the world (Eger, 2020).

Healing requires willingness: willingness to feel, to take responsibility for processing emotions and energy in the body, to let go of all the reasons why forgiveness is impossible, to step out of familiar pain and into new territory.

This is how we break the cycle.

1.3. The Backstory: Exploring My Roots

The summer of my sweet sixteen, my family attended a birthday party for one of my parents' friends. It was his 50th and the party was at Jõekääru—the same place I went to Estonian camp every summer, about an hour from Toronto—but it looked different. The dining hall was dressed up for a party, with white tablecloths, formal place settings, wine glasses, shot glasses, flowers and bottles of wine on every table. There were also blocks of ice filled with flowers and leaves, with the tip of a bottle of vodka peeking through the top of the ice. Our table didn't have one—those were only on the adult tables—although over the course of dinner, one made its way to our table and got passed around, several times.

After dinner, I tried not to stumble as I wandered outside with a friend. We ended up behind the kitchen, on the porch, where a small group of people were sitting around in chairs, smoking and drinking. There was a man there that I didn't know, which was rare—usually within the Toronto Estonian community, if I didn't know someone, I'd at least know of them or their family. He was talking about Estonia and asked us, "Have you been?" Estonia had regained independence just four years earlier, and many families had made the maiden voyage back to the homeland. My friend had already been three times—his family had even gone before Estonia re-declared independence—but my family hadn't. I remember my dad wondering if it was really safe. When it was my turn

to answer, I said, "I've never been." This familiar stranger looked me in the eye and said, "You have to go. You have to find your roots."

My first trip to Estonia was the year after I graduated from university. I was with my parents, who had also been there a couple years earlier. We visited several places in Estonia, including Saaremaa, where my dad was born. One day we did a tour where we ended up on the shore of a smaller island. The tour guide pointed at a boat and said, "This is the same type of boat that people escaped on during World War II." My dad's eyes turned red and filled with tears. I had never seen him like that before. He would've been 10 months old when he was on that boat with my grandparents. I stood there, biting my lip, trying not to cry, grateful I was wearing sunglasses so that no one could see the tears in my eyes, asking myself, *How on earth am I even alive?*

That same trip, I celebrated my birthday with relatives I'd never met. To welcome us, they had a table full of food: pancakes, fruit, jams, cheeses, nuts, homemade salami, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, potato salad, smoked fish, bread, butter, cake. At some point, we ended up talking about money and how much people in Estonia were earning. I had just started working in the corporate world in Canada and realized how different my lifetime earning potential was based on my starting salary, and while some of it was based on merit, some of it was also based on the luck of where I was born. I couldn't help but wonder, *Why was I part of the family that got out?* When they surprised me with a present, I tried not to cry.

That summer, my mother and I both sang in the Song Festival. Estonia's Song Festival tradition was born in 1869 as both a cultural and political event. Held every five years, they were a critical part of how Estonians united, kept their spirits up and found their path towards freedom. There are usually 20,000 to 30,000 people onstage, singing as one. I was singing soprano and my mother was singing alto, so although we were on

stage at the same time, we were separate from each other, lost in the sea of singers. Standing on stage, singing, surrounded by others dressed in their *rahvariided* (traditional costumes), there were people all around me who had tears streaming down their faces. I felt like I needed to cry, but somehow I couldn't. The pain inside me was so much bigger than me.

Growing up in Toronto, I was raised in the Estonian community. We spoke Estonian at home. I went to Estonian camps, Estonian school once a week, Estonian girl guides, and I even had an Estonian piano teacher. I was immersed in the culture and the language, the song and the dance.

The Estonian community in Toronto was formed by Estonians who escaped from their homeland during World War II, when Estonia was reoccupied by the Soviet Union in 1944. That summer and fall, approximately 80,000 people fled from Estonia because they remembered the terror of the first Soviet occupation. They left under the assumption that this relocation would be temporary and that they would be returning back home to Estonia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). People called it the great escape.

As a child, I didn't understand any of that. I didn't understand what it meant to escape. I was also confused about being Estonian, because a kid in my class told me Estonia wasn't a real country. How could my family be from a country that didn't exist? All I knew was that my grandparents had left Estonia on a small boat when my dad was a baby. I remember my grandmother saying that the only thing that they were allowed to take with them on the boat was a *väike kohver* (small trunk) with diapers and clothes for the baby. She would draw it out with her index fingers to illustrate that it was about the size of a piece of paper, or maybe slightly bigger. Adults were only allowed to take the clothes that they were wearing. I also knew that they lived in Sweden for 5 years before

coming to Canada. Beyond that, my grandparents didn't really talk about what happened.

Nobody ever really said anything about Russians either. In fact, if anything, whenever they came up, people would usually stop talking. The energy in the room would shift to the point where I could sense danger, and my body remembered that every time I met someone of that descent. It felt like a jolt to the system, as if somehow it was life-threatening and I needed to run away, even if it was in a conference room or coffee shop. When I got into yoga a few years after that first Song Festival, I really started to pay attention to my body—how it reacted to everything, what it was trying to tell me. The more I allowed myself to feel that jolt, the lesser and lesser it became, until the point where one day I had the opportunity to notice that it was no longer there.

My second trip to Estonia was ten years after my first. I was singing in the Song Festival again, but I came by myself and for an unusual reason: I wanted to have that breakdown on stage. I wanted to feel my way through that pain inside me that felt so much bigger than me, and free myself from it. When I got on stage, I was ready for it, and wondering, *When is it coming?* We sang the first song. We sang the second song. We sang song after song after song and there were still no tears. There wasn't even an inkling of sadness, or that it was coming. It seemed like whatever was in me ten years earlier was gone—that pain that I'd felt I couldn't handle—and instead, there was space. I felt grateful to be alive, and grateful to be Estonian.

