

**TRANSFORMATIVE, EXCEPTIONAL HUMAN EXPERIENCES AT MUSIC
FESTIVALS: A TRANSPERSONAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION**

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Dedication

To the exceptional human experiencers whose lives have been transformed; may you continue your journeys into expanded awareness and wholeness, wherever it may take you.

Abstract

The current study investigated the phenomenological experience of transformative mystical and transcendent exceptional human experiences (EHEs) in the context of two music festivals (i.e., Shambhala and Burning Man), while also considering the festivals' characteristics and the co-researcher's EHE integration processes. Six co-researchers who had attended one or both of the festivals and experienced a life-changing mystical or transcendent EHE therein were recruited and interviewed. The analysis of emergent themes was conducted using transpersonal, phenomenological, heuristic, and hermeneutic research methods. The identified themes unfolded within three parts: Entering Mystical Kingdoms, Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience, and The Essential Gifts of the Exceptional Human Experience. These parts explicated meaningful festival characteristics, the triggers and phenomenology of the EHEs themselves, and the EHEs' transformative effects and integration processes, respectively. A prominent theme involving acceptance and surrender to the EHE and its transformative effects and integration emerged from the data. The findings from this study provide important implications for mental health and psychotherapy regarding EHE integration, guidelines for potential experiencers, and areas for future research around EHEs. Further research on the EHE as an opportunity for movement into awakening and consciousness development is encouraged.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The current study addresses the need to understand exceptional human experiences and their effect on experiencer's lives in the context of their occurrences at music festivals. Accounts of exceptional human experiences (EHEs), anomalous experiences, and experiences occurring during non-ordinary states of consciousness, which overlap substantially in content and experiential properties, have been studied mostly as a general phenomenon (Brown, 2000; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2013; Grof & Grof, 1986; White, 1994). Deficiencies exist in the research, however, around the occurrence of EHEs and their subsequent transformative effects in specific contexts, such as the music festival. EHEs are defined by the fact that they point to new insights and knowledge of realities that are unlike our everyday, ordinary experiences (Brown, 2000; White, 1994). They involve a range of atypical experiences, such as out-of-body, mystical, psychic, transcendent experiences, and many others. It is a specific class of EHEs that will be examined in the current study (i.e., mystical and transcendent experiences). Existing research on phenomena like EHEs suggests that such experiences can be transformative if they are adequately integrated into the experiencer's life (Brown & White, 1997; Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1993; White, 1995b; White 1997a; White, 1997b).

I believe that there are many important elements of these music festivals that facilitate EHEs. For example, previous literature has documented the importance of inclusive communities, *communitas*, and collective effervescence; all of which can be found or are demonstrated in some way at transformative music festivals (Hunt, 2010; Hutson, 2000; Jansen & Wildemeersch, 1998; Partridge, 2006; Rill, 2006; St. John,

2011). Other literature pointed to the experience of electronic music, itself, that may provide access to altered states of consciousness (Grof, 2010) that further facilitate the occurrence of EHEs. In addition to this, I have proposed that there are parallels between elements of Shambhala and Burning Man and those of Eastern traditions that center around awakening (e.g., the music festivals providing sacred spaces akin to an ashram, the DJs and festivals themselves acting as gurus, and the EHEs as shaktipat). The importance of spiritual resonance at music festivals is also investigated as a field of consciousness that could be providing access to EHEs if one is to “tune” into it. To demonstrate this, I draw from the occurrence of spiritual resonance between counsellor and client, a study of spiritual resonance, and expound upon how such resonance may be facilitated at music festivals in a similar manner.

The Implicated Researcher

In studying EHEs it is important that the researcher is implicated in that they have their own EHEs and are open to further exceptional experiences as they manifest in their subjective reality (White, 1992). I was so moved by my own EHE at a music festival that I sought to research the phenomenon in this context to further elucidate the lived experience and its subsequent transformative potential in the lives of experiencers. My EHE set me on a path of self-inquiry, soul searching, and a total embrace of non-duality that has fully transformed my life. The following is my personal account of my EHE as it was experienced at Shambhala Music Festival in the summer of 2013:

I was lying in the warmth of my tent with my partner at the time. We were talking, about what I can't recall, while the bass and flow of the music washed through the camp around us. Suddenly, we both stopped talking and were staring

into each other's eyes when "I" disappeared. There was a sense of being pulled somewhere else, somewhere formless and vast. It was evening outside, but wherever I was it was bright and spacious. "I" was aware that "I" no longer existed and instead had been replaced by *everything* and *nothing* at the same time. I felt connected to all of the voices and beings at the music festival, and felt an overwhelming sense of love wash over and through me. There was no sense of time or space in this place, only an interconnection that flowed like a river or the undercurrent of an ocean. Without knowing how much time had passed, I found myself back in the tent with an entirely detached sense of my self-other boundaries. I was still staring at my partner, but I had a sense that he was naught more than an illusion, as was everything else around me, as was *myself*. I was not entirely sure that he, or "I", actually existed anymore. I remember reaching out to touch his face, asking him if he was really there, if he was really real? My mind refused to accept previous notions of separateness, as I had finally seen through this illusion. I could still feel the immense love and connection to All swelling in my chest and I knew I had been forever changed from that moment forward.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experience and meaning of transformational, exceptional human experiences at music festivals and the experiencer's journey thereafter. Attendance at transformative music festivals is steadily rising, for example, Burning Man has grown from 20 participants in 1986 to 56,149 participants in 2012 ("Burning Man: What is Burning Man?: Timeline," n.d.). As such, it is useful to know the impact of EHEs occurring in the context of these festivals. It is

valuable to understand how to educate people about EHEs, especially those in attendance at transformational music festivals. It is also important to be able to learn about these experiences and their meanings in order to educate psychologists and therapists in better understanding client's experiences and how to work with them so that they may successfully integrate the experience into their lives in a lasting, meaningful, and positive transformational manner (Wilde & Murray, 2010).

The following research questions will be examined in the current study: What kinds of life-altering EHEs are occurring or being facilitated at music festivals, if they are occurring? How are people responding to these experiences? And, what are the impacts of these experiences on the experiencer's life?

Before delving into the current study we will examine several areas that served as scaffolding for this research. This will include illuminating the pre-existing literature on EHEs and altered states of consciousness (ASC), therapeutic applications and implications of EHEs, the topic of shadow issues, drug use and its implications in EHEs and ASC, transformational aspects of music festivals, and spiritual resonance both at music festivals and in the client-counsellor dynamic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Controversial Role of Anomalous Experiences in the West

Western spirituality has evolved in much different ways than that of the East, and Christianity dominates the Western spiritual landscape. Phenomena common to both Eastern and Western cultures and spirituality, however, are anomalous experiences. Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner (2013) described such experiences as uncommon or deviating from everyday, ordinary experience or from Western, scientifically accepted explanations of reality. Grof and Bennett (1993) explained the Western, Newtonian, scientific way of thinking in that the universe functions like a giant, rule-driven machine that results in the creation of a limited view of human beings and their potential. In contrast to this view, anomalous experiences can betray the verification of one's own senses, but at the same time free one from the mechanistic and behavioristic science that can lead to alienation, loss of meaning in life, and lack of reverence toward all forms of life (White, 1994).

White (1997a) discussed the unfortunate fact that individuals, especially in the West, are taught that anomalous experiences are delusional, illusory, malevolent, physiological by-products, signs of mental illness, coincidence, and even psychotic abnormalities. In Eastern traditions, however, individuals may actually be prepared and directed through such anomalous experiences in order to find truths that guide their lives (Solowoniuk & Nixon, 2009). Brown (2000) asserted that the normative personal and cultural definitions of reality are still insufficient and limited in attempts to capture the predicament of those who have anomalous experiences. She described experiencers as present-day explorers who have discovered uncharted landforms, who can map new

territories, and who can chronicle their journeys through the use of narrative. In this way, experiences that differ from the norm are suggested, instead, as offering views into the evolution of conscious awareness and human potentialities.

There are hundreds of documented anomalous phenomena (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2013) that include hallucinations, fusional experiences (i.e., an awareness of merging with another being, the universe, or a divinity), out-of-body experiences, trance, and mediumship or channeling, as well as other experiences that fall outside of the normative and statistical bell curve of everyday life experience (Brown, 2000). The specific prevalence rates of these phenomena are difficult to ascertain, although some estimated prevalence rates have been reported. For example, in the U.S. Epidemiological Catchment Area Study the prevalence of hallucinations over the lifetime was estimated at between 10-15% (Tien, 1991), and an analysis of a more recent U.S. National Comorbidity Survey reported prevalence rates of 8.5% auditory, 7.0% visual, and 7.0% tactile hallucinations (Shevlin, Dorahy, & Adamson, 2007).

Exceptional Human Experiences

Specific types of anomalous experiences have been reworked and renamed under a class called Exceptional Human Experiences (EHEs). White (1997a) viewed any anomalous experience as having the potential to become an EHE if it is viewed as beginning a lengthy process that extends into the future. She likened this process to dreams or unconscious products that have yet to be worked through. For example, White used Jung's metaphor of persons carelessly going along in their lives until they stumble and lose balance and only then have to deal with their unconscious in order to regain their course. In this way EHEs are thought to serve as stumbling blocks that are calls to

awaken to an evolved state of consciousness. While exceptional experiences may occur frequently in the lives of individuals, there are particular experiences that will move persons to take notice of the event and investigate it further, thereby moving such experiences into the realm of EHEs (Brown, 2000).

White (1995a), who studied these phenomena for the better part of her career and collected hundreds of written accounts of EHEs, used EHEs as an overarching term for those that are considered to be psychic, peak, mystical, and flow experiences. These experiences are exceptional in their ability to provide awareness of a reality in contrast to one's ordinary experience that may even be able to transcend it (i.e., the barriers of time and space, personality, and even death) (White, 1994). Grof and Bennett (1993) explained these experiences by likening individuals to microcosms who both reflect and contain the macrocosm, whereby the potential exists to experience directly and immediately every aspect of the universe including those that transcend one's senses. White (1995a) explained that EHEs are seen as timeless, conscious experiences of self that are both within and without and move one toward an increased sense of unity. These experiences also have documentable concomitant social, cultural, and personal effects. An important aspect of the EHE is that it sparks an impulse to be and become more connected (White, 1997a). Other names for EHEs include, but are not limited to, transpersonal experiences (Grof, 1972), peak experiences (Maslow, 1962), praeternatural experiences (Nelson, 1989), and transcendental experiences (Neher, 1980).

Five main classes of such EHEs were developed and include psychic (e.g., out of body experiences), mystical (e.g., unitive experiences), encounter-like (e.g., angel and UFO experiences), death-related (e.g., near death and mediumship experiences), and

exceptional normal (e.g., empathy and ascetic experience) (White, 1995a). In her extensive work with EHEs, White (1994) illuminated their widespread qualities which include hushed stillness (even in the midst of activity), time stopping, deep silence that has a roaring quality, buzzing or ringing in the ears, temperature changes (i.e., chills or flushing), goosebumps, cool breezes (even in closed quarters), and a deep sense of peace and calm. She also listed the most commonly reported EHEs as near death experiences, out of body experiences, mystical experiences of oneness, human-animal communication, strange coincidences or synchronicities, déjà vu or the feeling of having been here before, telepathy, falling in love, premonitions, creative experiences involving “aha” or “eureka” moments, UFO encounters or abductions, and performing beyond previous limits (e.g., in the context of sports). White (1993) also elucidated 10 characteristics that were common to most EHEs. These include spontaneous occurrence of the EHE that cannot be induced by the individual, even under the influence of drugs; experience of connection (e.g., to different levels of one’s self, others, the planet, the universe, etc.); insight into new experiences of the self (i.e., teaching that one is more than one thought); loss of separation of body and mind that can induce an orgasmic element in one’s physiology, psychology, and spirituality (e.g., tingling, flushing, or breathlessness); experience of transcendence (i.e., of the body, life/death, etc.); direct experience of opening to a reality one was taught cannot be true in such a way that one can experience actually being there; occurrence within an ongoing, unfolding process requiring one’s conscious cooperation and participation; ability to link one to the sacred, meaning, and connection; potential to be life-changing depending upon how they are received and responded to; and, finally,

their disclosure or sharing can result in validation and heightened senses of meaning and reality.

Researchers who study these experiences tend to define them in ways that capture the essence of the specific experiences being examined. For example, Palmer and Braud (2002) referred to EHEs as non-ordinary, transcendent experiences that are relatively rare and unfamiliar. They expanded upon this definition to explain that non-ordinary, transcendent experiences go beyond conventional understandings of oneself and the world in regards to agency, identity, space, and time. Wilber (1979) discussed specific, awakening experiences as “no boundary” moments (i.e., the sense of self or identity expands beyond the mind and body’s location in space and time). While some assume that anomalous experiences are all one in the same, others believe that some of these experiences have the ability to trigger transformative changes, allowing one to transcend what one was before the experience (Palmer & Braud, 2002) and change their partially socially constructed realities (White, 1995a). In fact, Walker (1992) suggested that radical change in an experiencer’s attitude or conduct can be a key factor in validating EHEs. This notion of transformation is important in the present study and will be investigated in specific EHEs occurring in the context of music festivals.

Theoretical Foundations of EHEs

White (1995a) examined some of Charles Tart’s work as theoretical foundations for EHEs. In the context of their place in the universe, White revealed that experiencers of EHEs implicitly feel part of a meaningful, inherently purposeful process. White used the example of astronauts (i.e., the Gaia experience), wherein the earth is experienced as a living thing, pulsating with meaning. In examining assumptions about the nature of

human beings, White explained that EHEs alter one's sense of self wherein the universe is experienced as one's own body, thus destroying insignificance in that each being is embedded in the same underlying unity. The universe is experienced in a way that is more real than physical objects, connecting separated organisms and even places (i.e., transcending space, time, and even death). Furthermore, EHEs can provide past life experiences that facilitate awareness of new states, provide clarity that can come from the knowledge and strength regarding what one should do in one's life to transcend a regressed state of evolution, and initiate a process of self discovery (i.e., of one's limitations or shortcomings). For example, Brinkley (as cited in White, 1995a) was reported as halting his violent and destructive path only after an exceptional experience.

In examining assumptions about the function of human beings in the universe, White (1995a) explained that EHEs act as seeds or initiators of a common process that seems to be connected to, aided by, and bonded with the universe. It is during this process that one can learn to disengage from their ego, connect to all forms of life, and become filled with a sense of calmness, peace, and wonder. White (1997a) believed that EHEs could, in this way, make a difference in one's personality and, through the personality, have a larger effect on society in general. Finally, in examining assumptions about human consciousness, White (1995a) explained that EHEs provide one with the notion that the entirety of the earth and its contents seem sentient to some extent. Furthermore, one's body and brain is separated from the knowing self that transcends physicality and one creates a new sense of self that is founded on connection. Such personal knowledge can function to strengthen belief in reality which transcends that described by traditional scientific knowledge (White, 1997a). This unmistakable knowing allows one to

understand that the spiritual realm is a reality and allows one to feel the presence of the divine within the Self.

Triggers of EHEs

Grof and Grof (1986) discussed the fact that EHEs, which they referred to as non-ordinary states of consciousness, can occur spontaneously or be triggered. From their research, they concluded that triggers include, but are not limited to intense sexual experience, psychedelic drugs, childbirth, physical exertion, emotional stress, and accident. They found that such experiences often occur in meditative practices designed to activate spiritual energies. Additionally, in a study further described below, Brown and White (1997) found 121 triggers of EHE, the most frequent involving meditation/prayer (37 narrative accounts), impasse (22), surrender (20), exploration (19), human interaction (19), spiritual emergency (17), death of another (15), depression (15), fatigue (15), crisis in a personal relationship (14), and insight into a problem (14). Other new and unique triggers included agony, burnout, physical diagnosis, and sleeping. For the purposes of this study, the music festival experience will be examined in itself as a potential trigger or facilitator of EHEs.

Integration and Potentiation of EHEs

Brown (2000) expounded that when an experiencer realizes they are not separate from their exceptional experience, but are integral to working with it, the experience can be acted upon, transmuted, and humanized and moves to the realm of EHE. In essence, it has been taken from an “out there” experience to a meaningful, “in here” experience as it is integrated and transformed into the experiencer’s being. White (1993) explained that while EHEs are potentially life changing in this way, it depends upon how the

experiencer receives and responds to them. White (1997b) described this process as one that involves one's narratives (i.e., stories one composes about oneself and one's place in the universe), wherein one must include the experience in a meaningful context by dissociating from one's ego-self and refraining from dissociating from the all-self. If one can accomplish this, White (1997b) believed that the all-self provides support in a collaborative way by offering additional ideas, concepts, and images. White (1997b) explained that if EHEs are included into one's life view they begin a process of association, connecting one's experience to existing culture and the realm of one's ego-self.

Traditional narratives are linear (i.e., demonstrable events associated with the ego self that exist on specific points in one's lifeline) and contrast EHEs which have a vertical sense of direction (i.e., they transcend one's linear stories and can affect and connect past, present, and future) (White, 1997b). If one chooses to assimilate an EHE into one's narrative, it can become the beginning of a new life story. White (1997b) referred to this as a life-potentiating narrative that provides a meaningful explanation for the experience. Such potentiation involves a process that includes an intense and sometimes all-encompassing search for meaning, the trial of a new life view, accommodation of new knowledge and further experiences, fostering of a sense of openness to experience (i.e., involving the all-self), and dissociation from the ego-self. In this way, EHEs have been called "preparadigmatic experiences" (White, 1993, p. 195) in that they announce a new paradigm for an individual, one that can be either trusted or denied. If, however, the EHE is explained away (e.g., repressed, dismissed, or laughed off) it can become a life-depotentiating narrative (i.e., confirming the status quo and stalling growth) (White

1997b). White (1995b) explained that this paradigm shift marks the end of a separate sense of self and facilitates a new sense of an all knowing self that encompasses all. The EHE provides an experiential paradigm that serves as an extension of the being of the experiencer; that provides a new perception of the nature of the universe, life, and other beings; and that is known identically in the way that one knows who they are (White, 1997b). White thought that this opened an individual to experience more of the world and the universe as belonging to them, with a self that exists beyond the body and an identity that is discovered in anything and everything. Examples of such life-potentiating narratives include: Reality is malleable and is not constant for all persons in time and space, past and future moments can be experienced now, and there is no boundary between mind and matter.

White (1997b) believed that if EHEs are integrated they can serve as links to the sacred and heighten one's sense of meaning, connection, and reality. For example, Jung spoke of cooperatively and actively incorporating unconscious symbols found in dreams into conscious, living experience, which can be likened to the integration process of EHEs (as cited in White, 1997a). Brown (2000) understood these new paradigms as adding to the quality of life for individuals if they were potentiated. In this way, EHEs can be viewed as seeds of spiritual growth (i.e., moving events that spark a lifelong process of transformation and spiritual development that is caught in an interplay of oscillating dependence between the view of the EHE and the stage of spiritual growth) (White, 1995a). Such seeds, under certain conditions, can sprout, grow, and become cultivated into fully mature plants (Brown & White, 1997). EHEs are, in that way, woven into one's life story and provide opportunities to learn, grow, and expand inner and outer

boundaries. Brown and White (1997) explained that exceptional experiences enable the experiencers to realize more of their human potential and, over time, alter the person's identity and worldview. In this way, experiencers view spiritual paradigms as reality and can integrate a positive relationship with other persons, species, and even the planet. Such integration also provides increased meaning in life that facilitates further experiences of awe and wonder. It is the purpose of this study to explore the integration and potentiation of EHEs into the lives of experiencers and investigate the subsequent transformational effects.

Effects of EHEs

Wilber (as cited in Jackson, 1996) argued that accessing matrices, as they occur in therapies such as Grof's holotropic breathwork and in EHEs themselves, is not conducive to affecting spiritual growth. Instead, Wilber believed that true spiritual growth required accessing transpersonal states that transcend ego boundaries and access higher states of consciousness. Such states are outlined in Wilber's developmental fulcrums, specifically fulcrums seven to ten, comprised of the psychic (i.e., the opening of the third eye and beginnings of spiritual practice), subtle (i.e., the level of the saints and white light experiences), causal (i.e., the level of the sages and realization of the unmanifest source or transcendental ground of all lesser structures), and the nondual (i.e., the total dissolution of the separate-self sense and letting go of attachment to manifest existence) (Wilber, 2000). White (1995b) explained that one's sense of their life is entrenched in their tendency to preserve their sense of being a unique self. Wilber (2000) captured this in his lower development fulcrums (i.e., 1-5) that include the sensori-physical (i.e., our sensations, perceptions, and physical matter), the emotional-phantasmic (i.e., our

emotional boundaries of the self), the representational mind (i.e., the id, ego, and superego), the rule/role mind (i.e., the rules and roles we use to belong), and the formal reflexive (i.e., our mature, egoic self). Taken together, those who seek to preserve their unique sense of self seem stuck in Wilber's lower developmental levels, while those who experience, embrace, and integrate EHEs may be affected in ways that move them into higher developmental levels and allow them to participate in an evolutionary shift in consciousness.

Palmer and Braud (2002) studied EHE disclosure and found that frequent and profound EHEs are positively and significantly correlated with high levels of spirituality, high levels of meaning and purpose in life, permeable boundaries, and a tendency to move toward life changes. They discussed EHEs revealing and making manifest one's true human potential in promoting the evolution of worldview, awareness, and sense of the meaning of life as experiencers move toward identifying less with their egoic selves and more with an all-self. White (1993) also studied the effects of EHEs on experiencers and reviewed many published accounts that were reported as life changing in the journal *Exceptional Human Experiences*. Findings from this data will be further illuminated in the following section that outlines a study examining many of these accounts.

While there is evidence of the positive aspects of EHEs, they can also be associated with apprehension, fear, misunderstanding, and can feel as dreadful as stepping off of the edge of a cliff (Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1997b). Furthermore, Palmer and Braud argued that the inhibition and nondisclosure of EHEs could contribute to increased stress and risk factors for physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being. Grof and Grof (1986) discussed the fact that non-ordinary states of consciousness

and experiences may even be viewed as pathological rather than therapeutic and transformative. Another example is found in the context of spontaneous and profound awakening experiences that, if they are not integrated into body and mind, can cause psychological disturbances (Almaas, 2001; Wilber, Engler, Brown, & Chirban, 1986) (e.g., a feeling of free fall and flood of abysmal terror (Almaas, 2001; Epstein, 1986)). Grof and Grof (1986) discussed the fact that some of these non-ordinary states of consciousness and experiences can spark evolutionary crises (spiritual emergencies) that can manifest physically and psychically and, thus, could be misinterpreted as mental illness. The authors argued instead that these experiences could be treated as difficult stages in a developmental process that, akin to White's (1993) beliefs, could result in creative problem solving, emotional and psychosomatic healing, personality transformation, and consciousness evolution. Fortunately, Palmer and Braud (2002) found that the act of disclosing and working with EHEs was positively and significantly correlated with reduced stress-related symptoms, positive psychological attitudes and well-being, and meaning and purpose in life. These findings are important for the present study in that psychological and emotional distress could be alleviated by the process of co-researchers disclosing their transformative EHEs.

Studies of Transformative EHEs

Brown and White (1997) conducted a study of individuals who had had transformative EHEs (i.e., those that qualitatively shift the life view or worldview of the individual) by randomly selecting 50 essays from a pool of 160 entries submitted to an Exceptional Human Experience Network essay contest. Specific accounts that were representative, transformative, and rich with triggers (as well as predisposing

circumstances), concomitants (i.e., physical, psychological, physiological, and spiritual), and aftereffects were extracted from the narratives. Triggers, concomitants, and aftereffects will be collectively referred to hereafter as TCAs. Triggers were noted if they pre-staged, contributed, surrounded, or served as a background to the experiences and were studied to show that life circumstances (e.g., loss, anxiety, abuse, trauma, serious illness, etc.) are favorable in that they require transformation in order for resolution and revolutionary life change. Concomitants were used to capture the raw elements as written by the experiencer; where, for example, physical could involve an experience of a vision, physiological could involve an experience of heart palpitations, psychological could involve the emotional and intellectual cognitions surrounding the event, and spiritual could involve transpersonal experiential feelings (e.g., being flooded with x, or an overwhelming sense of x, y, z). Finally, aftereffects revealed whether or not the EHE was transformative.

Brown and White (1997) extracted 317 pages of material from 509 pages of narrative text. Both researchers analyzed the sets separately, utilizing different strategies to add to TCA lists in order to improve validity and reduce biases in their findings. Experiences were classified into one of five categories (i.e., psychical, mystical, death-related, encounter, or enhanced) and 31 out of 50 essayists indicated that their life had been changed in some way by their experience. For the purposes of the current study, the elucidated aftereffects that are the most relevant included altered outlook (58 narratives), awareness of more than body (55), changed attitudes (52), personal growth (46), joy (45), new meaning (43), wonderment (43), fuzzier edges (39), increased spiritual interest (39), awe (38), and increased well-being (37). The researchers reported that their findings

suggested that a before and after qualitative change (i.e., transformation) took place within the experiencers due to their experiences. Shifts or, at the very least, minimal engagement in the EHE process, were connoted by the use of words like “altered”, “increased”, “decreased”, and “awareness of more”. Psychological and spiritual aftereffects were registered long after the experience and had become a major transformative point in the experiencer’s everyday life. These aftereffects were conveyed as lasting changes of attitude or vocation, exploration of new life interests (e.g., newfound talents), a sense of personal healing (e.g., physical or emotional pain, and spiritual angst), and new ways of envisioning oneself and one’s possibilities. Brown and White reported that the experiencers knew that their lives had been forever transformed and redirected because of their experiences. Furthermore, of all of the experiencers, those who had mystical experiences were most likely to report positive aftereffects, long-term aftereffects, and that the experience was life changing.

Another example of transformative EHEs can be found in Wilde and Murray’s (2010) qualitative study (i.e., face-to-face, semi-structured interviews) of 15 participants who had out of body experiences. They found that participants were concerned with the probability that their experiences could function as adaptive forms of behavior. One type of EHE (i.e., the near death experience) was revealed, in particular, to be a critical life event that had transformed the experiencer’s identity, sense of self, and views toward relationships and life directions. For example, one woman in the study reported that her near death experience changed her life and human development and noticed modifications in her beliefs, major life choices, and attitudes. The findings from these

studies highlight the importance of studying EHEs, mystical EHEs in particular, for their transformational capabilities in a different context (i.e., the music festival experience).

Why Study EHEs? Therapeutic Applications

Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner (2013) explained that ignoring the study of anomalous types of experience constitutes movement away from a comprehensive study of human psychology, development, and the human experience. They stressed the importance of understanding other forms of consciousness (both spontaneous and influenced) and ways of interpreting reality and the physical world. For example, White (1995b) explained that some experiences indicate knowledge and understanding of the notion that everything is everything else (e.g., mystical experiences), or that the world is physically limitless (e.g., psychic, death-related experiences), or provide a glimpse of a world where the self is nurtured by nurturing others in a way that no one is less than anyone or anything else (e.g., purposefully harming another would also be injuring oneself). Furthermore, it is important for clinicians to understand the differences between pathology and peculiarity (Cardeña et al., 2013). For example, as elucidated above, EHEs in particular may contribute to the evolution of consciousness and psychological and spiritual healing with long lasting effects. EHEs may serve to provide insight and expand human awareness regarding the nature of life and allow one to move from a lesser sense of self to a greater, consciously evolved state (White, 1997b). White (1995b) referred to this as a specific satiation wherein one knows and becomes more than they were previously (i.e., a self that we all are, all-self, or what others have called the human collective unconscious) with incomprehensible possibilities for growth.