After the Song Festival, I found myself standing on the shore of the Baltic Sea. There were ridges of sand beneath my feet and waves lapping around my ankles. I thought back to that moment during my first trip, when I saw my dad's reaction to the small fishing boat, and couldn't help but wonder, *If I really had to—if somehow, like my*

grandparents, I ended up in a life or death situation where I needed to escape to survive—would I have the courage to do the same thing?

I also went to visit my relatives in Saaremaa. One night when I was staying with them, we were sitting on the couch, watching the news in Russian. I don't speak Russian, but they do, since they were in Estonia during the Soviet occupation, so they were translating for me: A plane had been shot down in Ukraine. While the announcer was saying, "We don't know who did this," my relative who was translating for me was also yelling at the TV in Estonian: "What do you mean you don't know? You did this!" I could feel my heart pounding and wanted to get out of Estonia immediately, even though it didn't make any sense. Why would I feel like I was in danger in Estonia, when the plane crash was in Ukraine?

The next day, I went to the wedding of a cousin that I'd met for the first time two days before.

The day after that, my dad's cousin asked me if I'd ever seen my grandmother's birth record and offered to pull it up in the digital archives. I hadn't and was curious to see what might come up. The summer before that, one of my second cousins had forwarded me something from the digital archives: a copy of Estonia's declaration of independence (Figures 2 & 3). Signed in 1918, it had something on there that I didn't expect: my great grandfather's signature. There it was, second from the bottom on the second page: J. Kutan (Figure 3).

I had never seen my family name spelled with one *u* before. At Estonian school, they had said something at one point about how Estonians had added extra vowels to their names to make them more Estonian. I'd always thought that was just a rumour, but now it seemed like it might be true.

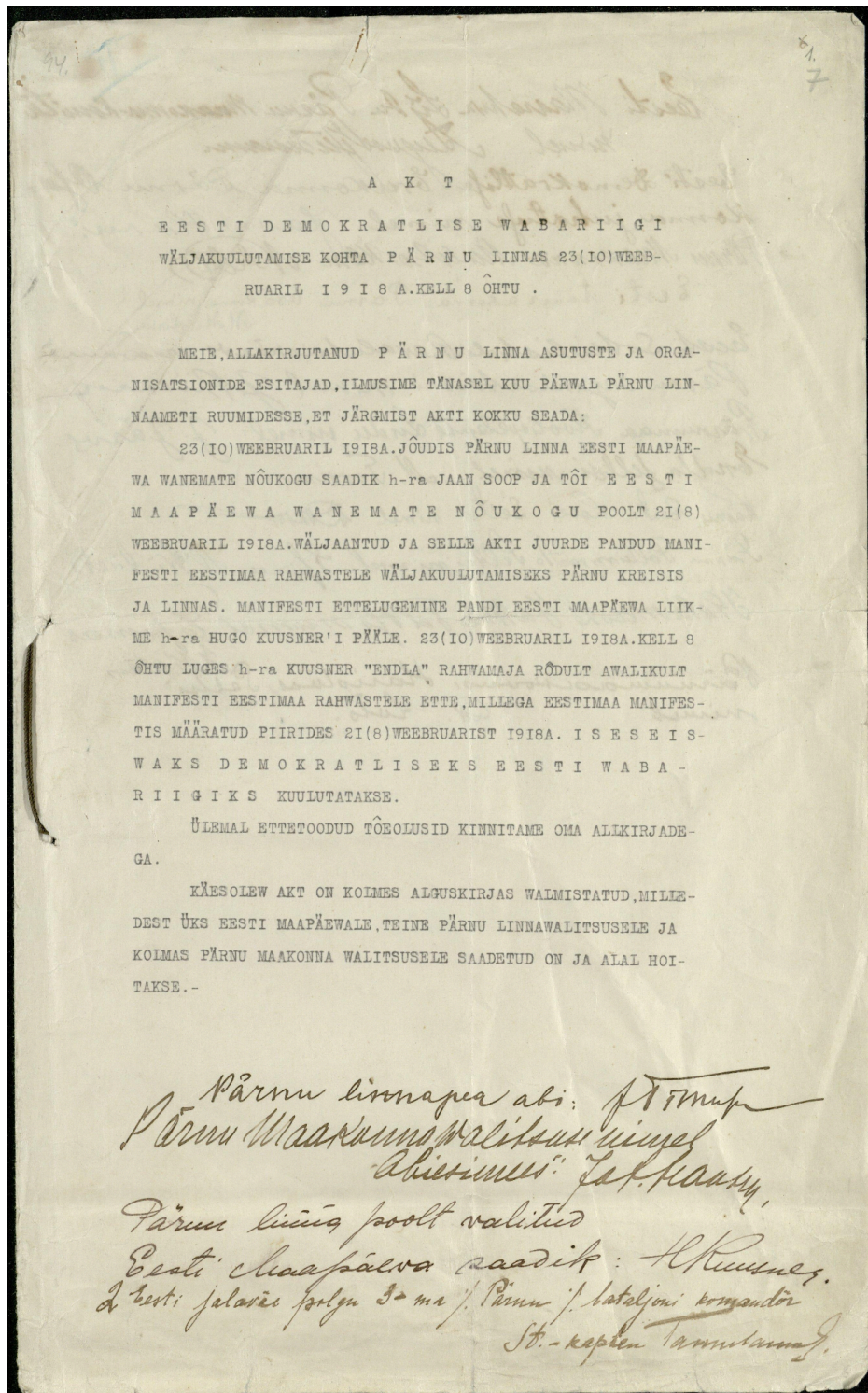


Figure 2: The First Page of Estonia's Declaration of Independence in 1918

Source: Photo by Anu Emery (A. Vaiay, personal communication, July 23, 2013)

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Eesti Maarahva Liidu Pärnu Maanoma-Komitee
nimel August Püümann

Eesti Demokraatlike Erakonna Pärnu Oja-
Konna juhatuse nimel Jaan Klaar.