The present study has significant therapeutic applications. For example, White (1997b) expressed the importance of converting life-depotentiating narratives into positive, potentiating narratives. White described shamanic identities versus psychotic identities, wherein the former is built on EHEs as life-potentiating narratives and the latter may have developed as a result of becoming stuck in the plot of a life-depotentiating narrative. White used Grof's Spiritual Emergency Network as an example of therapeutic benefits, in that the Network helped connect people with counsellors who were familiar with anomalous experiences. These counsellors could then aid individuals in finding meaning in their experiences, incorporating the experiences into their lives, and developing new identities based on life-potentiating narratives grown out of the EHE.

Grof (as cited in Pressman, 1992) also believed that EHEs could be integrated into the therapy process and could lead to profound changes in the realm of existential issues. Grof considered that in such non-ordinary experiences an ideal utopian world is replaced by transcendental realism that frames both dark and light in the universe as components that are intrinsic and inseparable; therefore, one is not to repress the negative, but to accept things as they are in their complexity and allow new dimensions to materialize amongst what would have been considered negative. Grof (1980) explained: "The ultimate reconciliation with the universe -- not necessarily with its *status quo* but with the unfolding cosmic process -- comes from the insight that the totality of existence forms a unified field or network which is experientially available to each of us" (p. 231).

Grof (1980) posited that non-ordinary states of consciousness could be therapeutic agents because they allow for access to psychological material normally out of the reach of one's conscious mind. Grof (1985) developed his holotropic breathwork therapy

system to address different categories of therapeutic growth, of which the transpersonal is relevant to the current discussion. Grof viewed the transpersonal as the most radical and extreme in perception and defined it in the context of unusual experiences in the “individual’s feeling that his or her consciousness has expanded beyond the ego boundaries and has transcended the limitations of time and space” (Grof, 1985, p. 41). Furthermore, Pressman (1992) presented some of Grof’s case studies that revealed the effectiveness of non-ordinary experiences in promoting wholeness, noting that Grof’s subjects were able to build upon their every day, subjective identities in a way that allowed them to work more effectively with subsequent life experiences.

In moving toward wholeness, William James (as cited in Pressman, 1992) saw acceptance as key. That is, an allowance and surrender to life’s difficulties rather than resistance which only creates tension and blocks one’s access to a wider view of one’s life. James spoke of translating psychological difficulty into something purposeful and fulfilling that can be likened to the integration of EHEs into one’s narrative. Pressman (1992) outlined Maslow’s work on peak experiences and their resultant effects (e.g., feeling unified, whole, and integrated), wherein individuals shift from D-cognition (i.e., cognition focused on deficiency needs) to B-cognition (i.e., cognition of being) that exists in wholeness. Pressman (1992) posited a theory to explain how non-ordinary states of consciousness can affect one’s movement toward wholeness in that non-ordinary states of consciousness can have therapeutic effects once they are successfully integrated into one’s ordinary state of consciousness or subjective identity. Non-ordinary states of consciousness can be positive (i.e., integrated in a coherent, continuous way wherein the old identity is developed) or negative (i.e., repressed, denied, dissociated and leading to

chaotic disintegration or confusion). Moreover, Pressman (1992) argued that the two states are distinguished only by the role of an individual's awareness of them.

While EHEs and their transformative and subsequent therapeutic effects are, in themselves, intriguing, it is important to study them in more recent, relevant contexts. Brown (2000) discussed the importance of discovering contextual and environmental factors of EHEs, which the present study seeks to accomplish in the context of the increasingly popular music festival. It is mystical (i.e., unitive, oneness, or everything is everything else experiences) and transcendent (i.e., white light, union with the unmanifest source, total dissolution of the separate sense of self, or egoic death experiences) EHEs in particular that will be the main focus of this study. Inclusion criteria for the current study were developed to capture these experiences and their transformative effects, for example White (1997a) explained that a defining characteristic of a mystical event is that it combines an experience of the *other* with improvement of quality of life in the here and now. I would extend such improvement in quality of life into the future as it supersedes the event. Similarly, Grof (as cited in Pressman, 1992) believed that the most notable of the transpersonal experiences was the experience of cosmic consciousness, universal mind, or the felt experience of God. Next, however, it is important to examine the role that non-ordinary or altered states of consciousness play in facilitating EHEs, especially at music festivals, and their concomitant transformative effects.

There is evidence to support the idea that music festivals could be providing the grounds for EHEs to occur by altering states of consciousness (St. John, 2011; Hunt, 2010; Hutson, 2000; Grof, 2010). To further investigate this connection, I will first focus on the idea of altered states of consciousness in general, given that EHEs can occur

during such states. As mentioned above, altered states of consciousness allow individuals to perceive the world in new and compelling ways that then supersede the Newtonian reality and the notion that one is naught more than a “skin-encapsulated ego” (Grof & Bennett, 1993, p. 91). Growth can then be facilitated from access to new, innate knowledge wherein altered states of consciousness play a role in aiding this journey of healing and incorporating novel and profound meaning into one’s life (Cortwright, 1997).

Therapeutic Potential of Altered States of Consciousness

The therapeutic potential of altered states of consciousness can be exemplified by Grof’s holotropic breathwork (Grof, 2010). This work utilizes altered states of consciousness and can lead to progressive relaxation, intense sexual feelings, and mystical experiences. It was reported that there were many instances when participants in the holotropic workshops were able to

break out of depression that had lasted several years, overcome various phobias, free themselves from consuming irrational feelings, and radically improve their self-confidence and self-esteem. We have also witnessed ... disappearance of severe psychosomatic pains, including migraine headaches, and radical and lasting improvements or even complete clearing of psychogenic asthma. ... [Participants also] favourably compared their progress in several holotropic sessions to years of verbal therapy. (Grof, 2010, p. 36)

Grof argued that transpersonal experiences occurring during altered states of consciousness could not be dismissed as irrelevant or psychotic. For example, Grof (2009) discussed his participant’s abilities to describe accurate, new information that they had accessed (e.g., specific historical events or detailed subjective descriptions of animal

behavior and plant life) and had not known or had access to prior to their experience. It was explained that these

[t]ranspersonal experiences suggest that human consciousness is continuous with the inner nature of the universe, which from this perspective appears to be a unified web of events in consciousness permeated by interiority and intelligence. These experiences provide evidence that the individual human psyche is part of a greater psyche that has no boundaries and is essentially commensurate with all of existence. (Grof, 2009, p. 53)

Jackson (1996) studied the empirical basis of Grof's holotropic therapy system. In his exploratory study, he surveyed and interviewed 38 participants from a Holotropic Breathwork group in New Zealand. Transpersonal experiences were reported frequently by 34.2% of participants and occasionally by 60.5%. The most common experiences reported were archetypal and out of body experiences (60.5% and 50% respectively). Jackson found that "[a]lmost 80% of the sample experienced a significant and lasting increasing in the following: a sense of unity with all life, an ability to heal themselves, compassion for others, inner strength, insight into the events of their lives, and wisdom (Jackson, 1996, p. 35)." Furthermore, 78.9% of the sample claimed that powerful healing had occurred in their workshop experiences and 94.7% claimed to integrate their insights into their daily lives. It must be considered that Jackson stated that a shortened version of this article appeared in an August 1996 issue of *Forum*, an in-house journal of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists, but this writer was unable to find this version.

Other Effects of Altered States of Consciousness

Thapa and Vinoda (1985) studied the experiences of three types of altered states of consciousness (ASC) that included meditative, psychotic (i.e., schizophrenia and other mental disorders), and epileptic (i.e., non-integrative groups who were confused by their ASC experiences and were unable to handle the experiences in the absence of emotional and social supports). They found that age, developmental and psychological maturity, available emotional and social supports, guidance of a sage, and cognitive structuring from religious or philosophical systems contributed to the positive adaptive and integrative consequences associated with the meditative ASC group as compared to the other groups. For example, they found that younger participants involved in meditative practices experienced the psychotic ASC as a consequence, and, in contrast, meditators who had more developed cognitive and intellectual structuring were better prepared for their experiences. One limitation of this study, however, is the use of predetermined groups of individuals (e.g., individuals predisposed for schizophrenia) as these individuals may not have been able to experience anything other than their psychotic ASC. For example, in reference to Wilber's (2000) development fulcrums, as outlined previously, those who are grounded in, or in this case predisposed to, disorders at the first developmental fulcrum (i.e., the sensori-physical) may have their experiences in the higher developmental fulcrums coloured by such grounding (e.g., psychotic experiences with ASC).

Unlike the meditation induced ASC investigated in the study by Thapa and Vinoda (1985), my focus is on the spontaneous occurrences of ASC in the context of music festivals. The consequences of ASC were mediated by the effects elucidated in the

study above and I am interested in the role that structural framework, as potentially provided by the atmosphere of the music festival, plays in precipitating ASC. I am also interested in understanding whether or not that structural framework can act as a safeguard for individuals against the potentially negative effects of their subsequent EHEs in the music festival environment. For example, it is possible that transformative music festivals are providing what Almaas (2001) called mirroring. Almaas explained that such mirroring shows individuals what their soul or essence is capable of, however, the quality of the mirroring needed to do so is rarely available. This may explain why so many people need transformative music festivals to establish grounds from which they can connect, mirror each other, and integrate parts of themselves that are normally hidden from view. Such hidden parts may also include various shadow aspects that are seldom integrated and often projected onto others and situations. It is possible that an EHE could bring some of these shadow issues to the surface.

Shadows Cast from Light

It is important to include a discussion of shadow issues, first introduced by Jung, as they may manifest after EHEs. Various therapies include work on many different shadow issues of clients and seek to promote wholeness by acceptance and transformation of the shadow aspects of self (e.g., looking for positive gifts in the shadow (Ford, 1998)). Ford (1998) outlined a brilliant discussion of the shadow as a reference to any parts of one's personality that are usually denied and repressed, rather than embraced. These parts can include fear, vindictiveness, need for control, hostility, ugliness, cheapness, and weakness amongst many others (Ford, 1998). One's shadow usually manifests as the person that one does *not* want to be, however, all parts, even the shadow,

are seen as necessary compositions of the whole. If EHEs bring out shadow issues in experiencers, this does not need to be viewed as a negative effect, but rather an opportunity to bring the darkness within one's self into consciousness and attention (Ford, 1998). As discussed previously, it is important to integrate EHEs into one's self and it is also important to integrate and embrace one's shadow aspects in order to promote growth toward a comprehensive wholeness in one's being.

The shadow aspects of mystical and transcendent EHEs could manifest in many different ways that could be as unique as the experiencers themselves. Specific shadow issues I expect to find, due to the EHEs occurring in the realm of Wilber's psychic level of development, are psychic inflation (i.e., thinking and acting as though one is Jesus, a spiritual entity, or God due to their experience) and egoic inflation (i.e., the ego taking ownership of the opening into new, transpersonal energies) (Wilber, 2000). The rebel shadow issue could also arise, wherein one undertakes a new path that is rebellious in comparison to their previous paths. It is important that the experiencer is able to transcend the novelty of their experience in order to allow it its full transformative potential. This could be taken a step further, in that it could be integral for the experiencer to integrate and accept any shadow issues that arise during their transformative journey.

Drugs as the Great Revealers

Drug use at raves and music festivals is not uncommon and can also act to facilitate states of altered consciousness. There is evidence to suggest that specific drugs, especially psychedelics (e.g., psilocybin, peyote, acid, ayahuasca), may provide access to deeper knowledge and magnify or reveal issues and potentials that are already present in all humankind, thereby sparking beneficial, transformative experiences (Masters &

Houston, 1966). Grof (as cited in Walsh, 2007) spoke of spirituality as an intrinsic property of the psyche, wherein EHEs may allow individuals access to new, or hidden, levels of consciousness that promote new worldviews. For example, in his anthropological travels, Carlos Castañeda examined novel, separate realities from one's own that were revealed through indigenous people's use of psychotropic plants. Castañeda used peyote and datura under the guidance of a Mexican shaman and experienced a transformation of body and mind to reach higher spiritual realms where he was able to understand the world in a non-ordinary manner (Sluis, 2012). Masters and Houston (1966) studied participant's experience of recollections during guided (i.e., working with a therapist) psychedelic drug use. They called these recollections the *recollective-analytic* level of the experience, wherein the emotional tone of the experience deepens and the boundaries between the unconscious and the conscious dissolve so that "long 'forgotten' memories may become accessible and meaningful in the context of the subject's particular concern" (Masters & Houston, 1966, p. 185). Inaccessible or rarely accessible parts of the mind appeared to open, wherein new methods and concepts could be learned. In this way, these drugs have been referred to as short cuts to happiness, especially in the case of attaining desired altered states and experiences (de Ropp, 1957). Some may spend years participating in meditation and ascetic practices to facilitate awakening experiences, while others have found ingesting a chemical or psychotropic substance can provide a more immediate pathway to the very same experiences. In fact, Furst (1972) reported the difficulty of distinguishing any phenomenological differences between substance-induced versus spontaneous religious or mystical experiences.

Drugs have been used throughout human history to induce altered states of consciousness that, in the shamanic world, can be referred to as sacred states of consciousness (Furst, 1972; Masters & Houston, 1966; Walsh, 2007). Some ancient examples include the Zen use of tea, Australian aboriginal's use of pituri, and the use of soma in the tradition of Hinduism; while more recent examples include peyote used by Native Americans and ayahuasca used by South American shamans. Peyotism in itself comprises the native religion of more than 50 American tribes (Masters & Houston, 1966). For example, the Tarahumari tribe worshipped and had profound respect for the cacti (i.e., peyote) as a god, and the Minomini Native Americans worshipped peyote as a symbol of the spirits and utilized it as a sacrament that taught them new information (Ebin, 1961). The Minomini believed that peyote allowed them to become spiritually receptive and absorb some of the Great Spirit's power (as it is stored in the peyote). In participating in the Minomini's peyote rituals, anthropologist J.S. Slotkin reported that he found it easy to become absorbed into any thought he contemplated such that a mystical experience or inquiry could then last hours (Ebin, 1961).

Shamanism is also of great significance here, where it comprises the most widespread, ancient methodological system of mind-body healing that dates back archeologically and ethnologically to 20,000-30,000 years old (Harner, 1980). Shamans sometimes use mind-altering substances, or other induced (e.g., by the use of drum rhythms) altered states of consciousness during journeying. Throughout these journeys, shamans may experience shamanic ecstasy, a state of inspiration, where they feel as though they leave themselves but remain conscious of the fact that they are in one reality (ordinary) or another (non-ordinary) (Harner, 1980). This sounds similar to drug induced

mystical and transcendent experiences and, for the purposes of this study, it will be interesting to note whether or not participants had knowledge of being in an altered state of consciousness during the time that the EHE was occurring.

Walsh (2007) explained that these mind-altering substances can be referred to as psychedelics (i.e., mind manifesters) or entheogens (i.e., revealers of the divine within). Over the course of 3,000 years, archeological data regarding the shamanic tradition has recorded the use of 100 different plant agents (Walsh, 2007). Historically, those who ingest these substances, often treated as sacraments with few adverse effects (e.g., addiction), have reported intense visual experiences (usually occurring in a spiritually significant sequence), healing, telepathic abilities, and clairvoyant powers (Walsh, 2007). Walsh explained that while not all drug experiences may be mystical or spiritual in essence, some are. For example, Walsh discussed the fact that spiritual teachers and scholars have reported, from personal experience, that drug induced and contemplatively induced mystical experiences can be identical. Furthermore, Walsh (2007) elucidated that if such mystical experiential states are identical, then their cause (i.e., drug induced or not) may be extraneous by way of “the principle of causal indifference” (p. 196). Walsh cites Charles Tart’s systems model of consciousness in explaining that different techniques or substances can have similar effects on states of consciousness (e.g., perception, identity, emotions, and attention). For example, meditation or psychedelic ingestion might affect different brain-mind processes, but may still result in a similar altered state of consciousness (e.g., mystical unity).

Studies on the use of psychedelic substances to promote altered states of consciousness were conducted until drug laws prevented this research from taking place

(Furst, 1972). The studies on psychedelic substances that do exist from that time are intriguing, and many of the experiences seemed to leave participants with profound insight and knowledge. Ebin (1961) described a study in 1959 of the effects of psilocybin on typical people. One volunteer reported feeling a sense of wisdom and understanding, as though he had been given new concepts, relationships, and processes during his experience with the drug. Similarly, during a 1960s study of the effects of LSD, medical student Paul Moser reported an understanding of the meaning and structure of the universe that still existed after the experience but could no longer be verbally recalled (Ebin, 1961). Walsh (2007) reported that research has shown that psychedelics can induce mystical experiences, but only “*some times, in some people, under some circumstances*” (p.194). Bower (2006) described Griffiths’ many experiments with psilocybin. One such study revealed that most of the participants given the drug (i.e., 22 out of 36 volunteers) described mystical experiences. It was found that these experiences were ranked among the most meaningful and spiritually significant in participant’s lives for a majority (i.e., 25) of the volunteers. Furthermore, the positive effects seemed to last beyond the study itself (i.e., 2 months later) and were confirmed by friends, family members, and co-workers of the volunteers. Bower also described a study by Walter Pahnke in 1963, wherein Protestant seminarians received psilocybin and reported unusual spiritual experiences. Four participants (i.e., of the 10 who received the drug, while another 10 received a B vitamin that made the skin flush) also reported mystical reactions that involved ecstatic visions and oneness with God. Interviews that were conducted over 25 years later revealed that those who had received the psilocybin experienced greater positive changes in attitude and behavior. Masters and Houston (1966) cite a study by

Janiger and McGlothlin wherein 194 participants were given LSD in a nonreligious setting, then answered a questionnaire 10 months after their experience. They found that 48% of participants reported an increased interest in other universal concepts (e.g., the meaning of life); 58% reported that the experience was of lasting benefit; and others reported a change in their values where they thought LSD should be used for: Becoming aware of oneself (75%), gaining new meaning of life (58%), and allowing people to understand each other (42%). As the aforementioned studies have shown, the effects of some of these substance induced, mystical experiences can be long lasting. While there may be some concern that a single experience may not be enough to overcome years of neural hardwiring and repeated patterns of behavior, they could spark an individual's journey toward integrative wholeness and subsequent transformation.

Ultimately, whether drug induced, or not, one of the main attributes of an EHE, as investigated in the current study, is its lasting transformative impact on the individual and their life. It is clear that hallucinogenic compounds may open the door to mystical experiences and realms outside of ordinary, conscious experience. In parallel with many EHEs, some of the experiences that occur under the influence of these compounds have been reported to have lasting, transformative potentials. It is possible, then, that psychedelic drug use at music festivals may provide a means of magnifying or revealing implicit or unconscious knowledge that exists in each human being. This opening up to such knowledge may increase the individual's potential to have an EHE that presents itself in the form of a mystical or transcendent experience.

A New Consciousness at Raves

In connecting altered states of consciousness with the setting of the current study, it is worth investigating the atmosphere and apparent consciousness at music festivals and electronic dance music parties (or raves). St. John (2011) discussed rave and rave technologies as harnessing a new consciousness revolution by mixing sound, vision, pharmacology, and embodiment in dance:

Electronic dance music cultures contextualize the condition of *ecstatic entrancement*, a shifting (or nonsteady) state of altered consciousness proliferating in global dance cultures. *Ecstatic entrancement* does not simply refer to the state of *ecstasy*, but an *entranced state*, which implies the relinquishment of individual will and autonomy to an external power, higher energy, or extraordinary life force. (St. John, 2011, p. 211)

St. John gave the example of the Boom festival in Portugal, which was set up in a manner that promoted a dynamic of selflessness wherein participants could “experience fusion with or autonomy from others in extraordinary altered states of consciousness (St. John, 2011, p. 217).” Such an ushering in of new states of consciousness at music festivals segues into some specific aspects of such festivals (e.g., the community emphasis of these events) and the subsequent effect on attendee’s exceptional experiences and altered states of consciousness.

Important Transformational Aspects of Music Festivals

St. John (2011) captured the importance of theorizing about transformative movements, like music festivals, in ways that deviate from traditional Western theories because they can be viewed as vehicles for the performative (i.e., self-expressive),

ecstatic (i.e., self-transcendent), and reflexive (i.e., conscious alternative). There seem to be specific characteristics of these music festivals that make them transformational, or enable them to facilitate EHEs. For example, in my research I came across the specific, seemingly integral aspects of community, music, *communitas*, and Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence at such transformative festivals. I will now expand upon the notions of community and the role of music as they manifest at music festivals and will segue into the important concepts of *communitas* and collective effervescence that can be fostered as a result of intense feelings of community and unity.

Community themes. As mentioned above, St. John (2011) investigated altered states of consciousness in the contemporary counterculture of raves. He mentioned Burning Man festival (held annually in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada) in particular as an example of a techno-utopian society. The ambiance of transformative music festivals is captured in that they imply "movement from a condition of alienation implicit in monotheism, possessive materialism, patriarchy, patriotism, and a corresponding movement *toward* a resolution: realization, utopia, awareness, peace, and unity (St. John, 2011, p. 204)." Rill (2006) also described raves as associated with community, peace-and-love idealism, and psychedelic consciousness hosted in an alternate reality of free expression, dancing, and release. Furthermore, when free festivals (i.e., festivals that did not provide the organizer with a profit) first emerged in Britain in the 1970s they resembled new, utopian communities stressing notions of community, spirituality, love, and relationship to the land (Partridge, 2006). The nature of these festivals was built upon the idea that one could do what they wanted so long as it did not impinge upon others and stressed a common humanity wherein all participants recognized their duty to others and

the earth. An example of this is the Stonehenge Free Festival with its spiritual significance and inclusion of many activities one could take part in (e.g., music, folk dancing, arts, crafts, fireworks, theatre, and ecological awareness) (Partridge, 2006).

A deep and salient sense of community is created within the atmosphere of the music festival, and at raves in general. Rill (2006) discussed the dominant theme in rave communities as Unity and Acceptance of Diversity (UAD) that includes meanings of total acceptance of others despite any differences, open-mindedness toward others and their beliefs, and freedom of expression. Furthermore, there is an emphasis placed on communal spaces, friend groups that comprise many different social circles, artistic expression, egalitarianism, and “love everyone” themes (Rill, 2006, p. 651). Hutson (2000) also described this ideal in the rave motto “peace, love, unity, respect” (PLUR). Such ideals are not commonly found in the external social world outside of rave communities.

Rill (2006) argued UAD (and PLUR, by extension) is an embodied ideal; that means that it is so strong it can be physiologically felt by participants in a way that adds deep meaning to their experiences (e.g., when lyrics of love and unity exist in the music, participants report “feeling the love” (Rill 2006, p. 655) and a sense of mystical bonding with others). In this way, UAD is transformative in its own right, invoking increased empathy, respect, understanding, and peace in the participants of electronic dance music communities. Furthermore, Rill (2006) reported that such newfound acceptance and inner peace is lasting, revitalizing, and can be carried from the rave to the external social world and reshapes the worldview of attendees. Jansen and Wildemeersch (1998) explained that the development of identities relies on the places and ways that allow people to exert

forms of transformative power (which the authors defined as acting otherwise) that then change the outcomes of daily experiences and interactions. If the UAD themes are combined with other mystical and transpersonal experiences occurring at music festivals, the foundation is laid for immense transformative potential that is being facilitated by the specific environments at these festivals. It appears that this sense of community fosters an openness that can lead to the emergence of altered states of consciousness and EHEs.

The role of electronic music. Another important aspect of transformative music festivals is the therapeutic potential of the music itself. These festivals involve listening to electronic music with entrancing rhythms that are constant throughout the experience in that they span the greater part of several days and nights with small breaks in sound occurring only during the quiet morning hours. In explaining the aforementioned holotropic breathwork therapy, Grof (2010) discussed the fact that preindustrial cultures developed drumming rhythms that were shown to have effects on the electric activity of the brain. Grof believed that a constant flow of music functioned as a gestaltic wave, urging participants through impasses and difficult experiences as well as psychological defenses that ultimately resulted in surrender. In holotropic therapy, it was important for participants to surrender to the flow of the music, suspend intellectual activity, to allow the music to resonate in the entire body, and to respond to the music in a spontaneous manner. Such responses to music in Grof's therapy could be likened to the responses of waves of dancers, losing themselves in the music at festivals. For example, Rill (2006) discussed the crowds as "a liquid sea of bodies, all synchronized to the beats around and within them" (p. 648). Much like the sets of music played by DJs at festivals, Grof

stressed the use of music that is flowing, intense, evocative, and conducive to a positive experience.

Communitas. In the context of raves in particular, Hutson (2000) reported testimonies from ravers (using cyberethnographic resources e.g., www.ecstasy.org) about their therapeutic nature. Raves they were compared to ecstatic and shamanic healing in non-Western societies and spiritual experiences in Western subcultures (e.g., churches) with the caveat that they were more direct forms of spirituality than those experienced in religious contexts. In this way, Hutson explained that raves are types of primitive communities that view humanity as part of the world, not separate from it. Unity and harmony, as elucidated above, promote a “vibe” of collectivization (Hutson, 2000) and overwhelming positive energy (Rill, 2006). Such collectivization brings us to the concept of raves/music festivals as arenas of communitas (i.e., anti-structural moments that are both “in and out of time” and contrast the norms and values of the external world (Rill, 2006)).

Durkheim’s concept of communitas has been described as referring to “a state of equality, comradeship, and community humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles, and hierarchies” (Olaveson, 2001, p. 93). Relevant to this study, states of communitas are themselves transformative in that they “[go] to the heart of each person’s being and [find] in it something profoundly communal and shared” (Olaveson, 2001, p. 105). This seems to point to the very definition of EHEs themselves as shared knowledge existing within and without, perhaps revealed in such experiences of communitas. Furthermore, because communitas involves intense experiences such states move participants from occupying the rational realm to the intuitive or emotional realm.

Communities experiencing *communitas* are either unstructured, or rudimentarily structured, and comprised of a community of equal individuals. They allow for experimentation with an air of skepticism, scrutiny, and questioning especially around the prevailing moral order. *Communitas* may arise in the context of rituals with sacred character that exert profound influence over those involved, reawakening forces (e.g., society's mythological knowledge of itself) and intense emotions in their consciences. This could be likened to the effects of ritual dance and collective experience at music festivals. The following quote captured this well:

The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousnesses that are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche grows as it goes along. And since passions so heated and so free from all control cannot help but spill over, from every side there are nothing but wild movements, shouts, downright howls, and deafening noises of all kinds that further intensify the state they are expressing.