Pärnu Maxima Mõlva Kõm (Kõm)

Eesti Töerahva Pärnu osakonna nimel
M. Martinson

Eesti Sotsialistide Revolutsioonide erakonna
Pärnu organisatsiooni nimel J. Piiskar

Pärnumaa Kooliõpetajate Liidu nimel: J. Järve.

Endla feldsi nimel M. Torrim.

Kärnu Kõrge Kooli Seltsi nimel O. Kõrre

Pärnu Põlvkonnaste Seltsi nimel. E. Jõnn, N. K. Käär

Halamõesto Haldja Feldsi nimel E. Jõnn

Pärnumaakoostöö: Hariduse Seltsi
nimel A. Luts.

Figure 3: Second Page of Estonia's Declaration of Independence in 1918

Source: Photo by Anu Emery (A. Vaiay, personal communication, July 23, 2013)

This time in the digital archives, we were looking for my grandmother's birth record. My grandmother and her sister wrote letters to each other for decades, my grandmother in Canada, her sister in Estonia, and that was the reason I had any connection to these relatives. When my grandmother went back to visit after Estonia regained independence, my grandfather didn't want to go, and I couldn't understand why, especially since everyone spoke about the homeland with such longing. Why wouldn't he want to visit? After my grandmother's trip, he described her as a *nutumasin* (crying machine) because she cried the entire time. Now looking at her birth record, I discovered something else I didn't know: I'd always called her *memme* (a term for grandmother), but while everyone called her Salme, the digital archives showed a different name at birth: Salomia (Figure 4).

Kirikotalituste raamat 1919. aastaks.					
Sündinute arv		Sündimise kuu ja päev	Ristimise kuu ja päev	Sündinute nimed	Wanemad: nende nimed, isanimed, liignimed ja usk amet, kus hingekirjas
Poeg-lapsed	Tütarlapsed				
	7.	Juuli 29 juuni	6	Yidia.	Mustjala vallast, Rahtla külast, Alexsei Leonti p. Lougas, naine Anna Joanni t. mõlemad õiget usku. Juuli Kuus on sündinud tütarlaps. Preester Kõster
	8.	August. 5 juulil	3.	Salomia.	Mustjala vallast kodanik Andrei Sosnin, Sündimuse poolest uuelane, naine Elisaveta Georgi tüt., mõl. õiget usku.

Figure 4: Birth Record of Salme Kuutan (née Sosnin)

Source: National Archives of Estonia (1919)

As I tried to make sense of the handwriting, my eyes widened: My grandmother's father—my great grandfather—was Russian by birth. How could that be? I had always thought that I was 100% Estonian since both my parents were Estonian, but if one of my great grandfathers was Russian, that meant that I was one eighth Russian, or at least an eighth.

That also meant that on my dad's side, there were two seemingly opposing forces: one of my great grandfathers was Russian, while the other one signed Estonia's declaration of independence. How did I not know?

My third trip to Estonia was another five years later. I was singing in the Song Festival again, just for fun. I met another cousin I'd never met before. She was also a soprano, so we stood together on stage at rehearsals. During the performances, it was impossible to find each other. Even still, it was a joy to be there.

A few days before that, I was at *rahvuskongress* (the national congress) where the concept of global Estonians was on the agenda. Kersti Kaljulaid, the president of Estonia, gave the opening speech. I'd just seen her on the news, talking about how it was time to retire the term *väliseestlane*, a word used to describe Estonians outside of Estonia that translates as "foreign Estonian." She said there was no need to distinguish between Estonians within Estonia and outside of Estonia. What was important was that all Estonians unite globally to celebrate our homeland's independence and keep the language and culture alive.

One of the other presenters talked about the waves of migration from Estonia. There were basically three: the late 1800s through World War I, during World War II, and after Estonia regained independence in 1991. I had never really thought about this before, but most of my generation in the Toronto Estonian community had two parents who were both from that second wave while I did not, so theoretically, if no one had

escaped during World War II, they could've been born in Estonia. My mother grew up in the Alberta Estonian community, which was formed by Estonians who left during that first wave. Her family left Estonia for Canada in 1902 and 1922, so she was born in Canada. While the Toronto community prioritized keeping the Estonian language and culture—they never wanted to leave—the Alberta community wanted to assimilate. Even with that major difference, both groups had one thing in common: stories of Russian torment, stories that were kept silent, stories stored for safekeeping in cellular memory. When I was a kid, our family would go out west to Alberta every summer to visit my grandparents on the farm where my mother grew up. We would visit friends and relatives on their farms, and my sister and I would sing to them in Estonian. People would sit there, listening, with tears in their eyes. I now had tears in my eyes as I realized that if my grandparents hadn't escaped—and survived—I may never have been born at all.

After the Song Festival, I found myself at a yoga festival, where the crowd and the teachers were a mix of both Estonians and foreigners. They had translators to accommodate everyone, so if a teacher was teaching in Estonian, it would be translated to English, and vice versa. One of the organizers introduced me to one of the translators and the three of us chatted for a couple minutes in Estonian. The organizer pointed out that I also spoke English and said, "Aili's from Canada." After our conversation ended, I started walking away.

A minute later, the translator came running after me. "Why do you speak Estonian?" she asked, continuing to speak to me in Estonian. That wasn't the question I usually got. I'd usually get asked, "How do you speak Estonian?" or "How do you speak Estonian so well?" People could tell from my accent (and sometimes my vocabulary) that I'm not an Estonian from Estonia. I would explain that I grew up in the Toronto Estonian

community, that we used to speak Estonian at home. This was the first time someone had asked me *why* I speak Estonian. I couldn't help but wonder, *What was she really asking?* It seemed like there was an underlying assumption that I shouldn't speak Estonian, or maybe even *be* Estonian, as if my ancestors' flight response somehow negated my roots. It made me think of two weeks earlier, when some of the other members of my choir were onstage at the Song Festival and people were saying to them, "You shouldn't be here. Why are you here?" Did they mean that they were in the wrong spot on stage, or that they didn't belong at the Song Festival, in Estonia? I wasn't sure, but I was sure of one thing. I looked at the translator and said, "I speak Estonian because I am Estonian."

Like every trip, I went to see my relatives in Saaremaa. One day, I visited the castle in Kuressaare. In one room, they had furniture set up to show what a typical living room looked like in Estonia during the Soviet occupation. It made me feel like I was at my grandparents' house. In another room, a video drew my attention: It had clips from Jõekäaru—my summer camp. It talked about how out of the 6,000 people who escaped from Saaremaa during World War II, over 2,000 Estonians eventually made their way to the Toronto area in the late 1940s and early 1950s, arriving as refugees and becoming Canadian citizens. Now there was a new generation of Estonians who no longer had Estonia as their birthplace. I felt grateful and proud that my family too had become Canadian citizens. I'd recently found out that when my grandparents made that part of the journey—when they left Sweden to come to Canada with my dad and my uncle, who was born in Sweden—they should have been sent back. They didn't have the proper paperwork. The only reason they were allowed to stay was because the ship they arrived on wasn't deemed seaworthy.

After visiting the castle, I realized that my relatives' living room also reminded me of my grandparents' house. One night, we were sitting on the couch again, watching the news—this time in Estonian. My dad's cousin asked me, "Have you heard the story about how the Russian army came looking for your grandfather?" I hadn't, so she proceeded to tell me about it. They wanted to conscript him and came looking for him but couldn't find him, so they left. When they came back again, he got word that they were coming but didn't have time to flee so some of the relatives helped him hide inside a bed. "What do you mean, inside a bed?" I asked. I didn't understand how that was possible. She went on to explain that the bed had a wire frame and a mattress bag and he was hiding inside the bag. When the soldiers went inside the house looking for him, they walked around with weapons, checking in and under everything, asking where he was and when he was coming back. To be sure he wasn't hiding anywhere, one of them took his bayonet and stabbed the bed.

The next day, we drove around Saaremaa. We were planning to have lunch with relatives along the north shore, but before we arrived at our destination, we stopped at another relative's place because there was a car in the driveway. I met more relatives I'd never met. They invited us to join them at a table in the backyard, surrounded by trees, a giant stack of wood, and cottage-like buildings and sheds, some paintless, some dark red. In a neighbouring backyard, someone was playing Estonian folk music on an accordion. There was a rock wall fence on the property that reminded me of the retaining walls my grandfather had built at the cottage in Canada. We sat there, chatting, and when it was time to leave, they asked me if I wanted to see inside the house.

As we stepped inside, I realized that my dad would've been here as a baby, or maybe even lived here. My relatives pointed out every detail about the house—they had

tried to preserve it as much as possible, treating it like a museum. The doorknobs were still the originals. So were all the fixtures in the kitchen, although they'd had to replace the ceiling. There was a thick red brick wall in the middle of the house, although it wasn't quite in the middle and had a giant opening at one end. During the German occupation, that wall had been used to split the house into two, with the Germans taking the bigger side. At that point, there was a cabinet placed strategically at the opening to prevent anyone from going from one side of the house to the other. Now, there was nothing blocking the opening, so you could walk freely around the house.

As we stepped into the main room, my dad's cousin—the one who'd told me that story about my grandfather just the day before—started to elbow me. She pointed to the far corner of the room where there was a small dark green couch (Figure 5). A loveseat. She said, "That's where the bed was." The relatives I'd just met nodded in agreement. Even though they were on my grandmother's side of the family, they all knew this story, this story about my grandfather. I wanted to leave but couldn't, because the house tour was for me. I walked through the opening in the red brick wall to the other side of the room. I was trying to find something to look at so that I didn't have to look at anyone, so that they couldn't see the tears in my eyes. I wished I could put on sunglasses without it being weird and realized I was holding my breath. I took a deep breath and found a painting on the wall to focus on. It had a small fishing boat on a stormy sea, with a bigger ship in the background that looked like it was sinking. My dad's cousin saw me looking at it and said, "That's a painting of the great escape, when your grandparents left, when your dad was a baby." I finally understood why my grandfather never went back.