The effervescence often becomes so intense that it leads to outlandish behaviour; the passions unleashed are so torrential that nothing can hold them. People are so far outside the ordinary conditions of life, and so conscious of the fact, that they feel a certain need to set themselves above and beyond ordinary morality. ... If it is added that ceremonies are generally held at night, in the midst

of shadows pierced here and there by firelight, we can easily imagine the effect that scenes like these are bound to have on the minds of all those who take part. They bring about such an intense hyperexcitement of physical and mental life as a whole that they cannot be borne for very long. The celebrant who takes the leading role eventually falls exhausted to the ground. (Olaveson, 2001, p. 99-100)

Anti-structures like music festivals act as components of social change and EHEs in the context of these experiences of *communitas* may be the catalysts for such change on an individual and collective level. For example, both Turner and Durkheim (as cited in Olaveson, 2001) defined *communitas* and collective effervescence (further discussed in the next section) in ways that could invoke concepts of oneness and mystical experience and, in fact, linked their experiences to ascetic practices, ecstasy, physical hardships, and ingestion of psychotropic substances. In the sense that *communitas* is said to feed the spirit, ravers claim that raves nurture the soul (Hutson, 2000). Further synchronicity in manifestations of *communitas* is facilitated by ravers adopting similar nocturnal schedules, music, drugs, and familial metaphors (e.g., one's group of friends at a rave is referred to as a family) (Hutson, 2000). It was explained that

[b]y crossing over into a *communitas* state, rave culture dissipates the tension of entering a world of wage slavery, underemployment, and shrinking opportunity. Thus, by manipulating symbols of tribalism, ravers enter *communitas* where they reaffirm what they say the world ought to be -- liberation, freedom, union, communion, harmony, warmth, peace, love, family, euphoria, bliss, happiness, godliness, and health. They confront with renewed vigor what they say the world

actually is -- violence, fear, hatred, racism, poverty, injustice, hunger, greed, performance, achievement, competition, enterprise, judgment, division, comparison, differentiation, distinction, distraction, isolation, impotence, and alienation. (Huston, 2000, p. 42)

Greater societal structures, especially in the West, seem to provoke a sense of isolation and alienation in most individuals. In contrast, music festivals and raves provide an internal community that removes individuals from such structures (i.e., by their locations in forests and warehouses, or by using flashing lights and entrancing musical rhythms) to a place where the individual self can dissolve into the collective whole or a collective mind, free from differentiation and conscious reality (Rill, 2006). Jansen and Wildemeersch (1998) described aesthetic communities (e.g., music festivals) as providing experiences that are emotionally charged manifestations of everyday life, wherein lived and symbolized communitarian ideals give rise to feelings of belonging together and relationships wherein one can take care of oneself while also validating the other. The event is experienced as a pre-objective body that is simply *being* in the world. Rill (2006) explained: “At the heart of the matter is the desire to ‘be together’, which the dance party - apparently like no other form of popular music gathering in our history - seems to embody” (p. 653). This brings us to the togetherness that is collective consciousness or collective effervescence, which I will delve into further as an important feature of music festivals.

Collective consciousness/effervescence. Hunt (2010) described a tendency toward group-based consciousness and higher states in early shamanic traditions that were recognized by sociologists as social in structure (e.g., non-dual merging) with

shareable effects that can be felt collectively. Hunt (2010) referred to Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness (or collective effervescence) to explain society wide, inducible states. Hunt gave the example of negative states occurring in the group consciousness of mobs and more positive states occurring in group meditations or communal experiences. Hunt explained that shared numinous states, often described by participants as utopian, can manifest in temporary egalitarian communities created in groups after various disasters (e.g., earthquakes) and have overwhelming and paradoxical features often observed in mysticism (e.g., "euphoria infused with grief" (Hunt, 2010, p. 22)). Relevant to this study, examples of communal experiences that both Hunt (2010) and Hutson (2000) cited involved accounts of group consciousness at Grateful Dead concerts (e.g., fans reporting meaningful, psychic connections with the band). Hunt also added that neo-shamanic raves (e.g., Burning Man) could provide similar experiences, especially "shared states of MDMA-aided communalism, euphoria, love, and a temporary sense of an idealized planetary-wide utopia" (Hunt 2010, p. 22).

Olaveson (2001) noted specific conditions for collective effervescence such as intimacy, immediacy, and intensity involving will and intention that manifests as more than mob psychology and exists in creative eras. When collective effervescence occurs it is seen to have the potential to create novel notions of society, as emotionally intense gatherings can break down and dissolve established social barriers and structures, ultimately allowing for a "retempering" (Olaveson, 2001, p. 102) of the collective representations on which society is based. In the context of music festivals, individuals are certainly living differently and more intensely than in daily life, which is something

that Olaveson would view as stimulating individual energies and, one could argue, transformative experiences.

Hunt (2010) wondered about the possibility of experiencing transpersonal development (i.e., personal essence and essential identity) as an individual within shared states of consciousness facilitated in a collective manner. I believe that such collective potential of transpersonal development is, in fact, being accomplished in the contexts of EHEs occurring at music festivals. In this way, individuals are coming together as a collective to experience manifestations of Jung's idea of the collective unconscious (i.e., vast information about history and culture available in the depth of the human psyche), or what Huxley called perennial philosophy (i.e., timeless wisdom to be had) (Grof & Bennett, 1993). If such information is being revealed to music festival participants via the experience of altered states of consciousness and EHEs, perhaps there is yet another integral characteristic of such festivals that allow them to act as containers of these transformative possibilities.

The Eastern Influence: Music Festivals as Ashrams, DJs as Gurus, and EHEs as Shaktipat

I will now elucidate the parallel aspects of music festivals with the ashrams of Eastern traditions. It is my belief that music festivals may be functioning as modern day, spiritual locations for an entirely new generation of Westerners. For example, in Klautt's (1997) article, ashrams are described using several characteristics that could be equated to music festivals. Ashrams are communities of individuals who gather together to support each other during powerful spiritual quests and are characterized by relationships between the community and their spiritual leader. In the ashram, gurus are considered

worthy of worship and respect. In the case of music festivals, one could equate the spiritual leader with DJs, who are viewed by some as “technoshamans” (Hutson, 2000, p. 38) in charge of a group mood or mind, guiding dancers on a spiritual journey, and activating a “euphoric, collective catharsis” through the use of frequencies and beats (Partridge, 2006, p. 49). Furthermore, in the Eastern Goa trance movement (i.e., a movement that linked the hippie festival culture with recent psychedelic rave culture) of the 1980s the Goa trance was likened to mystical music, the rave to a *satsang*, and the DJ to a guru (Partridge, 2006). One could also equate the guru to the festival itself, often devoted, worshipped, and respected by participants who attend religiously (i.e., year after year) and who are encouraged to keep the land on which the festival takes place pristine (especially in the context of festivals like Burning Man and Shambhala Music Festival). It must be noted, however, that one could contest that the ever-present excitement and novelty provided by the music festival environment does not parallel the mundaneness of life in an ashram, nor the experience of long periods without access to one’s guru. Moreover, another difference can be found in the mediums utilized by DJs and gurus (i.e., DJs utilize electronic music while gurus utilize one’s own subjectivity).

Other characteristics of ashrams include meditation, asceticism, dialogue, simplicity, sharing of goods, and devotion (Klaudt, 1997), all of which can be found in the context of music festivals. Ashrams are viewed as “being in the world” and the “world being with us”, meaning that they are designed to be places that the world would feel at home in visiting and are open to all who are interested (Klaudt, 1997, p. 30). While music festivals may be limited to those who can attend (e.g., legal adults or those who can afford tickets), they still embody a “home” environment (e.g., Shambhala’s main

message of “welcome home”, or referring to those on the Shambhala farm as the “family”). The electronic dance music community also stresses the idea that anyone will be accepted into the community, as demonstrated above in the themes of UAD and PLUR. Spirituality is another important aspect of ashrams, with chapels or shrines as common fixtures (Klaudt, 1997). Burning Man also has a temple, and the man created and burned each year at the event seems to hold important symbolism and spirituality for the burners who attend the event (Brown & Deeter, 2013). Shambhala Music Festival, similarly, has The Wishing Tree that becomes a sort of shrine and holy marker at the festival. Spirituality is also maintained by choosing a physical location for the ashram that has a religious atmosphere and an emphasis on nature (Klaudt, 1997). This has parallels with the aforementioned festivals in that Burning Man is hosted in the Nevada desert under extreme conditions and Shambhala is located in a river valley, nestled in nature where participants can dance in the trees and cool off in the river. Both locations evoke spiritual feelings in their distinctive extremes.

The evolution of music festivals also has an Eastern influence, as mentioned above in the Goa trance movement. For example, D’Andrea (2004) reported that in 1990 after Osho’s Oregon ashram closed the *sannyasins* introduced MDMA, often used for meditation and body therapies, into nightclub life in Ibiza and soon spread to the rest of the world. Partridge (2006) described the migration of trance to the West wherein it embodied a pagan or shamanic and earth-centered focus. These parties had become Western forms of meditative, collective, and spiritual worship wherein the ritual of non-stop dancing served to reconnect individuals with the primordial energy of the earth.

Transformative music festivals may create a state of energy that pulls participants into a field of spiritual resonance. For example, McCraty and Childre (2010) explained resonance (defined as a flow of energy based in a state of inner peace and loving spiritual attunement) from a neurobiological framework. They stated “[w]hen coherence is increased in a system that is coupled to other systems, it can pull the other systems into increased synchronization and more efficient function” (McCraty & Childre, 2010, p. 11). Energetically, the occurrence of EHEs at music festivals could be compared to the Eastern idea of *shaktipat*, which is described as “a holistic, person-altering interaction between guru and other” (Dunn & Magnarella, 1983, p. 16) or an awakening that sparks the beginning of the path of self-realization. Dunn and Magnarella (1983) argued that this concept could be taken out of its cultural context by applying Jung’s ideas of the collective unconscious and archetypes that show up in all cultures (i.e., that *shaktipat* could be available in all cultures as a manifestation of the collective unconscious), as well as the notion of a universal human thought process borrowed from anthropology.

Dunn and Magnarella (1983) examined Siddha yoga and its notions of knowledge located within oneself, a shared consciousness in the universe and the self, and the guru as holding the power to awaken the *shakti* (i.e., the meditation energy available in every individual). While some believed that it would take extensive preparation to receive *shaktipat*, the Siddha yoga teacher Muktananda gave it to whoever desired it over two-day intensive programs. There is a belief that *shaktipat* gives one’s life a more positive, inner-directed focus, enhances the ability to meditate, amplifies energy and creativity, and causes negative habits to fall away (Dunn & Magnarella, 1983). *Shaktipat* has also been described in manner that reflects Maslow’s idea of the peak experience in that it

“occupies a moment in which the individual perceives the unity of the cosmos, fuses with it, and rests in it, completely satisfied for the moment in his yearning for oneness”

(Maslow as cited in Dunn & Magnarella, 1983, p. 17). These experiences are seen to be timeless and spaceless, beautiful and good, transcendent of dichotomies and conflicts in life, and promoting profound after-effects. I believe that EHEs can, and have, been defined in similar ways as was elucidated in the previous sections.

Spiritual Resonance at Music Festivals

To continue with the theme of energies, like shaktipat, as vehicles for transformation, I would like to propose that the music festival space acts as a psychic space much like that of a caregiver (e.g., a therapist or guru). To illustrate this, I will draw parallels between music festivals and the energetic experience between client and therapist. Jakel (2001) discussed the therapist as being able to share their client’s sensations and emotions, facilitating a type of resonance between them. Siegel (2013) also discussed the energetic phenomena between client and therapist as a spiritual resonance: “Generally, spiritual energy called upon and received by a skilled practitioner has been the source of healing and spiritual awakening for eons, oftentimes transmitted from a master to initiate, disciples, or persons suffering from disease” (p. 49). Such resonance was viewed as especially prominent in body psychotherapy, wherein an energetic bond is created between client and therapist, the latter acting as a highly charged, energetic field (Jakel, 2001).

Laszlo (2009), a systems theorist, endorsed the theory that an interconnecting and universal field exists and has been accessed by mystics and shamans over time. This universal field was described as a biofield that transcends space and time, holds memory

and influences evolution, and extends beyond one's body and into the environment.

Siegel (2013) posited that it is in this field where spiritual resonance occurs. The music festival setting itself can certainly be labeled as a similar, highly charged energetic field of resonance that, perhaps, provides a greater likelihood of access to the aforementioned biofield. This can be seen especially in the context of embodied resonance (i.e., "the bodymind's experience of energetic vibration from both internal and external sources" (Siegel, 2013, p. 51)) that is amplified when individuals come together to create a shared experience (e.g., the music festival) of similar emotional vibration that intensifies as they resonate together.

In the context of therapy, existential issues are faced within an experience of oneness, where the therapist (or, in this case, the music festival) activates an energetic level of bonding with the client and transforms their existential depression. Jakel (2001) cited the therapist's passion, empathy, and love for the client as the important ingredients for transformation, akin to the empathy, passion, and love that permeate the entirety of the music festival experience. Safety and warmth as established by the creation of a "therapeutic womb" (Jakel, 2001, p. 122) wherein a client is able to hear sounds, perceive light, lose form, and become aware of their existential self existing outside of space and time. The music festival itself sets up this safe, warm, and accepting womb. I experienced this in my own EHE (as described in Chapter 1: The Implicated Researcher) wherein I was held in the womb of Shambhala whilst I became the unity of consciousness and the overwhelming love and light located within such a womb.

Jakel (2001) posited that any disembodied Self (e.g., splits occurring after trauma) could be healed by the journey back into this womb wherein one could experience a state

of existential rebirth. EHEs may facilitate similar, transformative effects by occurring in the safe, warm, womb-space of the music festival. Such mystical or unitive EHEs occurring at music festivals could be forms of what Jakel labeled “existential bonding”, or the ‘I-it’ relationship, that has the outcome of “progressive transcendence” (Jakel, 2001, p. 129) as can be found in their subsequent transformative effects.

A Study of Spiritual Resonance

Siegel (2013) conducted an exploratory study of self-reported, spiritual resonance experiences of 12 licensed psychotherapists including their instances, range of experiences, and impact on clients, as well as the clinician’s potential as an activator of the shared resonant field. In this way, spiritual resonance is offered as an ingredient for transformation, one that I argue could also exist in the context of music festivals. Specifically, Siegel explored attunement through the use of mindfulness that facilitated an expanded awareness. Such awareness was thought to represent a “nonspecific state of consciousness in which boundaries diffuse, ego identification is diminished, and cosmic interconnectedness to all things can be experienced” (Siegel, 2013, p. 51). This energetic joining between the client and therapist promotes the expanded awareness, changes the resonance in the shared field, and may lead to increased transformation and growth for both parties involved. It is worth noting that, in using the aforementioned definition, such an expanded awareness can exist at music festivals, where participants can experience the transcendence of time and a free-flowing nature that is much less directed than the focused environment that the clinical container creates. In the context of EHEs, such a free-flow may be more useful as it can open up randomly to any individuals in the space.

Siegel (2013) divided participants into two groups. The first group experienced in-person interviews as a group to develop consensus around the definition of spiritual resonance, individual interviews were then conducted and a final group interview allowed for reflection. The second group did not experience group interviews and was used to provide comparison data for consistency and validity. Both groups also kept journals and drew pictures of their interpretation of spiritual resonance as it occurred during their therapy sessions. Interviews were transcribed and a qualitative content analysis found emergent and common themes in responses. Bias was minimized by first analyzing the interviews separately. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the themes that fell under “inter-dynamic client therapist experience”, “transmission of energy”, “detaching from ego”, “client transformation”, “development of spiritual consciousness”, and “emotional and cognitive healing” (Siegel, 2013, p. 56).

Of relevance to the notion that music festivals, and EHEs occurring within their contexts, facilitate spiritual resonance, several of Siegel’s (2013) participant’s responses are appropriate. Spiritual resonance was described by one participant as a “blending between the outer reality and inner reality that facilitates a process of transformation” (Siegel, 2013, p. 56), while another described it “as an energetic connection, it’s what connects every living thing on a vibration or an energy or frequency level” (Siegel, 2013, p. 56). Some participants spoke of directing transmissions of energy to chakra or energy centers within their clients. In regards to the heart chakra, one participant spoke of a gentle feeling, of being held by a loving presence, and experiencing an inner knowing as love opened up and allowed one to touch a deeper place. Co-creation and holding of the field was reported as important. Other participants spoke of simply feeling the energy that

was already present. A common experience during spiritual resonance was inner peace and spaciousness (i.e., a sense of expansion in their energy field with open and flowing energy) and kinesthetic sensations of lightness, tingling, expansion, flow, or quickening. Upon completion of the study and analysis of the results, spiritual resonance was defined as “a vibrational pattern of greater cosmic wholeness, which is experienced as being accessed by soul awareness” (Siegel, 2013, p. 69). The clients were viewed as having the choice to resonate with the frequency, dis-identify with their egos, change their perceptions, and transform within the unifying experience.

Client transformation was observed by expanded spiritual consciousness (e.g., starting yoga, reading spiritual books, and becoming more aware of higher selves and higher consciousness); integration of feelings of safety and peace into themselves and external situations; emergence of emotions of love, faith, trust, joy, and forgiveness of self; alleviation of emotions of anxiety, depression, and fear; abandonment of future thinking and the fear attached to it; and emergence of the ability to become an observer who was self-aware of old patterns and could make different choices based in knowing. Clients saw themselves as having developed new tools to function more effectively in their world, set clearer boundaries, and improve their quality of life. Parallels in themes between this study and the present study may be found. If the present study’s co-researchers report an experience of a deep felt sense emerging from within their bodies that is felt as an intricate whole that colours their experience, it may indicate that they are tapping into the spiritual resonance established by the music festival in the same way that therapists can facilitate such an experience with their clients.

Siegel's (2013) participants believed that they carried a specific attunement to a divine, cosmic force constantly available within them as a maintainable range of vibrational frequency that clients may choose to resonate with. It is possible that, in the context of music festivals, participants are carrying this force and releasing it into the festival as potential spiritual resonance. Furthermore, if the vibrational frequency is already set up at the music festivals as a result of the unconditional love, acceptance, and openness of participants then other attendees can choose to resonate with this, or not, and may have transcendent EHEs if they do. Participants of Siegel's study reported that the loving space of resonance allowed for attachments to ego identities to be dissolved and deconstructed, as can also be found in the after effects of EHEs. Of specific importance for the participants was presence in the moment without expectation or ego involvement to facilitate emergence of the client's personal, spiritual wisdom. If there is no therapist, but only a space free of expectation and ego involvement by virtue of its form then, perhaps, this type of transformation could occur on its own at these festivals. Siegel asserted that this does not happen overnight but over the course of therapy; however, the present study may provide evidence that this transformative impact can, in fact, happen as soon as an EHE has occurred.

This literature review has provided a thorough understanding of EHEs and shed light on potentially important transformational aspects of the music festival environment that may be contributing to their occurrence. EHEs were explored and their theoretical foundations, triggers, integration and potentiation, effects, and therapeutic applications were illuminated. As they are relevant to EHEs altered states of consciousness, shadow issues, drug use, and consciousness at raves were also investigated. The transformational

aspects of music festivals (e.g., community, electronic music, *communitas*, collective consciousness, parallels to Eastern traditions, and spiritual resonance) were also investigated. In summary, this study sought to elucidate whether or not EHEs are occurring at music festivals, as well as their effects and integration processes. The methodology with which this was examined will be illuminated in the following section.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lived experience and meaning of transformational, exceptional human experiences, specifically mystical and transcendent EHEs, at music festivals. This study explored the contexts in which they were occurring, their properties or aspects, and their integration into the lives of experiencers. There was a need to understand EHEs and their effect on experiencer's lives in the context of their occurrences at music festivals, as past literature has only documented their general occurrence and transformative effects. Nondisclosure and non-integration of such experiences can result in harmful consequences for the experiencers (Palmer & Braud, 2002), therefore; studying the effects of EHEs for those who are experiencing them at music festivals was important in order to provide experiencers with information regarding their experiences and how they might impact their lives.

Research Design Methodology

This study utilized transpersonal, phenomenological, heuristic, and hermeneutic research methods to investigate EHEs in the context of music festivals and their subsequent transformative effects in the lives of experiencers. As Valle (1998) discussed, historical psychological methods were based in linear, temporal perspectives explaining human behavior and experience as mere causes and effects. Since such an understanding only constitutes one way of being in the world, we moved, instead, into an understanding that human beings are co-constituted by and indistinguishably intertwined with their world and vice versa (Valle, 1998). This provided depth and honour to human experiences, however they presented themselves in awareness, and allowed one to

investigate their underlying lived structures as themes of meaning (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Given that EHEs comprise a realm of alternative experiences in nonordinary states of consciousness, it followed that one would use alternative methods to study such experiences.

Transpersonal research. Valle (1998) described aspects of the transpersonal in the idea of the trans-egoic, referring to Jung's collective unconscious awareness (i.e., states of mind that are deeper than everyday egoic consciousness) and profound transcendent awareness (i.e., sovereign awareness that is not inclined to define itself in terms of anything outside of itself). Valle explained that our understanding of the transintentional nature of being (i.e., consciousness without an object or subject, where perceiver and perceived dissolve and time, space, and causation of reality are not as we normally know them) calls us to investigate experiences that reflect the transpersonal dimensions. Specifically, Valle outlined research as being transpersonal if a transcendent unity binds all apparently separate phenomena; if the ego-self is not the ground of human awareness, but is only one manifestation of pure consciousness; if each individual can directly experience this transpersonal reality; if experience represents a tangible shift in future experiences and the individual expands beyond ego-self awareness (i.e., the mind is not consciousness); and if the experience is self-validating.

Transpersonal research involves the interviewer and interviewee "meeting" by collapsing their self-structures to enter a unified field of consciousness, wherein both manifest as consciousness itself and experience facets of it beyond normative, egoic identities (Almaas, 2004). Valle (1998) described the use of intentionality, which is the very nature or essence of consciousness as it presents itself, and was fitting for the study

of EHEs because of its implication of inseparable interrelatedness between perceiver and perceived. The researcher is encouraged to adopt a beginner's mind and embrace feelings of wonder, enjoyment, awe, surprise, and deep appreciation for the research topic (Braud & Anderson, 1998). The implicit meanings of our experiences can then be elucidated through careful reflection. The researcher's specific experience with the awakening process and EHEs is important in what Almaas (2004) called the eye of contemplation (i.e., knowledge of transcendent realities). This is something beyond sensory and mental understanding, of which Wilber (2001) gave the example of intuitive apprehension in Zen known as *satori* or "a direct seeing into one's spiritual nature" (p. 55). Since EHE's are transcendent experiences by definition, it followed that I would utilize methods that allowed me to understand and mirror the depth of such meaningful experiences (Valle, 1998).

Phenomenological research. Phenomenology was created by Edmund Husserl, who believed that the experience of the individual self informed the base of the understanding and knowledge found within the human sciences (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Osborne, 1990). Willis (2004) explained that phenomenology reaffirms and describes one's being in the world and can provide rich descriptions of the essential features and structures of an experience. Phenomenology is rooted in existentialism, meaning that it is our experiences that allow us to understand the nature of existence, or what it means to *be* (Valle, 1998). Wilde and Murray (2010) described this as a correlational relationship between one's consciousness and the presenting phenomenon, or "between that which is being experienced and how it is being experienced" (p. 58). In

this way, knowing was investigated subjectively because a person relates to, constructs, and engages in it.

Willis (2004) suggested asking participants what the experience was like as a lived experience, described in such a way that it allows others to imagine being in the experience. In this way we engaged the “third force” of psychology, humanistic psychology, by including openness to human experience in whatever form it manifests in awareness (e.g., EHEs) (Valle, 1998). Willis described empathic phenomenology as focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings generated in or by the experiencers, which is especially important because meaning can vary amongst individuals. There was what Willis described as an attempt to reveal the “whatness” of an experience so that its “itness”, then, became revealed, specifically by elucidating themes from interview transcripts. Because of the current study’s emphasis on process (i.e., of EHEs and their transformative effects), Wilde and Murray’s (2010) interpretive phenomenological analysis was relevant in that it disentangled thoughts, narratives surrounding thoughts, and behaviors of the phenomenon under study. For example, one could elucidate what was happening in the lives of experiencers after their EHE and how their behaviors, thoughts, and judgments of those thoughts changed. In the current study, especially, thoughts and behaviors could have played major roles in facilitating transformative effects after the EHE.

Heuristics and hermeneutics. For the purposes of the methodology of this study, heuristics and hermeneutics go hand in hand. Moustakas (1990) explained that the aim of heuristics is to know and understand the nature, meanings, and essences of experience and to appreciate, empathetically, the frame of reference of the individual who had the

experience. Conversational interviews were emphasized, wherein it was appropriate for the researcher to self-disclose to illicit further self-disclosure from the co-researcher. Anderson (1998) spoke about a method of intuitive inquiry that built itself upon the foundations of heuristics, wherein one seeks to “speak directly to the inmost self of another... [i]t is as if speaking our personal truths – however unique and passionate that may feel – transcends our sense of separateness and brings us suddenly, even joyfully together – at least for an instant” (p. 75). This sense of togetherness and understanding allowed for profound insight into the lived experiences of others and was integral in investigating the co-researcher’s EHEs. Furthermore, heuristic research entailed a final phase of creative synthesis wherein the researcher utilized tacit understanding and intuition to creatively synthesize (via quoted material and examples) the components and core themes into narrative depictions (Moustakas, 1990). This creative synthesis was accomplished through the researcher becoming familiar with the data and undertaking a period of solitude and meditation on the research topic and questions.

Hermeneutics refers to how a phenomenon is interpreted in the lived experience. It was accomplished from a position of interconnectedness in the world expressed through the use of writing or speech in order to uncover and reconstruct the meaning of a lived experience (Chessick, 1990; Van Hesteren, 1986). The use of language is considered as a shared aspect of understanding (Heidegger, 1962), and was thus appropriate to examine phenomena that may only be articulated via speech. Conversation and openness around a phenomenon are integral to the hermeneutical approach (Chessick, 1990). Researchers come from the interconnected place wherein their co-researcher’s voices become the focus that both confuses and sparks novel understanding

in the researcher (Nixon, 1992). Equality and trust are stressed in the sharing of such lived experiences (Osborne, 1990). Transformation of the researcher's understanding of themselves and the world may occur and required the researcher's willingness for confrontation and working through experiences that arose during the process of research (Van Hesteren, 1986). In the current study, my own EHE had already facilitated a process of transformation that enabled me to better connect with the co-researchers and provided more clarity in the coming together and sharing of these experiences.

Research Procedure

Selection of co-researchers. I referred to this study's participants as co-researchers because of their mutual and cooperative engagement in the study (Osborne, 1990). They, like myself, had a vested interest in wanting to illuminate the transformative power of EHE phenomena in the context of music festivals. Homogenous sampling (i.e., recruitment of a specific subgroup) and extreme case sampling (i.e., particularly enlightening cases) were used to recruit participants who had experienced a mystical or transcendent EHE at one, or both, of two particular music festivals (i.e., Shambhala Music Festival or Burning Man). Once data collection had begun opportunistic sampling (i.e., taking advantage of whatever cases unfold) and snowball sampling (i.e., locating additional co-researchers from previous co-researchers) were utilized. I aimed to recruit 5-8 co-researchers for involvement in the study.

Research site. The research site involved co-researchers who had attended one (or both) of two music festivals, Shambhala Music Festival or Burning Man. Co-researchers had to have attended one of the festivals and had an EHE at said festival within, at least, the last 3 years (and no less than 3-6 months following the experience to

allow for any transformative effects to unfold) in order to take part in the study. The co-researchers could be located anywhere in North America, as the interviews could take place over Skype if geographic location did not allow for a face-to-face interview. If face-to-face, the interview took place in a non-threatening, private, and mutually agreed upon location.