Figure 5: Dark Green Loveseat

Source: Photo by Author (June 25th, 2019)

My first time in Estonia on Estonian Independence Day was on February 24th, 2022. I got up, attended the ceremony at Freedom Square and went to watch the military parade. As the troops were marching down the streets of Tallinn, singing Estonian folk songs, I was thinking about how I'd never seen a military parade in Toronto on Canada Day. I was also singing along—I knew most of the songs from my childhood, although some of them I hadn't heard in years, or even decades. Depending on the timing of the different songs and groups, I'd catch some of them during a verse, others during the chorus, some during both. There was one song that I started singing during a verse. When it got to the chorus, I realized I was singing the wrong words, but it wasn't that I'd forgotten the words, it's that the words had changed. I hadn't sung that song since before Estonia regained independence, so I knew it as, "Get free, Estonian sea." They were singing, "Stay free, Estonian sea."

It made me think of a conversation the day before, when I was talking to a colleague. We were both instructors for a virtual coaching program that was based in the United States, where she was located. She was wondering if I felt safe in Estonia, given the history and the fact that Russia was lining up military forces along the Ukrainian border. She asked me, “Are you worried at all?” I said no. I didn’t believe it was possible for there to be a full scale war in Europe at this point in history.

After the parade, I grabbed some lunch and went back to the place where I was staying. I opened up Instagram and found out that earlier that morning, Russia invaded Ukraine.

I also discovered that any healing I’d already done—the de-programming of that jolt in my system—was only the beginning.

To me, Estonia has always represented the fact that life is a miracle. Now, at the same time, it was also a reminder that at any moment, death is possible.

And it made me wonder, *Am I going to have to escape too?*

2. Project Documentation

2.1. Project Rationale

What makes this film unique is that it uses memoir-style storytelling of the great escape from Estonia in 1944 to illustrate ancestral trauma—how it's passed on, the impact of it, and how to heal.

There are many reasons to bring this documentary to life. This project has historical, cultural and artistic value, which is something that cannot easily be measured. By using cinematography to look at history through art, the documentary creates space for processing the past—the emotions and energy stored in the body—bringing relief and a greater capacity to feel safe instead of threatened, which is particularly important for people who are worried about the current state of the world. There is also value in exploring ancestral trauma through storytelling, as that translates a theoretical concept into something that is understandable because it's personal, tangible and experiential. By talking about what it means to be Estonian, the film has the potential to build connection within and across Estonian communities globally, leading to deeper bonds as well as a greater sense of belonging for individual members and a stronger cultural identity. Beyond the Estonian community, this film will allow populations that have experienced occupations, invasions and war to process some of the impacts of all of that on individuals, families and cultures, which is particularly important right now for people from countries who were formerly part of the Soviet Union. As ancestral trauma can go back centuries or even thousands of years, and healing is a journey, a single movie can't possibly help everyone process everything—in my experience, processing happens layer by layer—but at the very least, it can be the catalyst to start healing journeys and help people who are already on that path take the

next step. For this reason, this documentary will also be of interest to people in healing communities.

For me personally, this project is an opportunity to preserve my family history in a format that makes it easy to pass on to future generations, continue my own emotional processing and healing journey, and express myself.

It's also possible that this project will create financial value, although that is not the driving force.

2.2. Project Plan

To the Root is a documentary film that explores how the pain and fear trapped in the body from having to flee your homeland can be passed down from generation to generation, even through silence—and how to break that cycle.

This project will be executed in six phases (Figure 6). The current phase—laying the groundwork—is about developing the idea to the point where it can be clearly communicated to others. It involves starting the research, which, along with idea development, will continue into the next phase of the project to build the storyboard. That research includes reviewing family history documentation, conducting informational interviews, rebuilding past travel itineraries, and looking at photos, as well as reading research papers and books on topics related to the ideas in the documentary. The goals of this phase are to document the backstory and key ideas; define the unique value proposition for the film; and come up with the logline, which is a one-sentence summary or description of a movie (see paragraph above).

The double diamond model was used to define the narrative arc for the backstory (Figure 7). The Discover phase involved exploring all of the possible ideas and stories that could be included from my personal experience and family history.

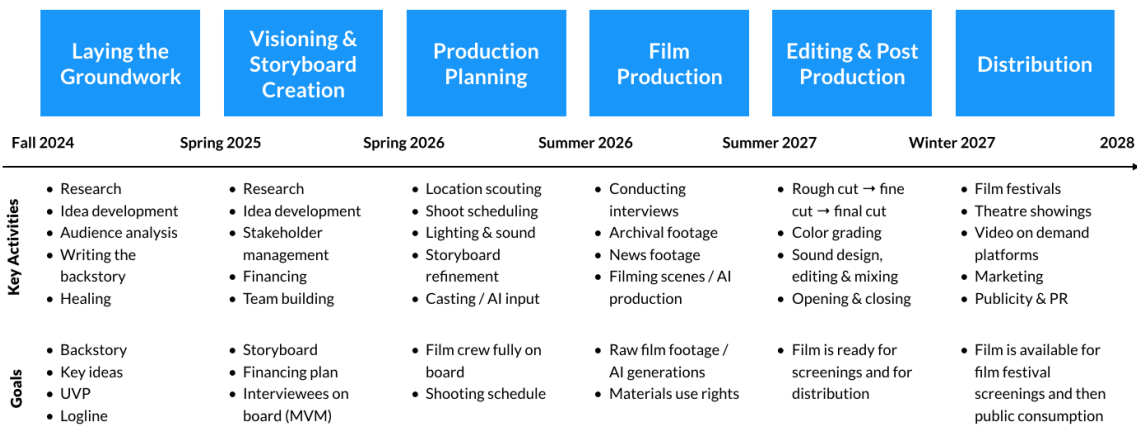


Figure 6: Project Plan

Source: Author's Creation

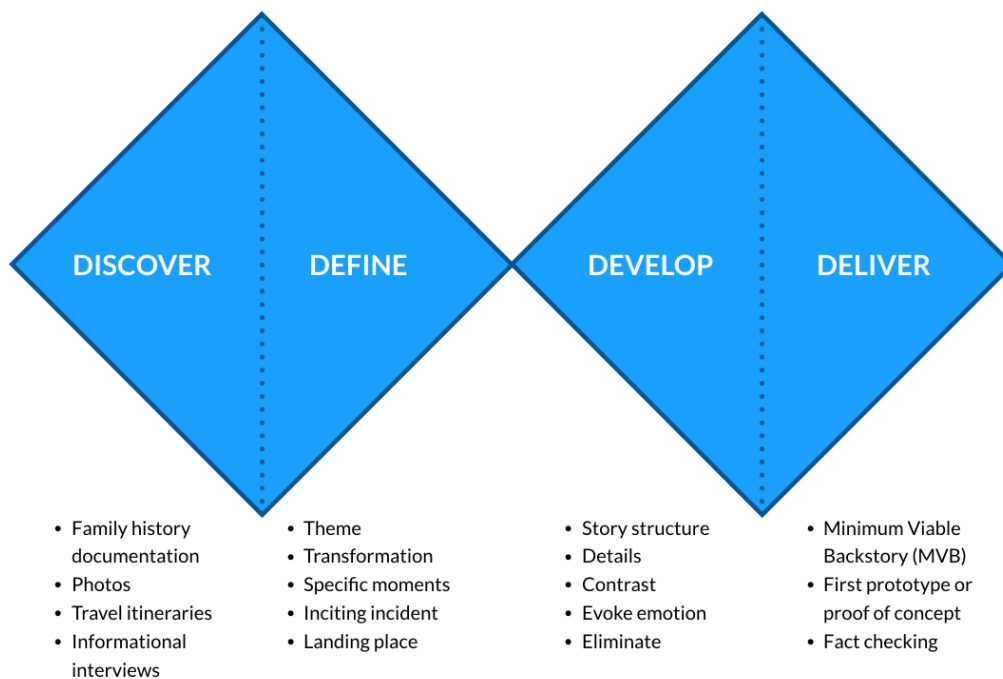


Figure 7: Building the Backstory's Narrative Arc

Source: Author's Creation

Key themes and specific moments started to emerge in the Define phase, as what this story was about became clear. In the Develop phase, the story structure was put together and details were included to evoke emotion. And finally, in the Deliver phase, the Minimum Viable Backstory (MVB) was delivered as the first prototype or proof of concept in bringing this film to life.

As the project moves into the second phase—Visioning & Storyboard Creation—the plan is to continue building out the main narrative arcs for the film (Figure 8). This will be done in written format initially and then translated into a visual format for the storyboard. After a brief pause, this work will resume in July 2025 and is targeted for completion before the end of the year.

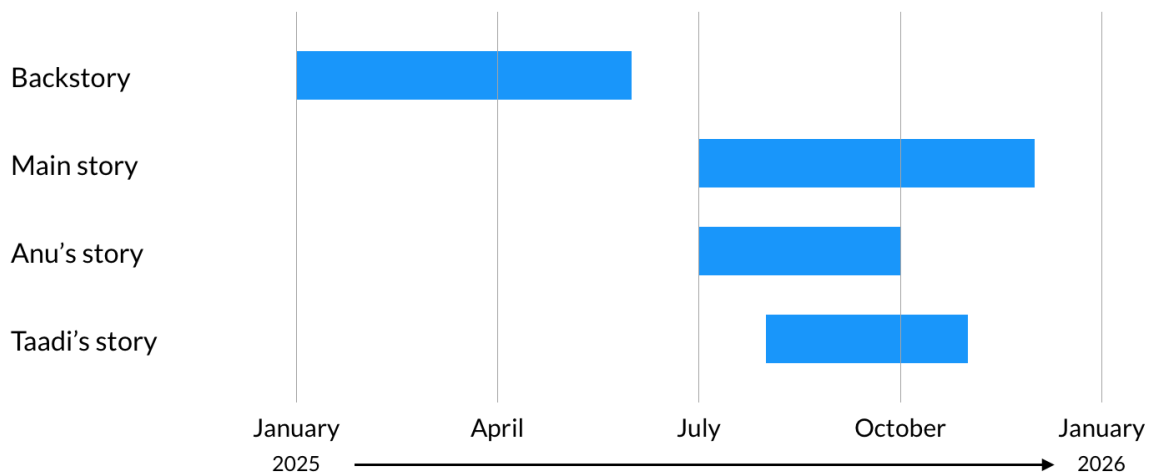


Figure 8: Timeline for Writing the Main Narrative Arcs for the Film

Source: Author's Creation

To bring this film to life, one of the key performance indicators is to get a minimum of three interviewees on board to tell those foundational stories. At this point, two out of three have said yes. On top of that, another key performance indicator is to

secure interviews with at least three people who can speak to ancestral trauma not only professionally, but also from personal experience. That will allow additional stories to be layered on to the main narrative arcs for the film.

2.3. Financial Plan

The current phase of the project—laying the groundwork for a documentary film—is an investment of my time and energy.

The budget for the full project will be put together based on the storyboard. The storyboard forms the basis for cost projections, as it will inform the production plan: where the film will be shot, travel plans to get there, and the size of the team required to make the film. Film crew day rates are available to create the initial estimate and apply for funding (Film Estonia, 2025a). On top of labour costs, there will be costs associated with set design and film equipment, such as cameras, sound equipment, and lighting. Depending on how the scenes from the past are recreated for the film, there may be costs for AI production and/or filming on set with the film crew and actors. There may be licences and fees for archival footage. It may be necessary to register a company to apply for funding or manage this project financially, which also has an associated cost. Other costs to be factored into the budget include insurance and eventually marketing and promotion.