Recruitment and inclusion. I recruited these co-researchers by posting advertisements around the City of Lethbridge, including the University of Lethbridge campus and local businesses. Online invitations were posted to group pages for the music festivals on Facebook, with permission obtained prior to posting recruitment scripts. Emails were used to contact individuals who had expressed interest in the study or had been suggested for the study. Appendix A contains the online scripts and posters that were utilized for recruitment.

The following inclusion criteria were used in the initial screening process:

- Adults not younger than 18 years of age.
- Adults who have had an exceptional human experience that is mystical (i.e., unitive, oneness, or everything is everything else experiences) or transcendent (i.e., white light, union with unmanifest source, total dissolution of the separate sense of self, or egoic death experiences) in nature.
- Such experiences had to have occurred no more than 3 years from the date of participation in the study, and at least 3-6 months prior to participation in the study (to allow time for transformative effects).
- Adults who have been transformed by their experiences (i.e., have had significant life changes) to move toward a quest for wholeness in their lives.

- Adults who are capable of identifying and articulating their experiences, especially because of the abstract nature of the material.
- Adults who are motivated to authentically share their experiences and engage in the study as a co-researcher.
- Adults who are not currently in an emotional crisis.
- Adults who are not diagnosed with a significant mental health issue (i.e., absent from psychopathologies) as, ethically, I do not have the resources to interview this population.

Gender, employment, race, ethnicity, religious values, or exposure to the counselling process were not considered to meet inclusion criteria in this study.

The initial screening process. I used telephone contact to screen interested, potential co-researchers (see Appendix B). I introduced myself and explained my current role at the University of Lethbridge in the Graduate program, as well as my interest in transformative exceptional human experiences that occur in the context of music festivals. I then outlined the objectives of the study and explained that I will personally interview the co-researcher either in person or over Skype, depending upon their location. I explained that the interview would be 60 to 90 minutes in length and would be audiotaped and transcribed by myself for use as data in the study. I explained that the interview would occur after the initial screening interview was complete and the co-researcher met all of the inclusion criteria. Demographic information was also recorded at this time. The following questions were used to start the screening interview:

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Have you been to either Burning Man or Shambhala Music Festival, or both?

- Have you had an exceptional experience (i.e., an experience that is out of the ordinary and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary experience) at the previously mentioned festival?
- Did the experience occur spontaneously (i.e., not induced by you)? Was it transcendent (of either space or time, your body, or life or death)? Did it provide a new experience that was previously unknown to you? Was there an experience of any sort of connection (to others, the planet, the divine/sacred, etc.)? Did you experience being *there* (i.e., a reality unlike our ordinary reality)? Did you feel a separation between body and mind? Have you had any additional non-ordinary experiences since then? (For the sake of time, I will require only yes or no answers to these specific questions.)
- Does uncertainty make you feel uncomfortable?
- Would you describe that experience as transformative, meaning it produced significant changes in your life or made you rethink and reevaluate thoughts, ideas, or incidents in your life?
- When did this experience occur (chronologically)?
- Briefly summarize any key or identifying features of the experience (e.g., things that stuck out for you, things you felt were particularly transformative)?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with a significant mental health issue (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc.)?
- Sometimes disclosing and discussing these types of experiences can bring up intense emotions, would you rate yourself as currently being in a stable emotional place in your life?

Other questions were added during the initial screening interview to probe for more information or provide clarification of the inclusion criteria.

In order to ascertain whether or not the potential co-researcher's experience was fitting for the study, their answers were evaluated based on Wilber's (2000) developmental fulcrums. Specifically, the transpersonal fulcrums eight to ten were used. These are the subtle, causal, and nondual as characterized by white light experiences and transcendental insights; realization of the unmanifest source; and total dissolution of the separate-self sense, cosmic consciousness, and ego death, respectively. These experiences did not have to be completely integrated, but they did have to happen to the potential co-researcher. Ideally, fulcrums nine and ten would have been most useful, because this would provide examples of experiences that were more intense than others and could provide new explanations as to how this is happening to attendees at music festivals. I also used Valle's (1998) six qualities or characteristics of transpersonal/transcendent awareness to assess potential co-researcher's experiences. It was not necessary that all of these elements were met in order to classify the co-researcher's experience as fitting for the study. These included deep stillness or peace existing as itself that had an "isness" or "amness" not a "whatness"; a feeling of love for and contentment with all that exists, embracing everyone and everything as they are; a diminished or absent sense of "I", the perceiver/perceived dissolved; one's sense of space was transformed and there was no sense of "being there"; time was not linear, and there was a sense of the eternal now; and bursts or flashes of insight occurred, there was a sense that the mind was actually a vehicle for manifestations of experience of something greater or more powerful, and the "me" expanded to include all that was previously felt as "other-than-me".

In order to ascertain whether the experience was transformative for the potential co-researcher, they demonstrated that they were in stage three of Brown's (2000) potentiating activities. This was elucidated in the screening process by using questions that tapped into accepting or valuing the experience for what it was, what it meant, what it shared, where it led, and possibilities for where it could lead. I ascertained whether or not potential co-researchers could hold a certain level of comfort with paradoxes, ambiguity, and uncertainty that carries over into everyday living. And, finally, I inquired as to whether or not these individuals had embraced any additional exceptional experiences and if they worked to maintain a semblance of balance in their lives. Ideally, an experiencer would have incorporated prior and new experiences and integrated the EHE into an authentic representation of a new self.

Data Collection

I conducted qualitative interviews in person (if located in Lethbridge, AB) or over Skype. The interviews were comprehensive, open-ended, and flexible to ascertain a thorough, thick description of the lived experience. As previously mentioned, interviewees were considered co-researchers who were invested in and corroborated, checked for accuracy, and elaborated on meaning and any other elements of the experience as the data analysis took place. Interviews were recorded to allow transcription, were semi-structured, 60-90 minutes long, and were composed of open-ended questions. Counselling skills, specifically person-centered approaches based in authenticity and transparency were utilized to inform the interview and build rapport with the co-researcher (Corey, 2013; Ivey, Bradford Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2014). Due to the

subject matter and intensity of the transformative process, the use of counselling skills was integral to these interviews.

Anderson (1998) stressed attributes of intuition and compassion in setting the research intentions, speaking freely and honestly about the depth and value of the co-researcher's experience, and experiencing the phenomena oneself before embarking on the research. This allowed for a natural blossoming into asking significant questions, guiding hypotheses and speculations into the nature of the experience, seeing value and significance in the data as it accumulated, and writing in a heartfelt manner. Anderson also suggested using reflective listening to initiate the field of sympathetic resonance (discussed in the validity section below) and move those involved into a deeper understanding of their experience.

Interview Instruments

Interview protocol. Letters of consent (see Appendix C) were distributed prior to the interview. These explained the roles of researcher and co-researchers; the process that was used to collect information and how such information was recorded, analyzed, interpreted, and reported; and the ethical considerations of the study. Co-researchers were informed of how confidentiality and anonymity would be facilitated (i.e., the data recorded was kept on a password protected computer, and pseudonyms were chosen by each co-researcher). Other individuals who had access to the co-researcher's information, such as this writer and the thesis supervisor, were disclosed to the co-researchers. Co-researchers had access to their records and were given copies of their transcribed interviews. Co-researchers were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty, whereupon their data would be destroyed.

In these letters of consent, I also described my personal interest in the study and my experiences with different variables in the study (e.g., my own EHE). I highlighted the importance of honesty, authenticity, and collaboration in the research and interview processes. I also ensured that the co-researcher understood my intentions in building trust and rapport with them as part of that process.

Interview questions. The intention was to ensure that the interview was semi-structured to allow for the experience as it was lived to unfold in the co-researcher's own words. The following open-ended questions were used during the interview to facilitate a deeper exploration of the EHE, the context surrounding it, and any subsequent transformative effects. It was important that flexibility was permitted in the questioning so that any and all other information could come up as it revealed itself in the co-researcher's lived experience and awareness. The themes I hoped to obtain from these questions are bolded in parentheses following each question.

- Which music festival did you attend? Was it your first time? (**context**)
- Describe your EHE in your own words in a way that best illuminates the experience. (**characteristics of the EHE**)
- What aspects stood out most from the experience? What was most striking, vivid, or jarring? What was most important to you? (**characteristics of the EHE**)
- Looking back, was there anything that you felt sparked the EHE? (**context**)
- What was the context around its occurrence: What were you doing at the time? Where exactly were you at the music festival? Were you under the influence of any substances at the time that the EHE occurred? (**context**)

- What were some of the strongest qualities or characteristics of the music festival you attended? Of those, which were most meaningful to you? (**context and distinctive music festival characteristics**)
- Did you pick up on any intense energies or overwhelming feelings at the music festival? If yes, when/in what context did these occur? (**distinctive music festival characteristics**)
- How did your experience change your perception of yourself, others, or life in any way? (**transformational effects of EHE**)
- Do you feel that your experience changed your life in any way? How? (**transformational effects of EHE**)
- How did you act on your experience? (**transformational effects of EHE**)
- How do you feel you have integrated your experience into your life, daily or otherwise? (**integration and transformational effects of EHE**)

Researcher's role and biases. This study is informed by my own experience, which comprises an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) of sorts as I have a genuine interest in the phenomenon of EHEs at music festivals. My personal EHE greatly informed many aspects of the research process, although it could also have led me to bring in assumptions about what specific EHEs look like in the context of music festivals and their application to the transformation process. Given my literature review on the topic of EHEs, however, I believe that I had a better grasp on the variety of EHEs and the forms and roles they can take in transformation. My experience, therefore, was not meant to represent all other experiences nor to illustrate all EHEs, but rather to spark this research. Through this study I sought to better understand the phenomenon of EHEs via its

exploration in the lives of other experiencers (i.e., other intrinsic cases) in the music festival context. Moreover, the researcher's role in transpersonal research is to immerse themselves in the phenomena and become closely acquainted with the lived experiences of the co-researchers. Thus, my own biases have served the purpose of allowing me to explore the lived experiences of the co-researchers in greater depth and understanding. Moffitt (as cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 12) captured the importance of prior experience with studied, lived phenomenon in his poem "To Look At Any Thing":

*To look at any thing
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
"I have seen spring in these:
Woods," will not do -- you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very place
They issue from.*

Ethical Issues

As outlined in Brown's (2000) model for studying exceptional experiences, challenges should be shared with co-researchers in order to keep them open to and informed about what could occur during the study. In obtaining consent, I explained the ethical issues that could arise from participation in the study and answered any questions that arose at that time. The most important ethical issues for consideration were the co-researchers' confidentiality, safety, and anonymity. Co-researchers had access to their personal data and could choose to delete any identifying information found in their transcripts. Co-researchers were informed of the fact that they would be excluded from the study if they disclosed any information regarding current harm of self (including suicidal ideation), minor, or other vulnerable populations; abuse; or neglect. If this occurred, the researcher would assist them in obtaining help.

Other ethical issues included, but were not limited to, inconveniences and risks (e.g., triggering emotional or psychological discomfort in the wake of new insights), discussion of illegal substance use, and possible breach of confidentiality (e.g., theft of research material or its seizure by legal authorities). Offering co-researchers referral numbers to counselling services; ensuring anonymity and confidentiality; and removing identifying information and utilizing pseudonyms addressed these ethical issues. It was my hope, however, that the beneficial aspects of participation in the study would outweigh any maladaptive effects.

Validity

Validity of the co-researchers' statements was ensured by considering the limits of introspection (i.e., reporting on the "what" of an experience) (Cardeña, Lynn, &

Krippner, 2013). Some of these limits included confabulation, forgetting, and motivation, which were taken into account by evaluating the internal coherence of a narrative.

Distortion through observation (i.e., confusing inference about the experience with the experience itself) could have occurred and was remedied by asking co-researchers to report sensory or direct experiences rather than comments or explanations. Censorship was avoided by asking for honesty and authenticity from the co-researchers, while guaranteeing anonymity of their responses. In the case of this study, demand characteristics and experimenter effect (i.e., cues within the context of the research, or coming from the researcher, that may have biased or guided a co-researcher's behavior and responses) should have aided the co-researcher in recalling their lived experience because of the fact that the desired data was sought after as a recalled, lived, and transformative experience as reported by the co-researcher.

Anderson's (1998) validation procedure of sympathetic resonance was utilized to validate the researcher's intuitive insights and any subsequent syntheses. The co-researchers provided validation of these insights by resonating with them in a sense of immediate knowing. To illustrate, Anderson provided the analogy of plucking the string of a cello on one side of the room, whereupon the string of a cello on the opposite side of the room will also begin to vibrate. Braud (1998) also elucidated many different qualitative measures for providing validity. For example, the use of bodily wisdom (e.g., bodily reactions like chills or feeling something in the pit of the stomach) could indicate truth of statements or conclusions, or could signal that something is erroneous. Emotions and feelings may be provoked (e.g., excitement, vitality, and joy) amongst those involved and could indicate that the research is on the right track and has not been compromised.

Intuition could be used (e.g., feelings of certainty or persistent feelings that one's knowledge is correct), especially in the context of studying noetic phenomena (e.g., mystical experiences *as* states of knowing). Reaching coherence or consensus amongst researcher and co-researchers was also integral to establishing the validity of the findings. Journaling on the part of the researcher, as well as member checking amongst co-researchers, was utilized to ascertain these measures of validity.

Since energetics was being considered in this study, it was important to assess whether the experience fell into either the material (intersubjective reality) or imaginal (psychological reality only) realities, or a combination of both (i.e., where mind and body influence and modify each other). In this way questionable conclusions were not asserted (e.g., a sensation is not real because it is not accompanied by electromagnetic energy) (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2013).

One limitation that could not be remedied was any inaccessibility that arose due to state-specific memory, as the conditions of the music festival and all of its aspects could not be re-created by the researcher in an interview. Reducing any resistances in the co-researchers might have alleviated this limitation. To do so Braud (1998) recommended using strategies such as relaxation or meditational techniques to facilitate impedance matching (i.e., facilitating communication and resonance through similitude between two channels).

Rigor

As elucidated above, the process of transpersonal and heuristic inquiry and data analysis were, in themselves, rigorous and immersive. To supplement this, I kept detailed records of my personal process as I moved through the interview and data analysis phases

to expose any researcher biases. Furthermore, White (as cited in Braud, 1998) stressed the importance of including personal materials (e.g., journals, dreams, and other experiences) to provide additional rigor. I utilized such materials as part of this thesis. I also utilized the recommended strategies from Creswell (2014) that entailed triangulation of data and member checking. I accomplished this by comparing the co-researchers' elucidated narratives to one another for consistency, as well as worked in collaboration with the co-researchers to ensure the accuracy of their lived experiences and their resonance to any illuminated themes.

Credibility

White (1992) discussed the importance of studying EHEs only after one has been moved to do so by an experience of their own. In the study of EHE's, White asserted that one does not remain outside of the realm of one's subject matter, but is instead immersed in the process both within and outside of oneself in order to shed light on it and become changed by it. White described this beautifully:

Offering to others (including ourselves) only those ideas that quicken the heart, enliven the body, make one feel that tip-top and furthest reach of one's mind is open, and, after the model of the Spirit as experienced everywhere, make one aware that birdsong and starlight, sunlight and shadow, the many greens and blues of this wondrous Earth are enfolding us, and that the best of each life that has lived upon it is alive: surrounding and applauding in a hush of silence as the new work begins. (White, 1992, p. 186-187)

Credibility was also enhanced by research outcomes; for example, by utilizing Braud's (1998) inquiry as to what the world would be like if others behaved in

accordance with the study's findings. Braud also suggested that one's research findings could be compared with established traditions and findings. Furthermore, such research findings were evaluated on their contribution to the discipline's health and growth (e.g., the field shows freshness, vitality, and excitement; grows in findings, applications, and conceptualizations; and joy and engagement in research occurs).

Data Analysis

Anderson (1998) recommended a limited, established data analysis process, wherein one accommodates the data however they present themselves (e.g., in themes or key concepts, or in other ways). In utilizing a heuristic approach to data analysis, Moustakas (1990) recommended the following steps: immersion (i.e., entering into the collected material until it is understood as a comprehensive whole) first in individual accounts and then collectively, incubation (i.e., intervals of rest wherein collected information is internalized and understood with no effort and by the creative process itself), explication (i.e., of themes from narratives), and creative synthesis (i.e., characterizing the phenomenon using tacit-intuitive awareness and knowledge that has incubated). In this way, the meaning of the phenomenon revealed itself to the researcher.

Interviews were transcribed and, in so far as it was possible, emergent themes were elucidated using a four-step, narrative immersion process (as outlined in Solowoniuk and Nixon, 2009). The first step involved dwelling and beholding. Dwelling on the revealed phenomena, by giving up control of interpretation of it and disappearing into it, allowed for the intelligence of it to be revealed on its own accord. One begins to understand through the transcribed words and sentences until a newfound familiarity leads the researcher to behold the noumenal essence of the co-researchers' lived

experience. Moustakas (1990) also described a similar heuristic process called indwelling, wherein the researcher turns inward to seek deeper comprehension of the meanings of the human experience in a preoccupying and all-encompassing manner (e.g., utilizing dreams, chance encounters, and casual conversations). The next step involved noetic reduction, which mirrored the perception in a way that attempted to free itself from the constraints of the ego and involved a silent encounter with the insights previously gained. There was an assumption of absolute consciousness (i.e., it will present itself) made before reducing any data. The researcher was able to contact the meaning of the data through absolute consciousness such that the relative and the absolute were both kept in mind. Furthermore, this meant that the transpersonal experience itself was given some protection from contamination by one's mental interpretation. The data, in the form of words, sentences, and paragraphs, was taken and the experiences were split off (i.e., literally from the unified field of consciousness) to become components of consciousness witnessed by the researcher. Noumenal parsing occurred next, segueing into a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach, wherein the researcher organized and illuminated the essences of the co-researchers' experiences. The researcher brought together what Wilber (2001) referred to as the three modes of attaining knowledge, the eyes of flesh (i.e., empirical eye - perceiving the external world), reason (i.e., knowledge of the mind, philosophy, and logic), and contemplation (i.e., knowledge of transcendent realities) to peer into the now of the narrative and reconcile the findings. Finally, recognition was used in a meditative way to determine what was resonating in the data as a manifestation of consciousness that spoke through the narrative to the researcher.

This section has discussed the procedures and research methods used to investigate the co-researcher's lived experiences of the transformative effects of exceptional human experiences at Shambhala and Burning Man. The underlying direction for the methods was informed by transpersonal, phenomenological, heuristic, and hermeneutic philosophies. The themes that were illuminated through this process will be expounded in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Themes of the Co-Researcher's Transformational, Exceptional Human Experiences

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of the co-researcher's lived experiences and includes brief demographic information, a preliminary note on the structure of the thematic analysis, and an analysis of the common themes within each of the three parts. As discussed in the previous chapter, I am an implicated researcher utilizing transpersonal methods and, therefore, I am not separate from the phenomena under study. As is important in phenomenological research (i.e., cultivating understandings of existence through one's experiences (Valle, 1998)), my being in the world cannot be disentangled from the experience of conducting this research and was informed by my interconnectedness with the EHE phenomenon. Moreover, my experience of tapping into flow states throughout the process of thematic analysis speaks to the transcendent nature of transpersonal research (Valle, 1998). This also demonstrates intentionality (Valle, 1998) in that I was able to adopt inseparable interrelatedness with the thematic analysis process in order to fully dive into and capture the depths of the co-researcher's meaningful lived experiences. A part of this process involved awareness of my biases, while simultaneously allowing my own experiences to augment the analysis process. Such interconnectedness (Chessick, 1990; Van Hesteren, 1986) also enabled me to utilize my own understanding and connection to my feelings, thoughts, and experiences in order to describe the co-researcher's narratives and cultivate meaning from and analyze their experiences.

Co-Researchers

The group of co-researchers for this study was comprised of three females and three males, ranging in ages from twenty-six to forty-five years old. All were Canadian and identified as Caucasian. Their highest levels of obtained education ranged from high school, trades, college, or university bachelor's degrees. All but one of the co-researchers had been to either Shambhala or Burning Man on more than one occasion. Those who were not first-time attendees had attended the festivals for two or three consecutive years. Four of the co-researcher's EHEs had occurred in the last two years (i.e., 2014 or 2015), while an additional two of the co-researcher's EHEs had occurred in the last 10 years (i.e., 2006 or 2007). In addition to this, three of the co-researchers described two separate EHEs that spanned across their years of festival attendance.

A Preliminary Note on Themes

The thematic analysis is intentionally organized to provide a coherent, chronological narrative that is both distilled from the research questions and constructed from the semi-structured interviews. As such, it is split into three parts. "Part 1: Entering Mystical Kingdoms" is comprised of the co-researcher's experiences of Shambhala and Burning Man that played a pivotal role in facilitating their EHEs. "Part 2: Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience" is comprised of the co-researcher's lived experience of the EHE as it unfolded. Lastly, "Part 3: The Essential Gifts of the Exceptional Human Experience" is comprised of the subsequent transformational effects of the EHEs as well as the co-researcher's integration processes.

Part 1: Entering Mystical Kingdoms

There were two main themes that manifested in the co-researchers' experiences of Shambhala and Burning Man. Theme 1, Rediscovering Godliness, outlines the strongest and most meaningful qualities or characteristics of the festivals and the co-researcher's experiences of intense energy therein. Theme 2, Paradise on Earth, outlines the co-researcher's cultivation of new understandings of the world from the festival experience and their experiences of overwhelming feelings throughout. Table 1 outlines these themes and sub-themes.

Table 1

Themes of Part 1: Entering Mystical Kingdoms

Themes	Sub-themes
1 Rediscovering Godliness	Beautiful beings
	Anything goes
	Authentic connection
	Your self is enough
2 Paradise on Earth	Loving and feeling everybody and everything
	Rocking world views
	Capturing the flow
	Plugging in
	Sacred wholeness

Theme 1: Rediscovering godliness.

Beautiful beings. The co-researchers described the community and the people at Shambhala and Burning Man as one of the festival's strongest qualities. For example, Jennifer shared that at Shambhala "people are so random; it's amazing to see different walks of life and how interesting everybody can be." Stan Smith expressed that "being able to connect with people [was] easier than in the normal world. ... The people, the energy... it's powerful." Ani described the effect of community: "[Burning Man] draws

people that are very open and create a real community. ... My mind was blown. It opened my mind to more possibilities of creativity and community, because you can't do this on your own." Celeste likened the experience of community at the festivals to group therapy:

I dream of everybody [taking] vacations in festivals... treat it like... somewhere you're learning. ... Festivals like group therapy! ... When you go for a vacation you're not accomplishing much... if [you go] to a resort and all you're doing is drinking, you're missing out on an opportunity, potential to do much more than just not do what you're doing usually! Festivals are a time when there's a bunch of people face-to-face, direct contact.

Celeste further described attendees as willing participants who augment the festival experience:

[Burning Man] is the grid creating the application of quantum physics in the field of humans and sociology. That was the first epiphany: 'Oh my god, this is a grid!' [It's] already activated, so all we need to do is be a willing participant. ... It's gonna have an effect on you that is not just you, not coming from you... there's something happening to you. If you open to it, it's going to take you. You're going to absorb a level of teaching and transmission that is so powerful.

While the people in attendance and the community formed at the festivals was one of their strongest characteristics, another entailed the co-researcher's encounters with no judgement, acceptance, and open-mindedness promoted therein.

Anything goes. The co-researchers experienced a sense of "anything goes" at the festivals that was characterized by underlying non-judgement, acceptance, and open-mindedness. Ani shared the impact of non-judgement: "It turns a person inside out.

Outside, we show up a certain way; in society it's what's acceptable. ... When you're at Burning Man, all that you hide inside can come out without feeling judged." Jennifer shared the importance of respect and open-mindedness: "Shambhala instills respect, which everyone takes very seriously. ... You need to go into Shambhala open-minded... [it] takes you out of your comfort zone." She further described openness as an important part of the festival: "Immerse yourself in the culture of Shambhala, be open to everything... and realize everyone is there for the same reasons: To connect, listen to some of the best artists... and have a good time." She also shared that it was "amazing to be in a place where all your preconditioned judgements from society go out the window." Larry James described the acceptance he felt at Shambhala: "The accepting nature permeates... everybody's concerned about one another, everybody matters." Similarly, Nanigain described the same concept as it manifested at Burning Man:

Acceptance is the first word that comes to mind. It's a place where we as Burners [collectively] agree to... radically accept all that is happening. Whatever is offered by those around you: ...nudity; state of mind, of being; the way they dress, there's radical acceptance. That extends to radically accepting yourself. Which is hard for many people... for acceptance is love. When we accept each and every moment, realize that it's happening for us, that is true love.

The festivals fostering this sense of no judgement, acceptance, and open-mindedness allowed for the next important festival quality, authentic connection, to form.

Authentic connection. Another striking quality of the festivals was that they nurtured many types of connection. For example, Larry James captured this when he shared that at Shambhala "everybody's willing to communicate with each other and that's

what... draws everybody in.” For Jennifer “the best part about Shambhala was being alone: You realize how many interesting people you can talk to and meet.” Celeste also described her insights around becoming drawn to the authentic connection at Shambhala:

People get together and connect... direct contact... this is when the real transfer of knowledge happens. ... It [doesn't] happen in our world, unless you're someone sensitive to that concept and create it of your own initiative. Most people don't realize they're lacking a sense of authentic connection with other human beings. That connection brings us to a place of being more aware of truth. The truth of us, our place in the universe, and on the planet. ... We have come to a place in society, [living] in big cities... where it's all about capitalism, the race; 'you're wasting time, you gotta go faster.' There's no room to really be... the natural humans we would be.

Celeste further expressed the types of connections and their transformative potentials:

I recognize things that, once you're aware of in the festival, you can maximize: Connecting with one another, the cosmic, the earth, and our child spirit. The child spirit... we could use to change the world, consciously. All these things happen, but once you put thought on it you can maximize that. It kind of happens by accident. Once we're at Shambhala, we're together. ... I: Like the festivals create space for you to access that... and once you [do] and begin to harness [it], that's what creates this transformation? R: Absolutely.”

Similarly, Ani shared a sense of reconnecting to her child-like wonder:

I describe [Burning Man] like Disneyland; when children go... they could have never imagined... a talking mickey mouse. Like, 'how is this even possible?' As

an adult it's rare, we are accustomed to the way the world works, the stuff we see. You don't get that 'oh my god!' But at Burning Man... you feel like a kid again. What they create there is mind blowing.

Connecting authentically with others was also extremely meaningful for the co-researchers. Larry James shared "the accepting nature – the love. That's the most meaningful. The ability to spend quality time... with anybody." Stan Smith described the meaningfulness of connection via amplified empathy: "The empathy I felt for other people... the oneness. You could go up to anyone at Sham... we were a big ol' melting pot of strange people and it was awesome." For Celeste, the connective effects of radical participation at Burning Man were important: "Once you have done [your own self-care], you can leave your personal needs, join in, and be with the collective [in Radical Participation] like, 'What are we doing? What's the program? What do we need?'" Jennifer also described the significance of Shambhala fostering authentic connectedness:

Sham is about creating friendships and lasting memories with people you might not normally associate with; [it] forces people to break down judgmental barriers. ... I miss being in a room with five people and everyone's there for those people, just to talk to each other... people aren't on their phones. [Shambhala has cell] service, but you don't really want or need it. If there's drinking, it takes away from conversation. ... So, you take away drinking and phones and suddenly you have 10,000+ people with nothing else to do but connect with each other face-to-face and be real. I: They're actually in the moment, fully? R: Yeah, exactly.

For Ani, this authentic connection was a relief that restored a sense of hope:

It's to remind me that there are thousands of people who are open to this. I get lost in day-to-day living, but then I'll connect with people who are in that [connected] space. I surround myself with those people. [Burning Man] reminds me, offers me that, 'oh yeah, these people exist all over.' Like satellite communities... it's good to know that that exists everywhere.

Another strong quality of the festivals manifested as self-expression and self-reliance that, in turn, sparked movement toward gifting, especially of one's self.

Your self is enough. Self-expression fostered at the festivals stood out for the co-researchers and branched into the importance of self-reliance and gifting. For example, Ani shared that Burning Man is “a space to express yourself from the deepest depths... that, sometimes, is hidden.” Nanigain found a gift in such self-expression: “You're there to offer yourself as a gift. And that might be... you. Just you. Give us the best version of you, that's what we're asking for... in life. It's a beautiful way to live.” Ani described the significance of the festivals fostering her own self-expression: “I like to be with myself, venture, and it kick drives my creative side – my more eccentric self – which will peter off. ... [It's] rejuvenating for me and my soul, it gives me the time and space. ... I go to Burning Man and come out feeling totally creative... it connects me to my creativity.” Stan Smith shared that Shambhala had an effect on his self-expression as, before attending, he had “never had the confidence to be myself, or speak up for myself.” Celeste illustrated the importance of radical self-expression:

In society [self-expression is] not encouraged. [At] school ... the teacher [asks] questions for participation, but it's not about expressing personal creativity, it's answering questions expected to be answered. ... People say, 'if we had no

money, how would people be motivated to contribute?’ That is a false idea, to presume it wouldn’t work because people wouldn’t be motivated. ... With the principle of radical self-expression, people live for the pursuit of finding out who they are, what they’re good at. Once they discover that, there needs to be people to receive it. ... There would be no limit, it would be nonstop... would work of its own accord. ... We thrive from learning... we would [not] be static, doing the same thing. It would go in waves, cycles.

Nanigain linked self-expression to self-reliance: “A beautiful aspect of Burning Man is you’re self-reliant. You’re on your own, as a sovereign being, fully capable of taking care of yourself and going beyond to offer more of yourself to those around you, without any need for reciprocation.” This principle of self-reliance was especially meaningful for Nanigain:

Radical self-reliance is important for all human beings. We can help each other, but only... as far... as we need to to make sure they can take care of themselves. We’re not here to babysit, enable and... carry each other. We can carry each other as a group for those who... broke the trail for us, those in their older years. ... If we are bound by some attachment to somebody... it’s not serving either person. We’re all here to evolve, not just to have fun, ... to grow, and you can only grow through expanding your experiences. Challenges are where we grow most... how we face those challenges is how we grow.

Celeste also spoke about the importance of radical self-reliance:

That concept includes self-love, self-care. Until you’re 100% ready to contribute, your priority should be taking care of you. ... Then if you [need] help...

everybody's there. ... We live at a time where everybody needs healing, recognition. We want to blame everything on everybody... we create so much drama! Radical self-reliance eliminates drama because you're joining in where you've done your self-help. ... Imagine, the revolution.

As it links to radical self-reliance, Celeste and Nanigain also found the concept of moneyless gifting at Burning Man meaningful. Nanigain explained that in "getting to that point [where we rely on others], we are all offering our gift and need to be able to offer that freely." Celeste also shared "the fact that there's no money... allows the participant to experience not sharing money. ... It's a gifting economy that goes beyond trading. ... Gifting creates surplus." Nanigain further described the profound effect of gifting:

My involvement with [another festival] led me to [build] the main stage. ... I had a transformational experience, I had no idea. ... I was giving something from me, my creation, to everyone. ... I ended up giving it to myself, watching thousands of people enjoy what I created. ... I'm standing amongst them, they're all in amazement of what was created. I could hear the words, feel the energy of people enjoying what was presented, and it was a giant gift to myself. I didn't expect that, it was overwhelming. I learned that as I give my gift to everyone else, I'm actually giving it to myself. ... It was so powerful.

The experience of self-expression, self-reliance, and gifting led the co-researchers to express love, positivity, and experiences of energy as strong festival characteristics.

Loving and feeling everybody and everything. The co-researchers described senses of love and positivity experienced at the festivals. For example, Larry James shared: "My favourite thing [at Shambhala]: The accepting nature, the love. ...

Everything is so peaceful.” Jennifer also explained that “there’s no aggressive behavior. ... Shambhala has the ‘love everyone’ and ‘shambhalove.’ As soon as you walk in, people are giving you hugs. If you’re timid, shy, and don’t like being hugged, you’re going to be hugging everyone by the end.” Nanigain described a similar feeling at Burning Man: “I’ve never experienced too much, negativity. ... All the times I’ve been it was so positive, everything was positive.”

While the aforementioned characteristics comprised the strongest and most meaningful qualities of the festivals, another aspect of the festivals that stood out for the co-researchers was their experiences of intense energies therein. These manifested in different ways. For example, the co-researchers described feeling energized, as well as experiencing energy as positive, palpable, and picking up on negative or “bad” energies.

The co-researchers described feeling energized by the festival’s surroundings and attendees, or bringing their own energy to the festival environments. For example, Larry James shared: “My experience was very energizing... everybody around you has an intense energy. ... That [EHE] was an intense energy.” Jennifer also shared a sense of being energized: “If you’re having a shitty time and you walk into that center village, you’re instantly energized and can’t take the smile off your face.” She further described these energetic effects: “We were at a darker stage... and it was dead because it was the end of the night. That was big, because you’re missing all those people to bring energy to the crowd.” Celeste also shared her energizing experience:

It’s all intense. I’m at a high level of learning, a sponge, and want to make the most of it. ... Outside of me is also intense. ... I’m a big sphere of energy in the

festival. I don't notice things outside of me much, because it's so intense inside me. I: The festival environment augments that feeling for you? R: Absolutely.

While the co-researchers felt a component of energetic exchange at the festivals, they also experienced energy in other ways, one of which entailed feelings of positive or "good" energy. For example, Stan Smith expressed that "the love was out of control." Celeste shared her experience of positive, magnetic energy: "My energy is so intense, so powerful, that I attract people to me... in the flow of energy. It's very positive." Jennifer also shared an infectious, energetic experience:

Everyone [at Shambhala] was there to have a good time. I couldn't sit there and not have a smile on my face, it was amazing to see all these energized people... no one was sloppy or [messed] up; everyone was all smiles. ... I was sitting there as happy as could be watching everyone. Everyone was in the highest spirits.

Nanigain also expounded: "I've been studying morphic resonance... the field of energy that is within everything. In a place like Burning Man... or Shambhala, you are surrounded by this positive, happiness, joy, creative essence." He further described his experience of such energy at Burning Man: "It permeates. At the temple is this beautiful energy where strangers get together... commune with different backgrounds, religious beliefs, and ideals about what life is; they find common ground in communion within the differences and start singing, preaching, saying prayers. ... Such a magical experience."

Sometimes the energy manifested as palpable. For example, Nanigain described the "incredible art... it's almost palpable, the energy around each art installation. You can actually feel the appreciation everyone is having." Ani explained that this is not felt "through sensation. ... The space you're in feels thicker. Imagine everything being

connected... all these lines interconnecting, a web of just one. The spaces between [are] tighter and that creates a feeling of thickness.”

Not all experiences of energy at the festivals were judged as positive by the co-researchers. Encounters with “bad” energy and difficulties were also described. For example, Jennifer shared her struggles:

People forget to take care of themselves, do what they want, and not worry about everyone else. ... Friends want to stick together... trying to make people happy. ... I can pick up if someone’s feeling a certain way, or not having a good time. ... We were at one stage... it was like everyone was dying. I could feel my heart sinking... anxiety, like, ‘I want to get out of this situation, I don’t know how to make everybody happy.’

For Celeste, difficulty manifested as disruptions in her flow of energy: “I’m already very intense, so in those environments I have a hard time following my flow. I barely sleep and battle [wanting] to do multiple things at the same time and can’t.”

The environment fostered at the festivals segued into the co-researchers cultivating new understandings of the world. Additionally, akin to experiences of energy at the festivals, the co-researchers also shared various experiences of overwhelming feelings as characteristic of the festivals.

Theme 2: Paradise on earth.

Rocking world views. A common quality of the festivals manifested for the co-researchers in facilitations of new understandings of the world, providing them with powerful alternative modeling as to what life and society *could* be, or *should* be. Jennifer captured this in sharing: “[Shambhala] opens up your eyes to how humanity should be.

... You see older people... they used to have kids go; all different types of people, and it doesn't matter what you look like." Similarly, Stan Smith shared the necessity of the festivals: "This is necessary for the world to wake up to: There's something else out there. If I could go to a music festival every weekend, dance my heart out, and really connect with people I feel like that's better than any hour in church." Furthermore, Stan Smith's experience of the world was changed by "[the energy], I feel lighter, energetic, I feel a warmth in my body... I felt like I could express myself easier. ... Out there I was never nervous, always very open and sure of myself." Larry James described the impact of Shambhala: "Everybody's so happy... I've never heard of a bad experience. ... What I experienced I never considered bad... eye-opening is how I describe it." Ani also shared the effect of her eye-opening experience:

It drops everything. We get so used to the way society works in our [daily] life. You go [to Burning Man] and it completely deconstructs and shows you a whole different way of living. It helps inform you when you go back out, 'this is a constructed society, this is the way we live because we choose to, not because this is the only way.' One of [Burning Man's] strengths is it offers a different way to interpret things, to show up, and disarms people. It's rare to come across somebody who is not open, kind, generous, and warm, instantly. You can be there for a few days and question why people are like that, but by the end they're going to defrost you, disarm you, and you're going to be just as open and warm. ... It's good for kids to go because, from the beginning, it offers this open view of what you can achieve or create. It pushes the boundaries... that we think exist.

Celeste shared a similar sentiment: “We get our teachings from the media and school. ... This is still within the system and following a rhythm, a vibration that is the system. The system portrays the system. But when we go to these festivals, we’re breaking away from the mold of the system.” She also felt called to action, explaining that the festivals are a place where we “[get] people on board... the real pilgrimage. Let’s all start walking until everybody’s marching and we’re talking. The occupy movement was like that. Imagine if everybody would have stopped and just sat, like, ‘we’re not going to do anything anymore until we’ve solved the real problems.’”

Nanigain expanded upon the festivals’ potential to create new experiences: Burning Man and other festivals have taught me that with a community of like minded people we can create a network, a field of experience that benefits everyone and is greater than the sum of its parts. ... We can pick, choose, and integrate [different models] into our own lives. We have to work together – we are a global community; we have the technology, capability, everything we need to save ourselves and the world. It boils back down to: Do you call it to you? ... We are experience junkies... here to experience it all. We call to us every experience... no one gets away. You can cruise at whatever level, you can live and die. You’re gonna continue doing that until you choose something else.

Celeste realized the weight of shifting the way society functions:

In the festival [we] realize we need authentic connection. ... It’s time to go back to... open source sharing. ... Money creates... separation and fear that other people are against you. We all benefit when the weakest’s needs are being addressed. ... Humanity is in its adolescence; it’s up to us to become the matured

adult or... perish from our arrogance. ... The sacredness of when we're all together. What do we do with that?

While the acquisition of novel understandings of the world was one strong quality of the festivals, they were also characterized by overwhelming feelings, revealed in the co-researcher's discussions of synchronicities and flow states; connecting to others and creative sources; and feelings of empowerment, love, wholeness, and sacredness.

Capturing the flow. The co-researchers found the experience of synchronicities and flow at the festivals overwhelming. For example, Jennifer shared "overwhelming feelings every time something happened that fell into place so perfectly... synchronicity." Stan Smith explained he "had a lot of strange coincidences while at the festival and a month and a half afterwards." Jennifer shared a specific incident of synchronicity:

Certain things would happen where it was mind blowing and it resonates. ... We met this group... we were like, 'it's the last night, [seeing them again is] never going to happen.' ... All of the sudden he pops out. ... There were friends I was trying to see the entire time and never [did]; but this person, in the most random part of the festival, what are the chances? ... It made me so happy.

Ani also described her experience of synchronicity:

My favourite day I've ever experienced... I biked [to] Funky Town. I love funky house music... I wasn't going to miss a moment. ... These moments I'm like, 'are you kidding me!?' I can't wrap my head around it; how is it that I'm out here in the desert with my friends and I get to be here? It's a beautiful day, there's a breeze, and a line up of DJs I couldn't have handpicked myself. It's too much.

The co-researchers also experienced deep resonance with overwhelming flow states during the festivals. For example, Ani described tapping into a flow state within her body: “I get this overwhelming frustration that I cannot express the gratitude I have. ... But, in that moment, I felt able to communicate through my body [through dance].” Nanigain shared his experience of flow: “There’s a palpable feeling. Burning Man’s wide open, you can open yourself up and get pulled in directions. A flow of energy pulls you towards certain pieces of art. The more beautiful the art, the more pull it has, the more appreciation and beauty around it. Like the creation itself has its own energy field.”

While the co-researchers’ experiences of synchronicity and flow at the festivals produced overwhelming feelings, their experiences of connection did the same.

Plugging in. The co-researcher’s experience of connection on various levels at the festivals also sparked overwhelming feelings. For example, Nanigain described overwhelming feeling of connectedness during Burning Man: “We gather at the burn of the temple. ... So much hard work goes into these creations and then we burn and give them back to the source... to where it came from. The entropy of it.” Celeste described sacred connectedness to others and the child self as provoking intense feelings: “Festivals [bring] people [into] direct contact. It’s a sacred thing. ... At Shambhala we’re together, like a child playing, connecting.” Jennifer also described the astounding feeling of connecting to others at the festival: “These guys strolled up like, ‘mind if we chill?’ We’re like ‘yeah... how did you two meet?’ They’re like, ‘we both came alone... so we decided to be friends.’ ... Things like that astounded me, like, why can’t people bring this into everyday life?” These feelings of connection led to experiences of empowerment,

love, wholeness, and sacredness that provoked additional overwhelming feelings for the co-researchers.

Sacred wholeness. Other incidents of overwhelming feelings were described in the co-researcher's experiences of empowerment, love, wholeness, and profound sacred moments facilitated by the festivals. For example, Jennifer shared: "By the end you felt... totally whole. Most festivals you come back super depressed... but after Sham, it was a beautiful feeling [of] 'I can accomplish anything.' This feeling of empowerment." Stan Smith was moved by the startling intensity of emotion at Shambhala: "Everyday something would happen where I would happy-cry... I never did that before. I [do it] all the time now, laughing and crying at the same time. Such a weird feeling, it feels so good. The intense emotional aspect... was startling, I've *never* felt like that in my life." Nanigain described his powerful, sacred experience at Burning Man: "When the temple burns there's this peace, this quiet. To watch an entire city of 70,000 people, the loudest place you've ever been, be silent. That is so powerful. ... It's a magical place to be." Ani's overwhelming feelings manifested in her sacred interactions with music via dance:

I spent the night dancing... how to describe the space is: I'm making love to existence in that moment. ... Expression through dance. [I'm] able to become one with the music; [it's] thick, I can almost see, feel, and move with it. I need for nothing, I'm so in love with myself at that moment and I guess my self is existence. That is an explosion of gratitude.

As part 1 has revealed, Shambhala and Burning Man played an important role in providing the space for the EHEs to open up and become available to the co-researchers.

Once they had tapped into the festival environments the EHEs were ignited. We now turn to an examination of this process and the EHEs themselves.

Part 2: Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience

There are two parts to the investigation of the co-researcher's EHEs. Part 2.1, Igniting the Flame, illuminates three themes (All Roads Lead Here, Slaying the Mind, and Creative Sanctuaries: Paradise Found) surrounding what the co-researchers perceived sparked their EHEs, as well as the common contexts around their occurrences. Part 2.2, Into the Fire, explicates specific qualities of the EHEs as well as those that comprised the most important and meaningful aspects of them for the co-researchers. It is comprised of three overarching themes (Leaving It All Behind and Below, Surrendering to Feel It All, and A Phoenix from the Ashes). Table 2 outlines these themes and sub-themes.

Table 2

Themes of Part 2: Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience

Part	Themes	Sub-themes
2.1 Igniting the Flame	1 All Roads Lead Here	Foreshadowing Basic trust and beyond 100% surrender
	2 Slaying the Mind	The mind in bloom Down the rabbit hole: Amassing intensity with entheogens
	3 Creative Sanctuaries: Paradise Found	
2.2 Into the Fire	4 Leaving It All Behind and Below	Transcendence: Rising above Feeling, seeing, sensing Goodbye to the self Mind blowing coincidence <i>Lucid dreams and EHEs</i>
	5 Surrendering to Feel It All	Injections of truth

6	Seeing through new eyes
A Phoenix from the	Breaking through
Ashes	Medicine for the soul
	It is what it is
	Igniting others

Part 2.1: Igniting the Flame

The co-researchers shared common themes that they felt sparked their EHEs, which included: All Roads Lead Here, comprising what the co-researchers brought that led to their EHEs; Slaying the Mind, involving their mind-states and influences upon them; and Creative Sanctuaries: Paradise Found, revealing the importance of the environment within which the EHEs occurred.

Theme 1: All roads lead here.

Foreshadowing. Many of the co-researcher's prior experiences leading up to their EHEs had a significant impact upon the EHE. For example, Celeste shared: "The year before [at Shambhala] was an awakening – it changed me. It got deeper the second year." Stan Smith shed light on his prior experience, feeling that it led to his EHE: "I always thought there was something more, but normal religions didn't speak to me."

Ani described the intertwined, strengthening nature of all of her experiences: I [can't] separate the experiences I've had. ... To me it built and built. At the music festival there was moments of feeling oneness, everything falling into place, and a different context or consciousness than you are normally, but it wasn't new to me. ... I imagine it like a puzzle, or something flat that I used to stand on, and that's how I viewed life from 0-25 [years old], what I knew. Then I had one experience, not at a music festival, a near death experience that came and completely smashed that. So now I have all these bits.

Larry James described a similar, intertwined nature of experiences that unfolded and opened the door to his most recent EHE:

The first [EHE] in 2009... that's what sparked everything... the lucid/vivid dreaming. I practiced lucid, vivid dreaming for a while, so that opened my mind to whatever this experience was. ... [The recent EHE], I don't know what brought it on. The vividness of it were the dreams I spoke of that happened prior, but they were 10 times more vivid. I: Do you feel like the dreams you had prior to [the EHE] were connected to it? R: In a vague sense, yeah. ... The two dreams told a story that allowed for what happened in the EHE to happen... to be a real thing. ... That line blurred and opened my mind to the possibility that that is out there somewhere. ... The three dreams had a lot to do with the experience I had at Shambhala. ... I can't see it being any other way... the only way to make sense.

Jennifer described her prior experiences as important to allowing her to come to an open spiritual place within which her EHE could occur:

Before Sham, I had seen a few cousins who are very spiritual and I'm such a Type A personality that it was hard for me to understand. Like, 'I get it, vibes and good feelings,' but I was like, 'whatever'. Then I saw a... spiritual psychologist, [who told] me about the chakras... she does an energy healing. She had described me as a third dominant chakra. I was like, 'that kind of makes sense,' and she explained things typical of someone like that. I was like, 'that was the past me,' because I had just decided to switch careers completely, like, 'that's not me anymore.' She did it again and figured I was a fifth dominant. The things she said to me... turned my whole life around, pinpointed me to such a T, where I looked more into it and

realized I always thought it was personality issues. She opened it to a whole other thing. Reading up on that... that's what sold me on the spiritual aspect.

Similarly, the co-researchers shared that their prior interests that were also an integral piece that led up to their EHEs. For Jennifer this entailed her spiritual understanding in combination with her interests: "I've read a lot of science on [EHEs]. So, going into Shambhala, I had this preconditioned idea of spirituality and that thoughts can affect things. When I [had the EHE] it put the theory... into an actual physical happening." Larry James shared a similar experience:

I'm big into science; parallel universes and things. ... I have a belief in that. That, I definitely would say, [had] something to do with it. And whether or not they're all tied together. ... Time travel and other universes... I took a big interest in. I was heavily into physics... but don't have the money to go into school for it. Those were things I always wanted to study and understand. Quantum physics. ... I [studied] on my own. ... All the things I experienced opened my mind to the possibility and then allowed the experience to take place. ... It was coincidental, but at the same time could have played out because it's what I was interested in.

Ani experienced some questioning, but her interest in connecting spiritually allowed her a similar opening into her EHE:

I always questioned – started my journey of prayer and talking to the universe and... connecting with the moon, like, 'what am I doing?' The more I would do it, the more it seemed plausible that there was something happening after. Also connecting, learning to connect with my spirit guides... the more you connect... check in, the more you're able to be guided. Cause your intuition's off, right? I

used to be afraid that if I didn't pay attention to my spirit guides they wouldn't pay attention to me. But they're always there, and the lack is that it's me not in tune with my intuition. It doesn't leave me... I don't think you're ever left. ... I realized... it's always there, it's just up to me to keep that connection strong.

Once their prior experiences and interests were elucidated as foundations to their EHEs, certain personal characteristics were also uncovered as playing a role.

Basic trust and beyond. The co-researchers described specific characteristics they held that they felt opened them up to their EHEs. These ranged from trust, belief, centeredness, wonder, openness, and expectations. For example, Ani shared:

At Burning Man, I prayed clearly for something. ... I was comfortable having spirit guides, but unsure. I feel like... existence is just one thing – I don't feel I'm separate from this thing I'm praying to. Prayer is like manifestation creation. ... I don't know if it's separate from myself, but I do imagine it that way. ... Like... there's this bubble and if I'm... praying to spirit guides, it creates a space where it comes back to me. Even though I'm putting it out there... something's guiding me, but it's like your inner guru you're talking to. ... [It took] a lot of thought, trust, and belief: I'm a believer that if you truly believe in something, there's more possibility for it to be created than if there's doubt. ... Centeredness definitely played a role in having that prayer answered within minutes, because it was so centered and trusting. It's hard to put into words, that feeling of knowingness.

Stan Smith shared he "always had a [sense of] wonder." In summarizing his sharing, I reflected: "I: It was a combination of Shambhala, love and openness, you being able to go in and be open to whatever happens, and feeling that energy come into you was

a big catalyst for everything that unfolded? R: Yeah.” Larry James described his openness as a catalyst: “I’ve opened my mind up to the possibility of [EHEs] being real, other dimensions.” Celeste felt her expectations played a role: “It’s my own expectations ... my goal was to recreate the level of amazingness I experienced the year before.”

A lack of fear was also a factor in opening the co-researchers to their EHEs. For example, Nanigain shared: “It was pretty magical. I didn’t have any fear around it.” Jennifer also explained: “I didn’t feel afraid I’d come out of it and never be able to find my friends, or be alone. ... It was about being in a safe environment and knowing that Shambhala is set up where if you were in serious trouble, everyone will help, no one’s going to leave you. ... Also that I’d been [to Shambhala] before, so it wasn’t totally foreign to me.” As their fears subsided, the co-researchers were able to surrender and commit to the EHEs as they unfolded.

100% surrender. The co-researchers expressed the importance of surrender and commitment to the EHEs. For example, Stan Smith explained: “It’s being open to the experience and letting the energy. ... I was so open to the experience that the energy entered me so I could take it with me.” Similarly, Nanigain shared his process of surrender and letting go of the mind that led to his EHE:

After three days of your mind, every moment thinking, ‘what is that? Why on earth.... Who would do?’ ... The mind is chewing away at why this is happening, how did this happen, and finally you give up. You give up and say, ‘I give in.’ You say ‘of course’ instead. Like this moment of ‘okay, I’ll just get it.’ That, for me, was a big moment of ‘alright, I give in.’

Ani shared the importance of being entirely committed prior to her EHE:

“[Commitment] influences things falling into place, the way things played out in my life, because – had I not been entirely committed to what I was asking for – it is a creation. To be able to create... it has to be this certain context of your wish, your desire.”

As the underpinning for the EHEs was established, the next theme speaks to the blooming mind-state of the co-researcher as further facilitating the EHEs.

Theme 2: Slaying the mind.

The mind in bloom. The co-researcher’s state of mind played a role in the context of their EHEs. For example, Nanigain expressed he “didn’t have any worries.” For Larry James there were no expectations: “We were at camp and started walking [to the main gates at Shambhala]. We didn’t have a set plan as to what we were going to do when we got in.” Ani explained part of her mind-state in that she “went on this bike ride, it was hot and I felt like I wanted to be there but sort of like, ‘well, I’m going to do this.’ I look forward to something being over; not because I’m not enjoying it, but cause I always want to know the outcome.” Despite her desire to know the outcome before her EHE, Ani elaborated on the importance of her mind-state as it approached:

I know when I’m trying to connect, but there’s something holding me back; not entirely connected, distracted, something in me that’s doubting what I’m asking. But I remember, in that moment, being fully... present and connected to... whatever it is I’m connecting to because I don’t know. I felt that connection.

Stan Smith also expressed the importance of permitting himself to cultivate a state of mind that allowed for the flow of life:

I: When we first talked, you said something about being in the flow of life? R: Oh, yeah. I: Letting it carry you, it sounds like that's what you were doing. You were flowing along and it was carrying you to all these places. Also, it sounds like one of the biggest contexts is being brought back home to your energy, your purpose, and allowing that to guide you and then all of these things happened? R: Yeah. That's pretty dead on.

Most of the co-researchers also described their mind-states as being affected by the use of substances that played a role in inducing their EHEs.

Down the rabbit hole: Amassing intensity with entheogens. Almost all of the co-researchers were under the influence of a substance prior to and during their EHEs. For example, Jennifer's two EHEs occurred under the influence of psilocybin and DMT, respectively; and Celeste and Larry James's EHEs occurred under the influence of LSD. Stan Smith shared that he had used "LSD a couple nights in a row. MDMA... ketamine." Nanigain's EHE and the substances he consumed (i.e., LSD and MDMA) were augmented by nitrous oxide: "I'd never done nitrous oxide. [It] seemed to expand the experience that was already happening." Ani's EHE, however, occurred while she was sober: "Under the influence? No... I wasn't. I remember [the friend who gave the instructions for my journey] stated that I should be sober." Similarly, Stan Smith also had many other exceptional experiences after Shambhala that occurred while he was sober.

Jennifer, in sharing her use of psychedelic substances prior to her EHE, described: "It was our first day [at Shambhala] and I had taken mushrooms. I've taken them lots, but this time I took more. It put me on my back for four hours, not in a bad way. When I came back I was exhausted; just mentally, like mind blown." Celeste also shared she

“took some acid [more than her usual dose] and it was really intense.” Larry James mentioned that he also “did some acid beforehand.” Interestingly, Stan Smith shared that “most of the time [his EHEs occurred under the influence of substances], but a lot of the time, no. After Shambhala I was having experiences sober. Dead sober. But would always feel high from the energy.” Nanigain described his EHEs as sparked “through the use of psychedelics” that served to dissolve his fear: “The use of hallucinogens to open myself up without any fear, knowing I can get through it. It created a sense of security I didn’t have before.” Stan Smith also discussed the effect of the substances on his EHEs’ unfolding:

The drugs may have introduced me to the situations and given me a different perspective on how they were important to me in my situation. A lot of these, like acid, MDMA, or mushrooms make you think differently. To have something happen like, ‘oh my god, this had to happen for that to happen so we could be within a couple meters and meet.’ Like, what had to happen for him to be there ... or for a certain situation to play out and you are able to... help out. I: You feel like the drugs magnified, opened things up, or allowed for things to happen, and think differently? R: Absolutely, yeah.