There are several potential revenue streams for the film, including box office sales, direct sales or licensing agreements with streaming platforms, and selling distribution rights to distributors who then release the film in their designated regions. It's also possible that the film will generate revenue via home video sales, merchandising and sponsorship. For films, pricing is usually based on the distribution channel. In the event that the project team does need to set a price, value-based pricing will be used.

2.4. Audience Analysis

As the path from creator to consumer is getting shorter, it's more critical than ever to know who your audience is and what's in it for them. There are two primary audiences to consider for this film: 1) people who are worried about the current state of the world, and 2) people with Estonian roots.

Life is always full of uncertainty, but the current state of the world is heightening fear and anxiety about what the future might bring. As of April 2025, worry about military conflict is growing in Europe (Nadler, 2025) and 47% of Americans are extremely or very concerned about Russia invading other countries (Fagan et al., 2025). War impacts everyone indirectly because of its effect on mental health (Agyapong et al., 2024), and the stress from Russia's invasion of Ukraine came at a time when global mental health concerns were already high as a result of the pandemic (Kalaitzaki et al., 2022). To sum it up: Things aren't looking good. And following what's happening in the news or on social media only makes it seem even worse (Greenglass et al., 2024).

People who are worried about the current state of the world may not necessarily know what to do about it. They have their own individual struggles on top of what's going on in the world and they don't want to have to deal with it all. They may try to take the edge off or avoid the news so that they don't get triggered. While those things may minimize exposure in theory, they don't reduce stress or help anyone process the experience in the body. If anything, they are more of an attempt to avoid the reality of the world and to escape the present moment.

It's for this reason that this documentary is needed. This film will create space for emotional processing. It aims to transform despair into hope. While the backstory ends where the war in Ukraine begins, the film will also cover what happened after that—the healing that ensued—allowing the audience to experience a sense of relief,

even with this difficult subject matter and even with the current state of the world. It's important to know that those two things can co-exist. And seeing this through film is particularly powerful because when you experience art, the sensory input allows emotions to be processed—there's a release of neurochemicals in the brain that leads to emotional release (Magsamen & Ross, 2023).

This release is particularly critical for Estonians. People in the country are wondering what the worst case scenario might be and worried that they will have to defend themselves (Smolentceva, 2024). This isn't surprising, given the history and geography. I've heard stories of people putting their lives on hold—postponing major life events like marriage, having kids, or buying a house. With all the uncertainty, it seems too scary to make big plans and build a life—and it isn't just because of the current state of the world, but also because the excitement for these things is gone. Having the space to do some emotional processing may create enough space for that excitement to start to come back. Beyond that, Estonians will be able to see themselves in this story—even if their personal or family history isn't the same, this film will allow them to process experiences from the past and through that emotional release, experience a greater level of safety in the body.

During film production, marketing efforts will begin on email and social media to show the production process and share stories to inspire hope and healing. Those stories could potentially be sourced from Estonian communities worldwide, as every Estonian family has a story. Leading up to the film release, there will be more communications to introduce the trailer, share interviews and announce showtimes.

2.5. Strategic Partnerships

There are several strategic partnerships that will come into play over the course of this project. In the initial stages, partnering with organizations that can provide funding will be key. These include cultural organizations, film institutions and foundations, both in Estonia and in Canada. The documentary will be of value to these groups historically, culturally and artistically.

As the film moves into production, finding the right people to bring it to life is critical. There are many production and service companies that could support the project execution and film production (Film Estonia, 2025b), which would generate financial value for those businesses, and work experience for the individuals involved.

When it comes to building a relationship with the audience, there are Estonian organizations and associations in many countries worldwide, including Great Britain, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, Ukraine, the United States, Australia and Canada. Since every Estonian family has a story, these groups could be approached to see what already exists that could be used to share stories of hope and healing. A process to gather such stories could also be set up using digital tools. The contact lists and communication channels of these organizations could also potentially be leveraged to promote the film leading up to the release. Since cultural value is one of the main drivers for this project, this partnership will create the opportunity to build a greater sense of connection and belonging within and between Estonian communities worldwide.

It's possible that there may be partners related to film distribution. It's also possible that this film will be self-distributed. The distribution strategy will be assessed at a later date and the project plan will be updated accordingly.

2.6. Risk Analysis

As making a documentary film often takes years and even potentially up to a decade (Nestor & Cole, 2024; Wissot, 2023), the risks considered here are the more imminent ones related to the next phase of the project plan: Visioning & Storyboard Creation. As the project progresses to each new phase, risks will continue to be assessed and mitigation strategies put in place to ensure the project goals and milestones are met.

In the event that financing is unavailable, the project plan can be altered so that production planning, film production and editing & post-production are executed in waves. For example, the first wave would document family history and the backstory. The second wave would capture the parts of the film related to current world events. The third wave would then include everything else required for a full feature-length film, including the expert interviews. That way, the funding could be approached in stages rather than all at once, reducing the financing required and increasing the chances of success. A short film could also potentially be produced after the first or second wave, which would be another proof of concept for the full film. Alternatively, the entire film could be shot guerilla style, which would reduce the budget as it uses whatever resources and locations are available and a minimal crew. Another alternative in the event that financing is unavailable is to publish a book with the stories and ideas from the movie and use the money generated by the book to fund the film.