While their mind-states played an important role in expediting the EHEs, the container of the festival within which they occurred was also highlighted as a catalyst.

Theme 3: Creative sanctuaries: Paradise found. The co-researchers expressed that the environments of Shambhala and Burning Man were integral parts of the context surrounding their EHEs. For Jennifer “it had a huge thing to do with the environment. I’ve been other festivals that aren’t transformational. There’s no drinking allowed at

Sham. Being at a festival where you know no one is drinking, or going to get aggressive, puts you in this safe spot. ... I was also with a great group of friends.” Larry James also captured this in stating that he was able to open to his EHE “once the correct environment was there.” Similarly, Nanigain described a sense of safety in the environment:

[Nitrous oxide is] not something I would do on a regular basis, but it was the right place and time to do [it]. ... When I used to go to these I would always take time to work on myself because, experiencing mushrooms growing up, I knew this is a space, a container in which it’s a safe place to work in that environment. And on experiencing something higher, in a higher dimension or state of being. And not have worries of who’s going to come down on me, or ramifications if found.

For Celeste the festival environment was “a combination of things: Music... and dancing. ... I have a deep relationship to dancing, I consider it a spiritual practice. ... It’s also the high level of energy around. ... It got really intense, with all the energy at Shambhala and so much people, I got overwhelmed.” Stan Smith explained that “at Sham the energy, the overall feeling you got of love and acceptance, is really what I think mainstream religion is shooting for but... they get sidetracked with the story and the message, and sometimes the message is skewed to serve them in another sense.” For Ani the energy from the environment served as a grounds from which to connect: “There’s so much going on at Burning Man. I knew I should be taking more time to connect, but at the same time [seeing everything is] what I do [there], for me that’s the grandest connection.” Stan Smith described the importance of being placed in situations where he could help others, both facilitated by the festival environment and continuing on after it:

I've felt, deep down, I was put on the earth to help people. [The experiences] put me in these situations where I could help somebody; whether it was feeding a homeless man down on his luck, or giving somebody the coat hanger. There was so many, I should have been writing them down. It's hard for me to remember everything. ... I was having five or six a day, so it was like I would have one and be like, 'that was one of these experiences.' Then by the time the next one happened, I'd already forgotten about the one prior. ... Everything was leading me into another situation where I would have one of these moments.

For Ani the intentionality in the festival environment was important:

The intentionality at Burning Man holds space for [EHEs]. The more people you have in this frame of mind, open and connected, the more space for these things to happen. The friend who gave me the meditation journey... she's connected, prays lots, so her intention and I went with full intent. It was a lot of intention.

Nanigain described the importance of the festival environment as composed of:

The group consciousness of the people attending creates a space or an opening of perception and experience that helped me realize a deeper connection to those around me, my family, my ideas about what is important in life, possibilities in my own life. ... The first time I went to the Burn it took three days submerged in this whole other reality for... a switch to flip. ... It wasn't about any influences, as far as drugs or alcohol, it was being submerged in this whole other reality of extreme acceptance, extreme connection between the people, and the sight of people's creation, people's art; like being submerged in a Salvador Dali painting.

Being in a living breathing art environment that defies the standard reality of the concrete jungle or of anything I'd ever experienced.

While the festival environment was important in holding a space for the EHEs, the co-researchers noted that environments involving isolation and aloneness could also play a role. For Nanigain it was “a very interesting moment because I ended up by myself... in between two camps, in the desert. ... It was three in the morning. I was completely alone.” In contrast, Celeste chose to isolate herself as her EHE unfolded: “I got aware, ‘I’m in trouble. I can’t dance, I can’t do this.’ So I took myself to my tent and stayed there the whole night.”

Now that the contexts that sparked the co-researcher’s EHEs have been illuminated, we will move to explore the qualities of the EHEs as they manifested.

Part 2.2: Into the Fire

In sharing their EHEs, the co-researchers described three common themes that illustrated the qualities of the EHEs and their most important and meaningful aspects. These encompassed: Leaving It All Behind and Below, entailing a multitude of transcendent manifestations of the EHEs; Surrendering to Feel It All, including the feelings provoked by the EHEs and ultimate surrender to them; and A Phoenix from the Ashes, including the immediate effects and trajectory of the EHEs as they unfolded.

Theme 4: Leaving it all behind and below.

Transcendence: Rising above. As the co-researchers’ EHEs unfolded, they reported transcending ordinary reality and entering, or becoming aware of, alternate realities or dimensions. For Larry James, such transcendence “was like being brought to another place, similar to ours.” Jennifer’s EHE was visual: “I was still in my own reality,

but looking into a whole other realm we can't see on a normal, day to day." She elaborated: "Fractals in the air... in a 3D space and connected to everything. I [felt] this is going on around us all the time and we've been conditioned to not feel or see it. They say, 'your thoughts and emotions affect other people,' seeing the connection in the space around me was like, 'obviously.'" She also shared entering a familiar, unusual reality:

In this different dimension, there were 4 beings hanging out... communicating, nothing was said but I could tell they were talking. They kept looking at me, motioning. I got this sense they were like, 'you've been here before, this is it... you shouldn't be surprised.' It felt like I had been there... like something I had forgotten. [They] were like, 'yeah, welcome, this is what it is.'

Nanigain also described accessing alternate dimensions during one of his EHEs: "My consciousness stretched into... the sky... hundreds of feet... vertical expansion. It wasn't actually in the sky, more like another dimension. ... I was in three different experiences at once: One on the ground, the faintest; the second, another level; and the third, a much higher level."

The co-researcher's perceptions of time were also affected. For example, Larry James shared that his "whole experience... felt like an eternity but only took an hour." Similarly, Nanigain described: "As I was walking I froze in time and space... [it] was a wide open experience which felt like quite a while... but was only moments." In contrast, Celeste's EHE felt "like everything was sped up and going fast in my head."

In transcending reality, the co-researchers experienced altered, shifted realities and events within them. Jennifer explained: "It's not like you're just hallucinating and an observer. When... you fall into it, you are a part of it. Whatever you see, it sees you. It

knows you.” She further described: “[The fractals] can see you. ... They were interacting, could sense your presence. ... When you moved... the colors change. ... I could put my hands out, grab the air, and move [it]; see how it was moving... the vibrations of it off of everything.” During his first EHE, Larry James’s reality shifted to accommodate empathic, deepened connections and psychic abilities. He explained: “[I] could understand how everybody was feeling... like a god, capable of controlling anything at my will. I: Did you try to? R: The wind. It worked. ... I reached my arm up, wanted the wind to come, a huge gust hit... and I had the feeling as soon as that happened.” His reality continued to shift, this time as a precognitive, synchronistic experience:

A guy... sits down beside me and... I’m like ‘I can’t find my friends.’ He’s like, ‘... The best thing I could give you is: Stop looking for your friends. ... I bet you’ll find them. And if you feel like you’re in a dark place, go towards the light!’ ... We go our separate ways. I’m wandering around... and take his advice. I stop looking for [my friends] and... there’s port-o-potties and light underneath and I’m like: I’m going to stand underneath the light, maybe they’ll find me. I [was] in the light for five seconds when I hear ‘Larry James!’ ... and there they are! Everything [he] said came true. Completely. I was amazed.

During another EHE, Larry James experienced a completely different reality: “I’d seen, out of my peripherals, a black truck with police lights. ... I looked back, it was this white maintenance truck... smaller. ... The tents [turned] into military tents and I felt this bad feeling. ... I thought [the darkness] was me; if I went in [to the gates] that would complete whatever darkness was going to happen.” Celeste experienced a similar sense of darkness when she “felt in the middle of the black hole.” Nanigain shared: “[I] was now

living in, or experiencing in, other dimensions than this 3D dimension we are in.” For Ani, this alternate reality was especially profound, as she described: “[I] broke down, like, ‘this is real’ ... I didn’t know where to put my gratitude; like, ‘I hear you, I see you world.’” Larry James shared: “The concept of another reality was interesting; whether you call that a parallel universe or something we get glimpses of. The idea was there but [the EHE] made it more real.” For Jennifer, accessing another reality was jarring as she had “a loss of time, self, and everything else. Seeing these patterns, but also seeing a face into it, it was like... someone watching over you. ... I felt lost in this whole other world that is going on around us all the time. People could come up... I’m still consciously aware. I: Like a foot in both realities? R: Exactly.” What stood out for Celeste was the collapse of time in her altered reality: “The past comes back, and a vision of the future. It really blows me away.” Stan Smith described an alternate reality of connection and community compared to “the way I used to look at the world was that you’d have to be out for yourself... everyone’s out for themselves. I feel now it’s like the whole world is connected; whether you like it or not, people are connected. ... I: The thing that sticks out the most would be that sense of connection? R: Community.” Furthermore, the co-researchers experienced additional manifestations of the EHEs that continued to transcend their ordinary experiences of the world and their senses.

Feeling, seeing, sensing. The co-researcher’s described their EHEs as manifesting in a variety of ways (e.g., through energetic feelings, visual and interactive experiences, and intuited and perceptual shifts). For example, Stan Smith shared: “[I] felt an unusual energy, being very light, a light headed feeling – without the drugs – but feeling energized and close.” Ani described her EHE as: “Crazy, [the] ether felt very

tight. Thoughts... were tangible. ... You could create something with your thoughts. The first experiences... I was thinking something and it would happen moments later.”

Nanigain shared his visual experience: “There was... a golden grid pattern and another dimension had... clouds or a fog or haze.” Jennifer’s EHE was also strikingly visual:

It was a clear blue sky, but I was seeing intricate patterns, fractals, and the most amazing designs. Rather than looking at lines on the leaves moving... making patterns of things that are already there... this was seeing a whole other thing that shouldn’t be in the sky at all. ... I remember seeing this female, goddess figure in it, but it was moving in flow with the patterns and you could go deeper into it.

Another of Jennifer’s EHEs was visual *and* interactive: “The visuals [were] the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen. A blanket sheen across my face with fractals going in and out... there were elf-like figures. ... they [weren’t] people, but definitely had faces.” During another EHE she shared that she felt “shook... I was breathing [the DMT] in... I instantly felt like I did too much. ... I was falling into it so quickly. I skipped passed all the visuals and found myself fully in another space with four [beings].”

Larry James experienced both visual and intuited components during one of his EHEs: “The tents started turning into military tents... and I felt this really bad feeling. ... I continued walking. ... The whole way things were seeming better; I was going to go for a walk and blow it off. There was this presence with me... a female presence, but it wasn’t like she was actually there. I could feel a conversation going on between me and her without words being spoken.”

Celeste’s visual experience affected her perception: “The sun came up over the trees and sent a white halo of light on everything. ... I could see this light everywhere and

also around me. I was aware that... the sun was creating a light... but in my perception it made me see everything as one... feel like everything was connected.” Later in her EHE, she continued to glean insight through perception: “All of this garbage represented all the problems on the planet, a metaphor for something bigger.” In addition to the transcendent manifestations, the co-researchers also experienced overall transcendence of the self.

Goodbye to the self. The co-researchers experienced transcendence of feeling like a separate isolated self, that was replaced by deep connection and oneness. For example, Jennifer shared: “[I was] confused because I forgot who I was... where I was... that I had smoked DMT.” Larry James shared feeling a deep connection: “[I] felt oneness... empowering, god-like oneness. I was part of everything.” Celeste described feeling separated from her body and sense of self, as well as coming to terms with the oneness:

I felt completely separated from my body. ... I was aware [it] was there... my vehicle was the body, but felt disconnected from it. I was dancing... and had this vision... that I would dismember, my arms would fly off. ... I could hurt myself. I was somewhere else... not in my body. When the white halo [came]... I felt no separation, didn't feel like an “I” anymore. ... [I saw] everything as one... connected. That was a hard concept, because I've had this feeling that we couldn't be all connected and one. If it was like that, there wouldn't be all the problems. ... Me and people like me wouldn't create this mess. ... It's coming from my heart... my connection to life. ... I couldn't relate to oneness because it was making us all the same and things done by others I can't relate to. I think differently now.

Nanigain explained that his new connection “helped me realize a deeper connection to those around me, my family, my ideas about what is important, what is a

possibility in my life.” Ani also described a sense of connection after her EHE: “I had this sense that there’s oneness. ... I feel like... existence is one thing – I don’t feel separate from this thing I’m praying to.” Transcendence also manifested and deepened as the co-researchers, through their EHEs, tapped into underlying synchronicities that provoked feelings of intense meaning.

Mind blowing coincidence. The co-researchers described meaningful, synchronistic events that occurred within their EHEs and continued to transcend their ordinary experiences. For example, Larry James shared a miraculous synchronicity: “I wished all my friends [at] camp would be back. My buddy was like, ‘... I don’t think that would happen... they’re all split up at different stages.’ ... We go to the washroom and... when we get back, it was like a miracle. Literally everybody was there.” Celeste’s synchronicity involved meeting a participant from Burning Man:

This man saw me [picking up garbage], asked if I had another bag... we [filled] up six bags. ... Then the music stopped... we started talking... sharing a lot. I asked him what made him help me. He told me he had been to Burning Man, how things work, and how it changed his relationship to a festival: It’s participation based. ... I kept wanting to know more. I was so blown away! I could feel the level of excitement. In my head, like, ‘I’m going to Burning Man.’

Stan Smith acknowledged the build up of his synchronicities: “I’ve had a lot of those moments where synchronicities would happen and I think back to how coincidental it was... for something like that to happen. ... It puts you in awe of how crazy the world – that energy is.” His EHE, itself, was comprised of many synchronicities in the form of strange coincidences that occurred both during and after Shambhala:

Small coincidences... I had a straightened out clothes hanger for unlocking a car. ... I looked at it before I packed for Sham... and left it in there. It was weird, usually I would take it out. ... Within an hour of being there somebody... locked their keys in. ... To give it away to a stranger... was strange. ... He was only a couple cars down and I was the first person he asked, which was weird. ... Then around the campsite... [we'd] lose something and ... usually it's gone for a day. When everybody's looking and we had all given up, we'd find it in the most obvious place. It was weird. ... I had etching carved into my hair... prior to the festival. ... A guy came up... looking at my head... calling his friend over... and pulled down his shirt. Over his heart was a similar tattoo of what was on my head. The next hour we were in the same place and a girl started flipping out behind one of my friends. They started hugging and laughing hysterically. ... She says, 'we have the same tattoo.' Between her shoulder blades she had a Buddhist hand... she has long black hair, wearing a spirit hood, it wasn't visible and this girl had seen it from a couple meters away and had the same tattoo. ... Things like that would happen. After the festival I started to ride my bike, was more active, and found synchronicity would happen more when I would get out of the house and explore. ... I was attracting people I would mesh with. ... I was... riding my bike through an alley where I usually wouldn't go. I was picking up trash, found this piece of paper – it said, 'FREE.' I thought it was funny... put it in my pocket, continued, and saw a garage sale... thought... it must have blown away. I walked in to give it back and it [was] a home of somebody I used to work with 10 years

ago. I had no idea they were living there, we reconnected... picking up that piece of paper led me to her. Thinking about it gives me that warm feeling in my chest.

Interestingly, Larry James's synchronicities aligned with lucid dreams he experienced prior to Shambhala. We will now turn to a special investigation of such overlapping dream and EHE content.

Lucid dreams and EHEs. Upon interviewing Larry James, it appeared that a large part of his EHE paralleled synchronistically with prior experiences he had while lucid dreaming. These included feeling his energy draining, grappling with the feeling of dying, manifestations that were "not as they seem," overlapping realities, specific interactions with three people, inhabiting spaces between life and death, and knowledge of other realities:

It [was] a set of three dreams... out of that lucid dreaming point. They made me decide to stop. ... The first one, I was at my old house. ... I woke up in the dream... my sister in law... turned into the devil. That made me realize I was dreaming... I realized, 'this isn't where I live.' I remembered everything that was actually true... I live in an apartment. I flashed to... my apartment and I see this house. My first thought is, 'this isn't my house,' but I had this feeling like it was supposed to represent my house. The house was on fire. It felt like... I had passed out due to a gas leak. ... I'm in this house fire... and can't wake up. Caught on that edge between life and death. ... I couldn't find [a way to contact anyone], gave up, appeared out of the house, crippled down and started crying at the thought of dying. I had this distinct feeling of three people coming up behind me... one of them put their hand on my shoulder and said, 'I think you've seen

enough,' weightlessly lifting me up. ... They turned me around and I was facing [a time travel device]... a deep black pit. I fell into that and as soon as everything went dark... my eyes were open and I was awake. ... I had a lingering feeling about those three guys: Who were they? I couldn't see their faces. ... It was [a] mind opener. The [next lucid dream] was a coma. I woke up in a hospital and... there was this nurse. ... She... saw I was awake and was extremely surprised. She hit a button. I'm really groggy... and she [helps] me stand up. She [takes] me down this hallway, talking about the fact that I've been in a coma and something about a physicist studying interdimensional travel and something to do with the mind. I didn't fully understand what was going on, and wouldn't, until the sequel dream a year later. ... She's telling me these things that sounded like my real life: My family and friends, things that happened, things I've seen. ... She says, 'the only way we think you're going to come close to understanding what's happening is if we show you this.' She brings me to a curtain and opens [it] and here is my living room when I was six... picture perfect, and the whole family. ... My mom starts crying. My brother's like, 'holy crap, you're awake.' My dad sits back and nods, 'I knew you'd wake up.' I'm confused; my first thought is that I dropped into a diabetic coma. ... I'm not understanding. I'm feeling weak. ... I sat down and dad was reading the newspaper, I saw a date on [it] ... January 2016. Like, 'weird, I've been out for a long time, five years.' My brother comes back, he's got this raw hotdog, 'here you haven't had solid food in years.' ... I take a bite, I remember the texture and taste. So vivid. ... [Then] all of my energy drained out of me – that feeling of passing out. When I closed my eyes I heard somebody in

the background, ‘what’s wrong with him?’ When I open my eyes, I’m laying in bed staring at the clock. ... I passed it off as a dream. I close my eyes and when I open [them] I’m back in this room; there’s bells, whistles, lights and everybody’s panicking. ... I nod off and open my eyes again... back in my room and I’m wide awake – wasn’t in the dream anymore. ... Those were the kinds of things I was trying to induce... practicing lucid dreaming. ... I had a dream about a flood and a house on fire. ... Six months later the [local] flood happened. ... The house burning in the dream, I saw in real life [after the dream]. I was standing in front of it, trying to get inside to see if anybody was in there. ... The dream flashed in my mind, like, ‘that’s that house!’ ... I didn’t think anything of it. That dream was interesting because I was convinced I was in the house looking for someone – thought it was myself. ... A year, almost to the date, I had a sequel dream: I woke up – but on a couch. I was at my parent’s actual home. ... I look at the TV and it’s static. ... My dad is sitting in [a] rocking chair staring at the TV and mom’s... in the kitchen. [Dad’s] face blurred and you could make a totally different face. I look away, ‘that’s really weird.’ I look back and it’s doing this again, but when it snaps back it’s not his face anymore. ... I panic, thought, ‘that’s it, I’ve snapped, I lost it. I’m not seeing things normally, that was not normal.’ I remember standing up, backing away, tripped over my foot and was crawling back. ... My mom comes, ‘Larry James, calm down, it’s okay, this is normal.’ I’m like, ‘...this is normal? That is NOT my father.’ She says, ‘yes, this is your father, here.’ ... As soon as I said ‘what?’ the last dream I had prior flooded back into my brain. ... I just accepted [it] as what was happening and decided to move forward with [it].

I... stepped outside... my parents sat beside me. ... I realized something was really weird; they'd taken the house they currently live in and moved it onto the land I was raised on. ... There was garbage lining the streets, the sky was red, and the clouds black. ... My parents... [told] me I was a physicist in another universe, studying how to consciously travel between; and my research had taken a wrong turn and left my body in a coma. They... didn't know exactly how many times I would make it back. I was confused, this is all the stuff in my real life I've always wanted to study. I: The three people, you said during your EHE there was three times that people came to help you? R: Yeah. Wow, I didn't even see that. You just illuminated that. ... I: Since then you have stopped your lucid dreaming? R: Yeah, for the most part... I've stopped practicing because I didn't want that line to get any more blurred until I had more ground for understanding it. So far... everything is going exactly... the way I think it would to answer that. All this science is coming out and it's... with evidence, confirming it. It's an interesting feeling... to consider the possibility of all that out there.

As illuminated, the overarching theme of transcendence in its various forms and manifestations was one of the main qualities of the EHEs, but another manifested in surrendering to the process and various feelings throughout.

Theme 5: Surrendering to feel it all. An important component of the co-researcher's EHEs entailed surrendering to their experiences as they unfolded. For example, Ani shared: "All of the sudden it was big, I broke down and that's when I feel like I surrendered. Like, 'I surrender and I trust you.'" Celeste described a similar experience: "Things were good. I kept monitoring my headspace and felt like I can let go

of hating myself, I can just surrender.” Larry James’s surrender entailed a sense of peace that followed accepting his ‘death’ in the moment: “All the energy was slowly draining out of me, but I was okay with it. ... [Later] I felt like I was passing through another death phase where it was peaceful and everything was shutting down.”

Surrender also involved opening to many different feelings during and after their EHEs, some of which were perceived as positive and some negative. For example, Stan Smith explained: “[the EHE] made me feel a warmth, here in my chest.” Ani felt a sense of presence and connection:

I took a time out... to sit, connect, and pray in gratitude... and then read the rest [of the instructions for the journey]: ... ‘Go find a quiet space and do this meditation,’ the first was gratitude. I was like, ‘I’ve done that,’ so I... continued ... [next] it was... to ask for something I felt in my life needed to shift. ... I asked the universe... I remember in that moment being fully... present and connected.

As Ani’s EHE continued to unfold, positive feelings manifested as a breakthrough that further melted away her doubt and increased her sense of trust in her experiences:

I had a meditation and prayer and asked for something specific... randomly, ten minutes later, I am sitting with this guy who’s answering exactly the questions I asked my spirit guides. ... It was a big breakthrough. It felt like... ‘yes!’, a melting. This is now my truth... my reality. This is where I’m going to operate from. Since then, there’s no more doubt; no hint of, ‘what am I doing, who am I praying to?’ It’s so much trust. ... I’ll draw [tarot] cards for myself, and there’s no more, ‘I can’t believe that happened.’ Now I’m settled into the fact that this is the way things operate and that’s really helped me shift.

Larry James's EHEs entailed a variety of positive and negative feelings ranging from "enlightening... strange... and transcendent" to "dark feeling... like something bad was going to happen... this feeling got more and more." His EHEs continued to unfold with oscillating light/dark themes and positive/negative feelings:

I don't want to go [through the gates] because I'm feeling like something's up. ... I chose to turn around and started walking away... this dark feeling dissipated and everything ahead of me seemed bright, shiny, and much better. ... That was the point at which I collapsed and thought... I was dying, slowly. Like all the energy was draining out of me. ... I ended up lost, disoriented, I had no idea where I was. ... [After searching for my camp] I was immediately stoked, 'cause I had finally found a place I recognized, and felt I was in a safe place.

Nanigain shared the overarching positive feelings during his EHE: "What happened for those three days [at Burning Man] was the experience of awe, wonder, and appreciation for the effort of this creation in every direction you look. ... It's pure amazing beauty, of people, friendship, connection, giving, acceptance, of pure love. It was submerged in this sea of love." Celeste noticed the positivity of her EHE waning as she experienced a host of difficult feelings she had to work through to rise up once more:

I started worrying about physical things... like: 'I'm going to get cold... thirsty.' ... Every time I was trying to take care of those things it wasn't working. ... I got aware, 'I'm in trouble... I can't do this.' I took myself to my tent and stayed. I was feeling guilty that I had created that situation. Mad at myself that it was all my fault – I felt very responsible. In my tent it was really dark... I went into the fetal position. ... Couldn't sleep, the whole night I was trying to process and all of

it was really dark: Hating myself, feeling guilty, and my whole life was going into it. ... I thought I was going to have to leave in the morning. That's how extreme it [was]. I was punishing myself, making myself guilty for having [taken too much acid]. ... That went on and by the time it... started to be light again, I got more calm and felt like I was not affected anymore. ... The feeling was calm, I had been going through hell in the night, so it felt like the peace after the storm.

After weathering the storm, Celeste felt renewed: "The feeling was amazing. I started crying, feeling so elated. I kept dancing and felt aware that I was having a process of redemption... making amends with what I had been through at night." Her journey through difficult feelings, however, resumed as her EHE progressed:

I [went to] the... Fractal Forest. ... The first feeling was nauseating... gross smelling. ... [The ground] was covered in garbage, to me this is where the smell is coming from. ... The feeling was, 'I'm going to puke, what is this?' It made my heart beat so fast to have this feeling, 'it's so gross and it's me as well,' I'm part of this. My feeling was I need to do something. The other was go... back to bliss. But it was clear that going back wasn't going to fix anything. ... What I needed to do was pick up the garbage. ... I started and was on a mode of panic... urgency was grabbing me where I couldn't walk away from it. ... You don't see people do that in the middle of a party; people are having fun, laughing, dancing, and I am picking up garbage like it's my mission. My heart was beating fast and I was aware part of [it] was fear I had of being judged by others. It was coming so spontaneously that it was after the fact I was able to look at what was going on and have intellectual thought about it. ... Then, people started helping... I was

panicked because of my fear of judgement, but as soon as people joined with me, I'm not alone and don't feel judged. I feel approved.

One of Jennifer's EHEs also brought with it a variety of feelings:

I was smoking [DMT] and could feel my body getting tingly. ... As soon as I closed my eyes it was like getting sucked back into a whole other realm. It was the most calming feeling I have ever felt. Completely at ease... even the air I was breathing felt like the most pure air I've ever breathed. ... The only thing I could think of was, 'how can I... do DMT for the rest of my life?' It was such a comforting feeling; I never wanted to leave it. But it's not like you come out of it addicted. There's no addictive part. As soon as I opened my eyes... I was speechless. The guy next to me, we were dumbfounded. No matter how much you explain it to people they're completely blown away by what [they] actually come across. I was so blown away, couldn't even wrap my head around it.

Jennifer's next EHE with DMT brought on different feelings:

This time, I completely lost all sense of what just happened. ... It blew my mind to the point where I came out of it... completely shook – I had to take 15 minutes and ignore everybody because... it was not like last time; it was in a whole other space. ... There was a point where... I felt scared *personally*, but I never felt scared about where I was in the experience. ... I could not wrap my head around who I was... my life, where I was sitting, anything... all I could do was be where I was. ... It was comforting, because I didn't feel scared by these [beings] and felt like I had been there before. And it was terrifying, because I knew it wasn't a

normal, regular occurrence. That's why... I was shook, because I was trying to re-figure out where I was, what happened, and what it all means.

These feelings, as well as the EHEs in general, were also experienced as overwhelming for the many of the co-researchers. For example, Jennifer recalled “[feeling] like, ‘I can’t handle this’. The bass, all the people... around... I could pick up on all the energy... it was too much to handle, so I... laid in the daisy garden.” Celeste described a similar experience: “It got really intense... I got overwhelmed. ... I was aware of everything and couldn’t process... it was too much.” During one of his EHEs, Larry James felt “that feeling of darkness... ahead of me become so overwhelming.” In another EHE, he realized the importance of grounding to ease overwhelming feelings: “[The feeling of being God-like] extended through the whole [EHE]. ... I was enjoying [it], but trying to keep myself on level ground so I could communicate and not be off thinking I’m God. ... [Communicating] with people in the here and now is a lot better.” Ani described embracing, overwhelming feelings during her EHE: “People came like, ‘are you okay?’ I was like, ‘yeah, it’s not a bad sadness.’ I’m crying and so overwhelmed. ... I just wanted to be with this feeling.” As Ani demonstrated, while the EHEs could be overwhelming, there was movement into a sense of surrender. As their EHEs continued to unfold, the co-researchers progressed into what comprises the final theme of the EHE, A Phoenix from the Ashes.

Theme 6: A phoenix from the ashes.

Injections of truth. All of the co-researcher’s EHEs left them feeling as though they’d encountered truth, accessed new (tacit) knowledge, or reached higher levels of understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them. For example, Larry

James described: “There’s more knowledge in that state, you understand things in a completely different way.” Similarly, Jennifer described her EHE as “a one-way path, to the pineal gland” that stimulated tacit understandings. During his EHE, Nanigain had a sense of being “downloaded with information.” Celeste also shared: “My head is on a journey, it’s receiving all these messages; I channel them... having epiphanies the whole time. ... It’s a new feeling. Going back to that place where we left it, I go deeper, get ideas and haven’t thought about it that way before. ... It’s always like there’s more truth coming.” Nanigain understood this truth as a pivotal point wherein “[the knowledge] became completely unavoidable because it rang so true and deep within me, I could no longer avoid the call to express myself more freely. I saw what that meant in those moments, how that manifested.” Celeste was also significantly impacted:

I was experiencing truth in a way that I can’t say I’ve experienced before. In a very visceral way that was going straight to my brain. It was physical *and* intellectual, all the levels: Spiritual, philosophical, sociology, anthropology... all together. ... When... multiple levels [are] activated at the same time – that’s when I get it all, when truth happens. ... What I experienced, I was processing at an intellectual level that you can send to your heart. ... It went so deep in me.

Ani felt a sense of relaxing into and accepting her understandings: “[The EHE] solidified it. ... I had the biggest – ‘okay this is real.’ ... You rock your foundation and it takes a long time to solidify. ... Coming to that point helps because that’s where I move from. ... Bits of doubt... can hiccup you. ... It just feels more... calming, soothing. It feels great.” She described her new sense of knowingness: “I felt that connection, in that moment, it’s this knowingness. It happens from time to time, this knowingness, there’s

no doubt about it. ... That feeling I'm talking about, it's like being informed. Through our bodies we get a lot of cues and information if we're quiet, present, and paying enough attention." She also described the truth she discovered and how it impacted her:

I'm separate and I get that. I live and operate in this body, but I get flashes of... looking at things completely differently. Before, if they were transcendental experiences, they were so fresh and new I was like 'this is weird, I feel different.' Now... it comes in waves, but that's the wave of truth; the ordinary, the realness. Whereas this physical form is like, 'how did we even get here?'

The aftermath of this connection to truth, knowledge, and understanding left the co-researchers with an altered sense of self and reality.

Seeing through new eyes. One of two aspects the co-researchers shared in regards to what they felt was the most important part of their EHEs was an altered sense of self and reality. Jennifer described this as a dis-identification: "The feeling of not being me in the sense of not being tied up and my usual voices in my head, self consciousness, all those things that go on on a daily basis. All of those were out the window and it was this feeling of being totally whole, complete, and still completely me, but realizing nothing else matters." For Ani this altered sense of self and reality manifested in different ways:

It's awesome. ... I feel like I have support... when I'm talking, there's support. ... There's that great saying: *Beware of the thoughts you are having, you're having a conversation with the universe. Your thoughts have power whether you realize it or not.* I feel really supported, that's the biggest thing for me. I ... still reach out to friends and share; but I used to be like, if there's something I'm feeling that's not sitting well I pick up a phone and talk it out. Now I'm able to talk with myself

or the universe, and that's the bubble I'm trying to explain that I created. This place of... safety. I'm always okay; I know I'm always okay because of that experience. ... I'm taken care of. Whether that means I go through hard times, I don't need to feel a connection with another to feel safe. ... I feel safe in the world without validation from others, my safety comes from my connection to the source. I used to reach out for safety and now recognize that I don't need to reach out for validation. ... In needing to connect with a person, it's nice, but there's a feeling of aloneness; I'm not connected and floating out there on my own, which means I need to connect with another human. I can now sit with myself through things and still feel connected, like there's something out there I'm connecting with beyond, not just with a human. ... It's the trust aspect. It's exhausting to constantly be wondering if it's real or not real.

Nanigain also shared that the most important part of his EHE was an altered sense of reality: "What I think, or thought was real, was no longer real. The bounds, the limits of reality I understood before were expanded beyond my normal – or what I assumed or I'd been told is my reality. To understand, to have a glimpse – it's really just a glimpse – of a greater reality that science is now beginning to unfold for us." Celeste described this altered reality as an experience of unshakable truth:

It was the truth... a serum of truth. ... I... did [acid] this summer... the first time in four years. That was really clear then, because it's always the same, what happens to me. I have a moment within the trip where I'm going negative because I get judgmental about the level of actions I'm taking, or not, in my life. I become aware of all the things that are present or not. ... What came as the most powerful

aspect of it [is] it's like I'm receiving messages from God, transmissions, and if I don't listen to them I lose myself. Like meeting your maker, and your maker wants results: 'How have you been doing since last time?' It's about accountability and it's powerful for me. I can't escape it. Like opening a level of consciousness that becomes deleting. I can't pretend, can't fake, can't hide from that place of face to face and consciousness.

Riding the wake of their altered senses, the co-researchers described their EHEs serving as massive breakthroughs.

Breaking through. Another aspect that stood out for the co-researchers was illustrated in their EHEs providing them with knowledge and insight akin to breakthroughs along their personal journeys, especially in experiencing expansive consciousness that provided them with platforms for increased learning and further insights. For Ani, the entirety of her EHE set a breakthrough into motion: "I remember this big feeling of a breakthrough... like the final piece of it that needed to come together." Nanigain described a similar process: "I've watched people... who were cold, lonely, alone, kind of small lives, completely transform after experiencing this. Tap into a part of them that they never knew existed." Celeste's breakthrough came in her understanding self-awareness as necessity: "We're not finished evolving; our intelligence is not static. It's been growing as a result of our self-awareness and technology. That's unique to humans; we're like Gods, inventors... far from fully understanding what we're capable of." Ani explained that her EHE was a rapid breakthrough to realization:

I recognize a lot more because of that mini-episode – it wasn't mini because it really broke through for me – but it's mini because it happens a lot, you just don't

recognize it. It happens so fast at Burning Man. It still happens in life, but the space being held in that container of Burning Man allows for things to happen, to manifest quicker, because of the intention held in that space. ... In... day to day life, it takes maybe a year for your intention. If I look back, I can see my thought process, where I got to, and how they match up.

Nanigain's EHE allowed him to access novel consciousness as his limits of self expanded and he was moved into a sense of assisted development:

It gave me a sense of expansion I had never felt before, into a conscious level much greater than anything I had ever experienced. ... The limits of who I was expanded beyond my skin. I was now a kilometer high. ... We open ourselves in communion with a divine force that helps or assists us in our development. ... I believe we open ourselves up and, when we do this in a very sacred, intentional way, we can receive much more information... a different set of programs we can utilize to operate within. I mean, all matter ultimately is information.

Celeste was also profoundly impacted by this opening into novel consciousness and her augmented ability to understand and learn:

It opens many channels present inside of us, but usually we're operating at one level. I feel they all become open; I become aware on a spiritual, a philosophical, a physical level. It just comes together. ... I'm at my best in that mode. ... I learn better, understand better. ... It's also fragmented, everything gets more intense. The intensity is at the level of the processing, it's like millions of ideas.

As they broke through into novel consciousness and learning states, the co-researchers moved into a realm where they felt healed by their EHEs.

Medicine for the soul. Their EHEs were so profound that the co-researchers described a sense of being healed by them. Nanigan made this explicit: “I remember feeling healed in some ways.” Jennifer described her EHE as healing in that it was “an awakening. A slap over the head like, ‘this is it, do something with it. Now you know, go with it!’” Larry James felt healed by reaching out for help during his EHE:

I sat down in the middle of the road. ... This girl came up... sat down and started talking to me, she asked if I was alright and I said ‘yes,’ but I thought about it and after [saying] yes to the last people... even though I felt like there was a problem, like I was dying... for the first two people I didn’t reach out, didn’t say anything. But this third girl – interesting it was a girl, and [earlier] I felt this presence of a girl – ... immediately I said ‘actually, no I’m not, would you mind sitting with me and talking for a bit?’ She agreed... we talked about what I’d just experienced.

Later, Larry James shared that he had passed on healing to another: “One of my buddies was [at camp] and not having a good time. We meditated back to back. ... He asked me to talk him through experiences he’s having. I gave him insight into how my experience had gone. He seemed, by the end of it, to have more understanding of what he was going through, and things cleared up.” Additionally, upon experiencing healing from their EHEs, the co-researchers also felt affirmed and validated.

It is what it is. The co-researchers shared that another striking aspect of their EHEs was feeling affirmed and validated by them. Ani felt this affirmation as calmness when she “broke down, opened up, and surrendered. Like, I’m done fighting... doubting, questioning it. It was just... calmness.” Larry James felt his prior thoughts and beliefs were affirmed by his EHE: “It was an affirming, ‘this is something serious to consider.’”

And that's not just an empty thought, considering the discoveries we are making on a scientific level with quantum mechanics and quantum physics. It's pointing in that direction, so to deny it, I don't know." Stan Smith's EHE validated the power of things falling into place:

When you feel disconnected from the world things don't happen as easily. When you have that oneness, open, loving everyone as you would love yourself kind of thing, things fall into place. ... Everybody I tried to touch was touched and went on to do something for somebody else. That's the mindset of Shambhala. If the whole world went to Shambhala it would be a very, very different place.

Nanigain also felt validated in both his EHE and his subsequent studies:

I started studying consciousness after [and] following quantum physics. That led me down that path of experience because now, all of the sudden, I've been opened to a different reality than anything I had ever experienced, and wanted explanations. I started searching. ... Through that study realizing all matter is made up of energy which means everything is made of the same thing, just arranged differently. We are consciousness operating these collections of matter pieced together so we can move, see, experience, taste, hear while we are operating within. This is what I've come to know. ... Science is confirming it.

Despite feeling validated by their EHEs the co-researchers also shared some hesitations. Nanigain captured this in explaining that facing and integrating EHEs "takes bravery, it takes guts to go to these places." Ani described working through and integrating her EHEs, with hesitation manifesting in regards to their applicability to others: "I'm still working through [it]. To allow it to shine and walk with it shining,

instead of trying to shine it in everybody's eyes. It's not for everyone." Larry James also shared his hesitance: "[My] jittering [in the interview] was nervousness, I get major stage fright talking about [this]. Especially when it comes to personal stuff that, let's face it, society hasn't acted great on people who have had experiences I described." Once they and their EHEs were affirmed and validated, however, the co-researchers felt compelled to help others and share their experiences.

Igniting others. The second of the most important aspects of the EHEs was expressed by the co-researchers as utilizing their experiences to help others, as well as sharing them with others. For example, Larry James explained: "I was able to talk my friend through his bad situation. I was glad I could. ... I started talking about my experience, everything played out well and I was very happy." Stan Smith was moved by a sense of community, although he struggled in sharing his experience with others who were not perceptive:

The sense of community [was the most important aspect]. I would like to see more of a sense of community in my every day life. I found there was some people in my life that are so negative and close minded to the experience that I've grown apart from [them]. It's sad because you're trying to bring a good message to the people that you love and they shut you out.

In contrast, Celeste described the power of sharing her EHEs and insights:

I share with people around me; they're there as witnesses and people that make it more real, because they give me back a reflection. It's clear that if they weren't enjoying themselves, they would walk away. When I'm like that, I'm really intense. If people are not in tune they can't stand it. ... So when they're staying

with me, I feel like they're on the same trip as me... they will say... I take them with me.

As elucidated, both the context and the qualities of the EHEs were profound in their common manifestations for the co-researchers. Following their EHEs, the co-researchers found themselves grappling with their integration. We will now examine the gifts and impacts of the EHEs as well as the co-researcher's integration processes.

Part 3: The Essential Gifts of the Exceptional Human Experience

This section explicates the transformational effects of the EHEs on the co-researchers and is broken down into four different parts. Part 3.1, *What's Up Is Down*, is comprised of three themes (*Into the Beyond*, *Diving into the Depths*, and *Thrust into What Is*) that explore how the EHEs changed the co-researcher's perceptions. Part 3.2, *This Changes Everything*, is comprised of two themes (*Seek and Ye Shall Receive* and *Augmenting Reality*) that examine the impacts of the EHEs on the co-researcher's lives. Part 3.3, *Now What?*, is comprised of two themes (*Showing Up* and *Continuing the Climb*) that elucidate how the co-researchers acted upon their EHEs. Lastly, part 3.4, *Embracing the EHE*, is comprised of five themes (*Leveraging Awareness*, *Fostering Unity*, *Upping the Ante*, *Dying to the Realization*, and *Bringing the Darkness into the Light*) that explore the process of EHE integration for the co-researchers. Table 3 provides an outline of these themes and sub-themes.

Table 3*Themes of Part 3: The Essential Gifts of the Exceptional Human Experience*

Part	Themes	Sub-themes
3.1 What's Up Is Down	1 Into the Beyond	
	2 Diving into the Depths	
	3 Thrust into <i>What Is</i>	
3.2 This Changes Everything	4 Seek and Ye Shall Receive	
	5 Augmenting Reality	Free flowing connection
		The pilgrimage to the spiritual self
3.3 Now What?	6 Showing Up	Marrying authenticity and connection
		Walking the talk
	7 Continuing the Climb	Owning it
		Already okay
		A second dose of medicine for the soul
3.4 Embracing the EHE	8 Leveraging Awareness	You're on your own
		Deeper, deeper
		Shining the light
3.4 Embracing the EHE	9 Fostering Unity	Pinnacles of communion
		Fanning the ever-present flame
	10 Upping the Ante	Becoming one with the process
		A new adventure
3.4 Embracing the EHE	11 Dying to the Realization	
	12 Bringing the Darkness into the Light	

Part 3.1: What's Up Is Down

The co-researcher's shared three common themes regarding how their perceptions of themselves, others, and life were affected by their EHEs. These included: Into the Beyond, involving the co-researcher's experience of insights beyond their prior

understandings of reality; Diving into the Depths, involving access to deeper knowing and gnosis, as well as knowledge of and ultimate acceptance of self; and Thrust into *What Is*, involving experiences of surrender to life's flow, however it manifests, as well as shifts in their life focus or paths.

Theme 1: Into the beyond. The EHEs provided the co-researchers with a sense that they had tapped into information about reality that was contrary to their prior knowledge and understandings. For example, Stan Smith shared: "I felt like all of this is not real life." Larry James captured his perceptual shift in that his EHE "opened my eyes and... gave plausibility to the experiences I've had." Jennifer also shared: "[The EHE] made me think there's so much more out there; a whole other thing we're not aware of." For example, she described experiencing an entirely different dimension:

I was in this space... it felt more than 3D... no floor or walls, just space. ... It reminded me of *Interstellar*; he's locked in that world and all of it is moving passed. [Carl Sagan] described it saying, 'we live in this 3D world, you can always look down at other dimensions, but can never look up'. ... Being in that world felt like going from 3D and visually seeing 4D. I: Like putting on glasses to look up? R: Yeah, exactly.

Similarly, for Ani, experiencing *more* was paradoxically made ordinary by her EHE: "It changed my perception in that... [the EHE] was the straw that broke the camel's back. ... It made the out of the ordinary, ordinary. ... I used to think of it as magic, and now... from observing, seeing in repeated instances, it just can't be any other way." She added: "My [EHE] took away that 'out-of-ordinariness' of [transcendence]. ... It doesn't seem out of ordinary. ... You're not always in this state of mind... where you don't feel

in your body and you feel one. It's like a sense and knowingness that exists now. ... It feels natural... that transcendence.”

Another paradox involved realizing everything is connected, or one. Larry James explained: “The oneness thing I do feel.” Jennifer expanded upon this:

It changed me, made me realize how we are so connected. ... The people that come into your life and realizing the reasons... you become more in tune with that. ... It relates to Sham, how there is so much love and harmony. Also [having the EHE] at the beginning of the festival put me in the right mindset for the rest of it; I felt in tune with nature and how everything's happening.

Once the co-researcher's perceptions began to shift, they noticed themselves delving deeper into the depths of their realizations.

Theme 2: Diving into the depths. Another perceptual shift involved the co-researchers accessing deeper knowing and gnosis. Ani captured this concisely: “[The EHE is] just informing... you know that feeling when you know?” Similarly, Nanigain described that his EHE and “hallucinogens are gateways that open us to a deeper understanding.” Jennifer's shift occurred in recognizing “each person's purpose and the events that happen in your life – you realize why that happened. That made a huge impact.” Celeste also described the impact of accessing deeper knowing that allowed her to “think differently. ... I could do horrible things others are doing, given a context brought me to suffering or whatever people experienced that gives them a disconnect, a loss of empathy.” Jennifer's EHEs also shifted her into deeper knowing: “If I remembered seeing [another realm] coming into this world, I would believe there is a

purpose for everyone to be here. It's one long experience, but after that it doesn't stop. ... It's hard when you see it all and don't know how to put [it] into words to comprehend."

Part of accessing deeper knowing also granted the co-researchers access to deeper insights and knowledge about themselves that, subsequently, played a pivotal role in promoting the acceptance of self. For Larry James this manifested in realizing "I was not open about things... the EHE opened me up." Jennifer explained: "[The EHE] breaks down those barriers and showed me none of this matters... you are an amazing person and need to do what you need to. A big one was following your intuition." She also described the similar effect of her second EHE: "It was an eye opener to how important it is to keep searching for these answers within yourself." Stan Smith's EHE allowed him to realize a deep sense of disconnection: "We don't know our neighbors... you lock yourself in... segregating yourself from the world. ... There is a lack of spirituality in the world. ... Everyone's so disconnected from each other... in their own little world. ... You should be able to connect with other people."

Nanigain's realization was that "I'm not doing something I should be, holding back my expression, my gift, because of some reason. I started to search for that." He further expounded upon the effect of the EHE on his search:

My perception of who I was expanded, I realized there's a part of me not being explored... my creative essence. I started to look for that thing I was avoiding, not tapping into, or hadn't realized. ... I found it behind my fear. When I asked, what would I do creatively? I couldn't come up with much. I thought, 'what do I fear most creatively?' ... What came was speaking in front of people. It was a difficult realization, 'is this my path? Seriously?' It was scary.

Celeste touched on a similar perceptual shift as she realized:

It's a matter of accepting potential, what you can do. ... I have a hard time loving myself. I've been aware of it... and my relationship with festivals is... my biggest helper. It's therapy. ... I've had a few counsellors, but never felt it was bang on. I keep going back to doing my own thing – it's just taking longer. But, as I keep going, I keep feeling I have more of the cards I need to come full circle.

Opening up to deeper knowledge and insights about themselves and accepting themselves facilitated the co-researchers thrust into life as it presented itself, even if that entailed shifts in their life paths.

Theme 3: Thrust into *what is*. Another shift in perception manifested as the ability to surrender to *what is* and allow the flow of life, however it unfolds – even if that entailed shifts in one's life focus or path. Jennifer captured this in sharing: “[The EHE] relaxed me into going with the flow. I'm so bad for that, I want everyone to be happy, make sure everything is planned correctly.” Additional surrender was nurtured in her second EHE: “Everything seemed perfectly in place, in balance. ... Everything will be okay and you don't have to worry.” After his EHE, Nanigain noticed a shift into surrender and natural unfolding: “I: Was there a sense of knowing *this* is my path? R: It was total reservation, this realization: ‘that's what I have to do? I have to face that?’ Two weeks later I get asked to be in a play, and shook my head at the universe... 12 years later, I'm acting professionally.” Ani also shared that her EHE taught her to surrender: “Control, I work through and feel come up, my ego steps in – but... you let go of the driver's seat and once you do you can drive. Let go and understand, I am not solo,

everything interconnects and happens. Once I step back and let go, I can dive in, understand how things arise and play it out better.”

Such surrender ultimately resulted in the co-researchers experiencing shifts in their life focus or paths. For example, Nanigain shared: “To get out of my comfort zone and express whatever gift I have inside, all of the sudden, became more important. ... The path this has pushed me towards has only deepened, and through continued use of stronger hallucinogens.” Similarly, Jennifer’s EHEs served as a lasting reminder: “Days get stressful, you lose touch with what’s important... forget what really matters. [The EHE] felt like... a permanent reminder of doing it for the rest of your life. I: Has that stuck around? R: Yeah... I’ll think back to that moment... it puts everything into perspective again.” Celeste’s life focus and path shifted in that she felt awakened and called to action:

This Perfect Day [book]... [is about] the planet and future... controlled by one computer. ... Everybody... [receives] treatments... that get rid of sickness, but make people docile. ... They don’t question anything. ... There’s no money, like communism, but everything works because [of the] treatments. There’s a group that secretly meet, get their treatments reduced, that gives them... awakening. ... The parallel is perfect to the world we live in. These [EHEs] and festivals, they’re giving me a heightened sense of awakening and it’s up to me... to do something with that. ... When I talk like this some [people] are not receptive... like ... ‘this is not some spiritual experience, just have fun.’ I don’t share that viewpoint. ... I: It doesn’t have to be *just* a fun experience; it can be *the* experience? R:

Absolutely. It's also putting me at the place of: We must do something; we can't accept the world the way it is. ... I tasted and can see how we *could* be.

After his EHE, Stan Smith was drawn to living differently:

The people in our group have personality traits or obscure skills that... together can accomplish something huge. If we need someone, or a skill... we meet them along the way and they melt into the group. After Sham I felt like... I was going to [buy] a piece of land... create a hippy commune. ... Anyone [could] join as long as you're not destructive or willing to be on the same path in the community. ... We could attain that. ... Everybody in our group had a niche... a butcher... artists, smart people, people that've lived on farms... botanists. We could be self-sustaining. ... The... powers that be... need you to consume; but when you stop, break away, you're so much happier. ... If you had fresh drinking water, food you could grow yourself [and] sustain, and didn't need outside luxuries, we could be happier. ... Start something new... it could be beautiful.

As their life focus and paths shifted, the co-researchers began to feel the impact of the EHEs on their lives in greater magnitude.

Part 3.2: This Changes Everything

The co-researchers experienced their lives changing as a result of their EHEs, and shared two common themes that included: Seek and Ye Shall Receive, that involved seeking answers and attaining new levels of knowledge and understanding; and Augmenting Reality, that involved experiences of expansive growth in different areas.

Theme 4: Seek and ye shall receive. The co-researcher's lives changed in that they began to search for answers and additional information regarding their EHEs. For

example, Larry James shared: “[The EHE is] one piece that is part of such a big story, it’s uncomprehend-able.” In order to better understand her experience, Jennifer “[started] reading more about DMT.” Nanigain shared a similar experience: “I started studying consciousness [and]... following quantum physics. ... Wanting explanations, I started searching.” He added that he is: “Still unfolding and tearing apart at myself to find my true essence. ... It’s difficult, but I am a fearless explorer of this conscious ocean. It’s an introspective minefield to unblock ourselves of programs and imprints set upon us. Ideas of who and what we are, what we’re capable of, have been imprinted on us and now we’re undoing it all through these paths.”

As the co-researchers searched for answers, they attained novel understandings and knowledge that continued to impact their lives. For example, Ani described her EHE as the last step to this new level of understanding:

It helped me. ... Through life I climb these mountains and there’s a... valley. ... Exploring it like, ‘I’ve never seen anything like this, does it exist?’ You spend a lot of time there... then you become informed of something else and start climbing this new mountain, see the plateau and explore. ... Things keep informing. That EHE was my last step up to this plateau and now I can explore. I’m not climbing, trying to peek over; ‘is it real? Should I walk back down?’ I’ve committed; I’m there and I’m exploring it.

Jennifer described a sense of becoming privy to novel understandings:

It changed my life. We left Shambhala and... met up with friends... I could feel the way it had affected me... all these people did not understand what had happened. ... It was a weird feeling... like I had this secret nobody else knew. ...

It makes me realize how trivial a lot of things are. ... It does change you. ... I also find it interesting that you pick up more on synchronicity after.

Nanigain described his EHE as: “This doorway open and floodgate of information has continued to flow to me through multiple experiences. ... Hallucinogenic openings are gateways to a greater reality. I’ve had unbelievable experiences in those realms. ... There’s many levels, different paths, and few are as efficient as this.” The impact of Celeste’s new understandings manifested in her openness to see things as they are: “When I start talking about... how it is, some people can’t take it. ... If you refuse to see the truth as it is, you’re not gonna be put into ‘we need to do something.’ You’re going to be complacent; to accept it. I: Like closing your eyes to it? R: Yeah. I: But if you open them it’s right in front of your face. R: Exactly.” Upon discovering these new understandings, the co-researchers experienced various augmentations of reality through which they continued to notice their lives changing in the wake of their EHEs.

Theme 5: Augmenting reality.

Free flowing connection. A common quality of the EHE producing life changes entailed the co-researchers feeling more open as well as more connected to others. For example, Larry James shared: “People thought I was a little weird. ... It opened me up to not care what people think... opened my mind up.” He added that he also opened to new possibilities: “[EHEs] are strange, but it’s not uncommon for people to have experiences similar to this. They’re happening to more people and that, in and of itself, opens you up to what else could be going on.” Stan Smith explained: “[The EHE] definitely changed my life for the better; it’s opened me up... to people in my life, to situations that present themselves.” Jennifer was moved by her augmented sense of connection: “I felt so

unbelievably happy... I was connected – I would walk outside and feel connected to everything. ... People pick up on what you're thinking about more often. My sister... she'll say or do things within seconds of me thinking it. She's the one I do psychedelics with." Stan Smith also described the impact of his increased ability for connection: "I was very confident in myself after Shambhala. There was a girl... I could feel this energy between us, I acted on it and we started dating. ... After Sham, I could go up to anyone and start a conversation... light people up." Jennifer also shared her sense of openness and duty to connect with others:

I felt very open to everybody. ... Past judgements or feelings... all washed away. Realizing whatever path people had... doesn't matter. What matters is who they are and what they're doing now. Giving them the benefit of the doubt... talking to every person. That's a big thing. Like homeless people... start a conversation. People say, 'have a good night' and turn their back. But now, 'I'll have a conversation with you!' What is it to me, does it waste my time? No. ... It changed me in a big way, you realize everybody's human... deserves to tell their story, be heard and listened to. ... The whole world could be ignoring [them]. You have an obligation to be as much of a listener to them as anyone is to you.

Becoming more open and connected further propelled the co-researchers into a sense of augmented spirituality in their lives.