Another possible risk at this point is that interviewees decline to participate in this project. That would affect the storyboard, and ultimately the film. This is why being able to explain what the film is about is so critical, and why that has been the focus of the work to date. However, if that still happens, the wave strategy for film production described above could also be used. That would allow footage from the film to be shared

with potential interviewees so that they can more easily see if they'd like to be a part of this. Since several of the potential interviewees are people who could help people on their healing journeys, the ask for an interview could also potentially be positioned like a partnership. People interested in the film would also likely be interested in the books, courses and other offerings of the interviewees, so creating paths towards those would be in the best interests of everyone involved.

3. Reflection

3.1. My Creative Process

This project to date has given me the opportunity to notice a few valuable insights about my creative process. The backstory documented here about exploring my roots is my second draft—it didn't require much editing at all once I was finally able to get it out on the page. What that reflects to me is how different my creative process is than the conventional wisdom about how to write. Some of the advice out there suggests that you should sit in the chair every day, write first thing in the morning, set a daily word count target, just try to get every idea down and figure out what to do with it later. For me, it's much more effective to capture ideas via voice memos and then look at them on post-it notes or Trello boards. That is how I process, rather than on the page. While it's faster to go from anything written to the final product, I still need time to understand what it is that I'm trying to say—and while that processing is happening, there's a high level of trust required that I'm on the right path, because there isn't anything visible to show for my work until pretty close to the end.

For me to write or create, it's essential to be in the body. It took three weeks of daily yoga practice before I was able to even start writing. On top of that, it also took several additional healing tools and practices in order for the words to start to flow.

3.2. My Healing Journey

I could pursue healing tools and practices for lifetimes and not get anywhere close to the level of emotional processing that writing this backstory has gotten me. It was surprising to me how much of a shift I could feel in my body after writing the first draft.

Working on this project has also given me a new perspective on an old wound. I was clinically depressed at one point when I was pursuing my bachelor's degree. Although that was a long time ago, I've looked back at that experience on occasion and wondered why it had to happen. Now, I'm grateful for it—I think it was so that I could discern the difference between depression and processing unprocessed emotions. From the outside, they may look similar, but on the inside, they feel very different.

In 1993, my sister interviewed my grandfather about his life in Estonia and the events that took place leading up to the night they escaped. I remember dying to know more and being terrified to ask. Reading that school paper now as part of the research for this project, I can see why I inherited a fear of visibility: In certain moments of his life, being seen meant death.

3.3. Estonians & Emotions

When I re-read the backstory, I noticed something I hadn't noticed before: how much during my first three trips to Estonia, I was trying not to cry—specifically when I found out details about my family history. The juxtaposition between that and the trip my grandmother took to revisit her homeland after Estonia regained independence stood out, as she cried the entire time. (I'm guessing she couldn't keep it in once the floodgates opened.)

One of the keys to processing emotions in the body is to face them without resistance. When you're willing to face what's there directly and experience it fully, you not only prevent that energy from being stored in the body, but you can start to reduce the backlog—whether it's from this life or by inheritance.

I can see how my level of resistance has decreased over the years, and why I initially had so much resistance—a lot of human beings do, but Estonians in particular

are good at hiding their emotions (Bird et al., 2010). There's an unspoken assumption that emotions are a problem, a sign of weakness, or something that shouldn't be happening—the definition of resistance.

To illustrate this point, I was at a funeral for an Estonian woman a few years ago. I didn't know her, but I knew her daughter and wanted to be there to support her. The deceased had been actively involved in the Toronto Estonian community for decades, and there were representatives from several organizations who wanted to acknowledge her contributions to the community. The first person who spoke started talking about what this woman had done for one of the organizations. Before long, their voice started trembling. They paused, holding back tears. They apologized, saying, "I'm sorry," before trying to continue. This happened several times. The next person who spoke did the exact same thing, and so did the next, and the next, and the next... and they were all Estonian. The pattern stood out. It was as if they all assumed that they shouldn't be emotional—while giving a eulogy at a funeral.

It's no wonder I didn't understand the value of emotions or want to feel them. I did whatever I could to avoid them: working hard, keeping myself busy, trying to numb. But when you numb negative emotions, you also numb the positive (Brown, 2012). Feeling better doesn't happen by feeling less; it's the result of allowing yourself to feel more deeply. When you stop trying to protect yourself from negative emotions, you expand your capacity to experience the joy and wonder of being alive. Emotions are no longer a problem: They are an opportunity to heal.

Three weeks after getting into yoga years ago, driving home from class, all of a sudden, it felt like there were beams of sunshine bursting out of my chest. The experience was so foreign to me, it wasn't until a couple of years later that I realized exactly what that was: joy.

3.4. Project Feasibility

When the vision for this documentary came to me in the spring of 2022, I had no idea what to do with it. It seemed like an amazing idea, but it felt completely overwhelming. What did I know about making a film? Now, it actually seems doable. I have a plan and while it's still very early, I know I just need to take it one step at a time and listen to my body along the way. When the time is right, there will be an entire team moving this forward.

The work to date has been focused on laying the groundwork for this documentary film, and all of the goals for this phase of the project have been achieved. The key ideas and backstory for the film are in the theory section. The unique value proposition is in the project rationale section. The logline is at the start of the project plan section. These can be used to explain the idea for this documentary to others. Anyone who thought this movie was a good idea in theory before this was documented now has the opportunity to connect to it emotionally and understand it through story. This will make it much easier to secure funding, get interviewees on board, build a team aligned with the vision and mission, and ultimately bring this film to life.

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