The pilgrimage to the spiritual self. The co-researchers discussed a sense of sacredness and elevated connection to spirituality in their lives as a result of their EHEs. For Larry James, sacredness manifested in understanding "what I'm experiencing is technically for my eyes only." Jennifer experienced greater spiritual connection in feeling

“like every bit of toxins or bad vibes is washed out of your body.” She also realized the importance of spiritual practices:

I started guided meditations, that helps... realizing and practicing. I read about the brainwaves of people meditating compared to [those] on mushrooms, they have the same type of brain activity. I could totally understand... you're present, lose all thoughts that have been driving you crazy. After [the EHE] you need to keep it up, keep grounding yourself, taking time for yourself.

Stan Smith shared his desire to embrace this enhanced spirituality:

I always knew there was something out there and now I want to be on a spiritual journey... to separate myself from my old life. ... I quit smoking, don't drink, don't do cocaine. ... Those are negative drugs and I feel like mushrooms, LSD, and... MDMA are more spiritual drugs. I stick with those, see how that works out, and if I can keep this going.

The co-researchers' enhanced spirituality and drive to connect to oneself from the foundation of their novel understandings also resulted in a vast sense of introspection.

Piercing the veil. The co-researchers experienced a greater depth of introspection as a result of their EHEs. For example, Larry James felt a sense of humility: “Although I had that experience, [feeling like] God, it's a humbling. To know [other places/ dimensions], they're there, whether physically or not... the fact that the mind can go there is another dimension on its own.” In Nanigain's subsequent introspection, he shared: “[I'm] still battling all those fears [revealed during the EHE].” Jennifer realized the value of greater introspection:

I [said] to my sister, ‘I have this uneasy feeling, don’t feel happy. I’m enjoying [school], love my friends, I have nothing to be unhappy about.’ She’s like, ‘take time for yourself, do some introspection.’ So, I did. ... Take the [EHEs] you have... and figure out what it is about it that made it so great and personal... realize how it changed you and keep that part of you going.

Jennifer also described her urge to further engage in introspection after her EHE: “You feel amazing in yourself. ... It makes you realize how important it is to focus on you, your personal growth and experience. ... It was an eye opener to how important it is to keep searching for these answers within yourself. ... All I wanted to do was start developing myself... on a day to day basis.” Stan Smith’s amplified introspection helped him re-evaluate his actions toward others, but he was aware of his struggles to change:

I did [MDMA] and freaked because usually it’s a loving drug, fun, always smiling. ... [I] hallucinated a situation that made me re-think how I treat people, how people see me. ... It affected me well after the drugs had worn off. ... It was a good learning experience to re-set your ego and bring you to baseline. ... Like, ‘I have to change my life in a positive way.’ I slip, forget, and may be stuck in a moment. [At my job] people are not good to each other. ... I try and stay away from it. It’s hard. I go out for two weeks, come back for a week, and spend days reintegrating into home life. Then, the first days at work are trying to keep that, but I get sucked back into the lifestyle.

Celeste learned to follow her intuition via her introspection: “[The environment is] the place I feel, in practicality, we can make changes. It’s where there is most urgency.” She also applied her introspective insights to her interests: “I’ve become

selective. My path as a dancer has evolved... in realms of conscious dancing. We have events... morning dances... those I go to now.” Another vital part of her introspection involved reconnecting to her child spirit: “I was sarcastic, pessimistic, and cynical before the festivals. ... Now I... believe that we can change things and the only way... is by believing it. That’s where the child spirit is important; with [it], we believe in playing again. The action of doing this, [undoes] the other reality of not doing that.”

Experiencing life changes was only one transformative aspect of the EHEs, while another involved acting upon their EHEs and insights in various ways.

Part 3.3: Now What?

As illuminated, being moved by an EHE can be an extremely powerful experience that shifts one’s perceptions, understandings, and provides a new place from which one identifies and interacts with the world. As such, the co-researchers acting on their EHEs was an important part of their integration process, which we will examine in more detail in part 3.4. As their lives changed, the co-researchers were moved to acting upon their EHEs and shared two common themes that included: Showing Up, that involved the ways in which they connected to themselves and others, and took physical action in the world outside the festival experience; and Continuing the Climb, that involved the cultivation of independence and responsibility which led to acceptance of themselves and life as it presented itself and facilitated the search for further healing.

Theme 6: Showing up.

Marrying authenticity and connection. In acting upon their EHEs, the co-researchers felt more able to connect to and act from a place of their true, authentic selves. For example, Jennifer shared: “I became in touch with my self... realize the

person you've become... everything you've done so far, you deserve to... keep doing you." Stan Smith described acting upon his true self: "Trying to bring people into my heart, [the EHE] was positive [for] that. ... I was open; open arms, loving, smiling all the time. My face hurt from smiling. I would wake up before my alarm, which never happened before." Ani shared sensing "the centeredness with which I approach things. I'm more sensitive to my body, how it feels, and can sense when I'm connecting or not. Even if I want to connect, it doesn't mean I can connect in that way." Nanigain expressed the connection and action that came "after intense hallucinogenic experience. I had this peace, a greater sense of being and my connection to the world, to life. It was always at odds with law or norms. I've never been one to buy into that... I set aside what's right or wrong and move toward what I know is right for me." For Celeste, a synchronistic connection to others who shared her vision, and helped her act upon it, manifested:

I met a woman... brewing the same idea. ... In my opinion, life is God; all of us together are part of that. ... There's a conspiracy for life to thrive... if you let it; life and all its form... keeps maximizing living. ... Things die, nourish the soil, and are born again. When we put ourselves to the service of finding solutions we come across other pieces of the puzzle to help us be what we can to change the world. Her and I met because we both wanted the same thing! ... I get excited saying this and your research... it fits exactly what I'm describing. ... I was at a high level of wanting to put my energy to the greater good. I'm coming back there and bang! I found you! You're activating me because you're like me... at the surface of, 'what can we do with this?'

Stan Smith shared his urge to connect with others, and his struggles in doing so:

After Shambhala I was trying to live to do good things for others. ... People in my life... were ungrateful... for the things I was trying to do. But strangers... were very grateful. You could see you'd touched their lives. ... 'You have a beautiful energy,' corny, but it brings smiles to people's faces. ... On a personal level, I would do more physical [things]: [My coworkers came] off night shift... I'm like, 'I'll clean your truck.' They're like, 'thanks, we'll hit you back.' I was like, 'just do something for somebody else.' ... I asked them after and they said they didn't do anything. I feel like some of those things are taken for granted.

By acting in ways that allowed connection to their true, authentic selves the co-researchers experienced new, meaningful connections forming in their lives. Ani described expanded awareness around the connection process: "[I had] more of an understanding of the importance of connection. ... If there's something off as I'm trying to connect... like praying, I can feel the gap clearly." Larry James shared his shift in connections: "[I] became more open with pretty much anything. It helped my relationship; I was able to open up to her more and she [gained] better understanding of me, so have my friends." Stan Smith spoke of replacing old relationships with new ones: "I've found that you... don't hang out [with certain people] as much... because they don't serve you, and somebody else comes into the picture." Jennifer also shared a loss of old connections, stressing the importance of new, more meaningful and spiritually fulfilling connections: "I lost a few friends... but after [the EHE] you realize if those people don't have the same interests or goals as you... you need to act on friends who develop you spiritually [and] intellectually. ... Those friends knew, were able to come to terms, see how I've changed, and understand that's not their path." As elucidated,

creating new, meaningful connections entailed a level of action on the part of the co-researchers and they described continuing this trend of action.

Walking the talk. An integral aspect of taking physical action in the world entailed the co-researchers applying their insights to contexts outside of the festival experience. For example, Stan Smith was able to take “the energy with me and that was, in itself, a religious experience; what I’ve been looking for.” Celeste described applying her insights: “[I believe] festivals could be full-time, real life. It’s a reality I want to feed; I want it to take over.” Jennifer also captured the importance of embodying the festival full-time: “People say, ‘I can’t wait until I’m home’ and count down the days. People forget to incorporate this into every day life. ... It’s important to not keep waiting for the next festival to feel that way. It’s a transformational festival to transform your life, not just your weekend.” She also shared that her EHEs provided her with grounding, focus, and synchronicity in her life apart from the festivals: “If you pay attention to how you are after any psychedelic, you pick up on how things fall into place. ... If my life is falling out of sorts, it’s a realization to take time, get back into being grounded and more aware. As soon as I focus on that life is much easier.”

Some of Stan Smith’s realizations were not interpreted as positive: “A lot of things in life are not important. ... Money: It’s a tool and if you use all your energy to get [it] you’re doing more harm than good. To realize you need it and don’t at the same time is disheartening.” He also divulged awareness in applying his insights to every day living in order to maintain them: “I’ve lost the Shambhala mentality. ... I should get into meditation or yoga. I’ve been avoiding... being lazy. I should be doing that because it’s

giving me a feeling I want back. I miss it, I feel like I connect with people, express myself better, when I'm in that mindset. Totally changed my life.”

Nanigain described the impact of the EHE on his life as it continues to unfold:

Did it change it for the better? I don't know; it definitely made it more interesting.

... It's still unfolding... I'm refining that and it may have to do with what we're talking about; what I've come to know; how I've developed through fears and these experiences; and the correlations in science, philosophy, and drug use. This melting of everything together. I grew up in a catholic school and see the teachings of Jesus and how they even correlate. The study of consciousness is wide open and still unfolding; you match it with quantum physics and realize everything is made of the exact same thing arranged differently, that 99.9998% of it is space, is nothing; that's what we are, we are mostly made of nothing.

The co-researchers were also able to translate their insights into taking physical action in the world in the wake of their EHEs. For example, Nanigain shared that his EHE led him to “work with plant medicine.” Celeste also put her insights into action: “[I] quit my job. I wanted to put all my time into figuring out what can I do... [to] help change things on the planet.” She further expressed: “[I] just wasn't the same anymore. ... I spent the whole winter dancing every [weekend] with friends and I don't even like bars!” Stan Smith also discussed applying his insights: “I used to... drink excessively and do cocaine all the time. It was detrimental. ... After Sham, I don't care to touch it. ... I almost never drink anymore.” He also noticed another effect on his life and behaviors:

I've never had the confidence to be myself, speak up for myself. I've always thought of myself as a follower [of] more confident people. ... After Shambhala I

was trying to lead, be more aggressive [in] certain situations. The guys in my group that didn't go to Sham, they're like, 'what has gotten into you!?' I couldn't explain it. It's left me a bit, but I still feel it from time to time where I grab the reins and run with the situation.

Ani observed that her "vocabulary shifted. Like: 'the car I drive' rather than 'my car.'" Larry James noticed his desire to share: "[The EHE] opened me up. I wouldn't have talked about the stories... wouldn't have opened up about that, would have seen that as something that should [be] kept personal. But... they're not that odd." Celeste shared many life changes (e.g., taking action at festivals, vocational changes, research, and activism) that involved physical action in the world:

[Picking up garbage at festivals] has become a tradition. ... After Sham [I] quit my job... withdrew all of my retirement savings... focusing on how can I help the world? How can I put my potential, intelligence, awareness, my everything, to change the world? My first goal was to... read everything about climate change and the environment. ... The vision was the pilgrimage... to not use fossil fuels... to go across Canada on bicycles and we did it.

Stan Smith noticed changes in his dietary habits: "[I would] make breakfast – which I never used to. I wouldn't cook, would eat fast food and [made] unhealthy choices. If you take care of your body it takes care of you." Despite making physical changes, he also shared: "I think [that] right after Shambhala if I would have quit my job – found something I was happy doing – I could have kept that [emotional/spiritual connectedness] feeling going." The co-researchers continued to act on their EHEs by pushing themselves to maintain their journeys of change and integration.

Theme 7: Continuing the climb.

Owning it. In acting on their EHEs, it was important for the co-researchers to cultivate independence and take responsibility for their lives, thoughts, etc. Jennifer captured this concisely: “[The EHE] showed me I don’t need to depend on other people.” Stan Smith realized his need to take responsibility in order to cultivate healthier relationships: “I have a problem cutting people out of my life, I feel like there’s good in all people and you should give people 50 chances to redeem themselves. ... I should be more conscious of that.” Nanigain confirmed his taking responsibility in that “these moments could be challenging and open realizations about myself I may not like, but have to face.” He also revealed the importance of taking responsibility in sharing:

There was always this sense of wellbeing after and I could never see it in a bad light. It attracted me to deeper experiences... to see how I’ve manifested all [the trauma] in my life; taking full responsibility for all of it. That has unlocked the beauty in it all. When I take full responsibility for the condition my life is in, absolutely everything, I’m in control; I’m the creator and no longer have exterior forces playing upon me in a negative way. I realize I am calling it all to me.

For Celeste, taking responsibility meant acting upon her urge to “present my ideas to the collective, find who’s thinking the same... got the same hunch. I know I’m not alone. I have original ideas, they keep coming. The most potent place to get these ideas is the festivals.” Ani also expounded upon her sense of independence and responsibility:

I’m continuing to learn that [the EHE] is sacred. I’ve always been like if I know something, everybody needs to know; if this is helping me and it feels good, you need this too! It’s been a journey to keep it to myself because... if you keep

offering your jewel, what you know, and people don't take it, it loses its shine.

I'm learning to lead by example, instead of trying to impart it. ... Allow it to shine, walk with it shining, instead of trying to shine it in everybody's eyes. ...

The biggest kaboom! for me was at 25 when everything shattered and reconnected itself... that plateau shifted. How I integrate now is... such a difference. [I]

compare [to] how I used to operate. ... A big one is a sense of responsibility. If I truly trust that our thoughts have that much capacity for change... I need to take responsibility for all of my thoughts and how I show up. ... I asked for that,

connected, and wanted it. ... I: A falling into and opening up of trust and

understanding that aspect of it? R: Yeah, that... I am connecting to something and

what I'm putting out there, the energy, love, desire... is being received... and

transmitted in whichever way it's meant to. I may never see the change, but trust

that it does, at some capacity, help transform. ... There's constant reminders.

Cultivating independence also involved less judgement of and comparing to

others, and a subsequent shift in obligations to oneself and others. For example, Ani

shared: "Burning Man reminds me there are [like-minded] people and for me to be less

judgmental; trusting that it's developing, it's happening." Jennifer also described this:

What I acted on after [the EHE] was realizing I have done so much and need to

worry less about what other people are doing; stop comparing achievements,

goals, or lives to mine. I [started] caring more about myself and my interests, in

the sense that I shouldn't worry what other people are thinking. Or, if people [ask]

you to do something and you don't want to, but feel like you should, you're not

obligated. It doesn't mean to... not show up if friends need you. ... It's amazingly better, I don't feel obligated to do things I no longer have interest for.

Upon realizing the importance of independence and taking responsibility, the co-researchers continued to act on their EHEs as they were better equipped to accept themselves and life as it presented itself.

Already okay. The co-researchers described acting upon the acceptance of self and life as it presents itself, which included facing the realizations from their EHEs. Jennifer experienced this as a sense of already being okay: "People... think when... I get married... have this job, I'll have my life together. Always looking for that next step to really be you. ... This epiphany, 'me, now, is amazing!'" Ani faced the realizations from her EHEs in trusting her connections, functioning from a place of less striving/doing, and sitting with her feelings. She also discussed the importance of accepting *what is* in life no matter how it manifests, without adding judgments or labels:

When I was in India, doing meditation, there was monks... it was important for [them]. It's vibration, all our vibrations, and they're bringing up the vibration. The vibration they're offering, this love, is important and plays a role in everything, in all of us. These things need to balance when you have vibrations of a negative nature. ... People meditating are not doing nothing. I do that thought process, praying, and something comes up. ... I know I'm able to, through my thought-power, connect. There's trust that the energy I'm putting out is going somewhere, something's happening. If I felt overwhelming love for a friend, I... would text them. ... There's nothing wrong with it, but I didn't trust I could sit with this feeling and send them love. Now I can, that's shifted. I no longer feel the need to

spend energy to convince people. I trust I'm putting it out there, it gets received, and that's it. ... Caught in material getting things done, as opposed to immaterial ... thought and trust. ... Now I work with both. I need to make things happen on a physical level, but I also have a responsibility. ... I was at a pub and... left my purse... I have a hard time saying, 'my purse was stolen.' Because there's this 'somebody wronged me'. ... I think with thought, intention, karma, energy. I've done things poorly, used to shoplift... it's [not] tit for tat... but I've lied... and I need to feel what it's like to lose things. ... The whole, somebody stole and wronged me, as opposed to this is how things fell, how things came to be.

Similarly, for Nanigain, facing his realizations facilitated the allowance of all aspects of life:

When you explore [beauty/light and darkness/shadow] avenues, we can stay in our safe place, cruise through our lives... it can be a little bit happy and a little bit sad. Or, you can search for greater understanding, greater knowing. When you open those doors you're not just opening to all this beauty, you're opening to all the darkness within the human condition, the human experience. We carry this lineage of darkness... handed down from [generations]. ... When you see it clearly, you understand the darkness is happening for you as well, then there's a transformation. It could take years to figure out. One of my greatest gifts was getting stabbed in the face, it took 23 years to realize that.

Transformed through their EHEs to accept themselves, their realizations, and life as it unfolds, the co-researcher's continued their healing journeys.

A second dose of medicine for the soul. Another way the co-researchers acted upon their EHEs was through maintaining their healing journeys. For Nanigain, healing manifested in deeper understandings of his past addictions: “My path of learning has been equally beautiful as dark. That was part of my path... certain addictions in my life have served me.” Celeste also described the impact and importance of the sustained healing process: “We choose to activate our energy to facilitate our own healing, to defeat things that prevent us from succeeding. I’m not talking in terms of society’s success, I’m talking: Are we going to survive this planet, to bring together what’s necessary to make the changes?” Stan Smith sought to pass healing on to others by sharing the book that helped him integrate his EHE: “I got 6 [copies of the book]... and handed [them] out... around and outside the group.” He also described engaging in additional healing practices: “Mushroom parties, where everybody will... trip and talk about philosophy. ... When it’s an acid, mushroom, or MDMA party you’re giving people your energy, love, and you’re receiving the same, if not *more*, back. You feel energized... I always feel a connective energy.” Another way he elevated his healing was through cultivating balance in all domains of human experience:

When you’re depressed and unsure of yourself, you know something’s not right... out of balance. Your spirituality, mind, heart, and body are all connected. Heart: If you go through a break up, that’s out of whack. ... Body: If you’re putting in bad food and not getting proper exercise, that’s out. If you’re shut off to your spiritual side, that’s out. You need all to be truly happy. I understand because I was eating well, conscious of what was going into my body... I was always moving, on the go. ... That let my spiritual side come out and beam through me.

The co-researchers were moved to act upon their EHEs by continuing their healing journeys, an integral part of which entailed integrating their EHEs and insights.

Part 3.4: Embracing the EHE

As aforementioned, acting upon the EHEs was an aspect of integration; however, directed, conscious integration comprised an entirely separate part of the interviews. Before moving on to the themes of integration, the co-researchers shared about the lengthy integration process and what it entailed for them. For example, Jennifer divulged that she was told by her “spiritual psychologist: ‘This is going to be a lonely part of your life, you’re going to realize how many people are not with you on this.’ It’s true, but you realize you’re so much happier.” Ani shared: “It took me a while to bring it all together. I was trying to reject the Western world, the way things were, and not accept it.” Stan Smith imparted his struggle maintaining the feelings he had after his EHEs:

The feeling from Shambhala was very emotional and spiritual for two months after. People noticed, ‘you’re different, it’s not a bad thing but we miss the old Stan.’ It was more familiar, what they knew. In a sense I fell back into that. ... If I would have quit my job, moved to the Kootenays, I could have started a new life. But it’s hard to keep that feeling. ... It’s depressing almost.

There were five common themes of integration that included: Leveraging Awareness, involving cultivating an independent process and additional explorations of the self and the EHEs; Fostering Unity, involving connection and novel communication, various forms of support, and sharing the EHEs; Upping the Ante, involving refining balance and utilizing meditation; Dying to the Realization, involving surrender to the integration process and the life changes it sparked; and Bringing the Darkness into the

Light, which allowed the co-researcher space to share anything else that came up for them and involved a discussion of the shadow.

Theme 8: Leveraging awareness.

You're on your own. The co-researchers discussed integrating their EHEs independently, on their own. For example, Ani shared: "It's been a process on its own. When things first shifted, it was difficult. I felt confused, disconnected, alone. I felt connected, like everything was one, but in society... like, 'what is going on?' It was bizarre. I had no clue." When asked, both Larry James and Nanigain also noted that their processes of integration were independent in that they did not seek out counselling or guidance along the way. Despite seeking help with integration, Jennifer revealed the importance of personal understanding:

It has to be personal. If [someone else] tried to open me up to this, it would have never happened. I'm a realist and need factual grounding before I build any belief. I take on ideas... to guide my... personal growth. I wouldn't say I'm a full-blown spiritual person who does crystal healing. I do what works for me and continue to follow this path that has shown positive changes in my life. It's about research, finding that niche that sparks your interest and following that. If someone was going to go to Sham and see this, that's one thing, but because I had a personal awakening beforehand it made it much greater because so many walls had come down. I had been to Sham years before and it was not the same, I could have never gone back again. I was not blown away. Going through [the personal awakening] and then going to Sham, one step after another, brought it all together.

Understanding and paving their own way along their personal, independent paths toward integration also involved greater understandings of themselves.

Deeper, deeper. Another vital part of the integration process involved the co-researchers better understanding themselves through additional, deeper exploration. For example, Nanigain shared: “My interest in understanding life and my studies [helped integrate the EHEs].” Larry James imparted that his increased “understanding... made it easier to communicate with people.” Jennifer noticed her elevated understandings helped her feel more confident:

I realized I communicate different than other people. How I think I’m explaining things, how I expect things to happen, other people don’t work the same way.

Shambhala also instilled in me this confidence. No one works the same way I do, but it doesn’t mean I’m defaulted in any way. ... Other ways I’ve integrated [the EHE] into my life is finding the positive about things on a day to day basis.

Greater understandings and additional exploration led Celeste to realize the blocks holding her back from fully integrating her EHEs:

I feel shame about allowing myself to flow at that level of... perfection... because of my struggles loving myself. I haven’t been able to put all of my energy into pushing that so I really refine my art, my craft. ... When I’m sewing, it’s like I’m dancing, like I’m on LSD. ... I wish I was able to write at the same time. The ideas that come are just bang! ... I need find a way to do it because... when talking about the festivals, how do I bring this into reality, this is where I’m at.

Jennifer spoke to integrating greater understandings of herself and stressed the importance of additional exploration: “I had to do a lot of journal writing after [the EHE].

... People need to be mentally stable before they take [DMT]. Could be a bad trip, but that might be what they need to figure their shit out.” Nanigain described his integration process through exploration and understanding:

Use of hallucinogens has brought me deeper understandings of who I am, what I’m holding onto that doesn’t serve me. As I let go... I clear my experience, my creation, moment by moment. We have filters; our bodies, experience of humanness, and experience of who we are is imprinted by generational [and] society imprinting – all these programs that we are we all buy into. It’s happening for a reason; we need it to happen... but we have to function. We want to experience it all... that’s why we created it all. As information comes through me or to me... through my food, media, friends and family; what I choose to accept... it comes through this filter that... I have set upon me, have accepted. As I lift the filters that no longer serve me, and pull these negative ideas away from who I am, realizing that they’re mine. I take full responsibility for the guy who stabbed me, I’ve been blaming him for 20 years for doing something to me. He only did [it] in that moment, he didn’t do it for 20 years. The other years I was doing it to me... holding onto this pain... stating to the world: ‘This is who I am, this pain. Look at me I’m suffering, I’m a victim.’ Once I realized that’s mine, I realized I’m doing this to me. I am sending this information out into the world and it’s shining back at me saying, ‘yes, you are a victim.’ Life is always shining back, ‘yes,’ because you are creating it. ... It’s one giant mirror. One beautiful, unbelievable mirror.

Upon reaching understandings of themselves via additional exploration, the co-researchers attained integration through knowledge and information about their EHEs.

Shining the light. All of the co-researchers were drawn to seek additional knowledge and information regarding their EHEs and found their interests shifting to accommodate the process as they worked towards integration. For example, Larry James noticed his interests shift and deepen to accommodate his EHEs: “[Before the EHE] I had the idea of other universes and time travel. ... Shambhala amplified it... was what sparked the heavy studying, cause I wanted to know more.” Similarly, Jennifer described: “I found this interest for... spirituality, the scientific aspect, and philosophy. You have to keep up those interests. When I stop reading because I get too busy, [I] feel lost.” Her interests further expanded following her second EHE:

It’s hard to find information on [DMT]... I want to know what it’s all about because nobody has the answer. ... I picked up... ‘DMT and the Soul Prophecy.’ I searched for books... there’s not much. ... I wanted to know how it relates to spirituality. This book... he compares his research with DMT and his participants’ visions... with the Hebrew Bible. ... I’m hoping it explains the spiritual side.

Ani described seeking knowledge to integrate her EHEs: “I’ve followed my callings, my heart, like ‘go to India.’ When I got there... I was like ‘there’s other people in the world... a lot of them, who have experienced the same thing. ... I’m home. This is real.’ That was another huge breakthrough... me integrating what I learned because it’s real.” She also shared: “[I] read ‘The Power of Now,’ that was my first hint about the observer. I was living in a state of observing, that helped me understand.” Larry James described trying “to reach out to a physicist in Australia. He wanted more mathematical stuff than I could... voice. Said if I could formulate whatever question I had, I could ask, but I could never figure out what question. ... I’ve mentioned it a couple of times online.”

Similarly, Nanigain shared he has “been studying online. ... I want to know more about the human condition, the humanness of life, and I realize that it’s all energy; that was key.” Nanigain further described the process of integrating prior understandings with new understandings gleaned from his EHEs via his interests and studies:

Everything is made of the exact same stuff that’s floating around in outer space, we’ve all organized it. ... You were on earth billions of years ago, but...we were one celled organisms. ... That’s all there was, no plants, trees, nothing. ... We got bored of that and called something else to us... in the form of challenge... of conditions changing; we had to start grouping together. Through the billions of possible arrangements of those cells, millions of years later, we have come up with this design: Humanity. ... I believe it’s a type of programming that was given. ... When our systems were ready to accept, when our bodies came to a point where we can allow that programming to work within us, that sent us on a whole other path.

Celeste explained that her creative interests were fuel for her EHE integration: [What] brings us back to connect to our inner child, to connect authentically with others, [is] creativity. ... Creativity is present as soon as we’re putting love into what we do; through our beingness everything is a creative act. Creative force... it’s living. When we connect... it’s fuel and has no limit. Your relationship to everything becomes creative. I started sewing... creating the platform for the most powerful therapy. ... That’s the side that’s more individual. ... I do this passionately because I love it, but my passion is my life. My next step is like the work you’re doing. I’ve got the same hunch... these festivals are so powerful.

Stan Smith described pursuing knowledge to understand and integrate his EHEs: I found [the book ‘The Celestine Prophecy’]. ... I swore at it... ‘get the fuck out of here, book. This is too strange.’ Parts reminded me of the Sham experience... seeing coincidences in your world, your life, and putting those together. When you’re full of the energy after Sham [the synchronicities were] happening six times a day, leading me into other situations where I would have these experiences. [The book] speaks about filling yourself with the energy from your surroundings and it’s going to lead you into those situations.

Understanding was one important component that allowed for EHE integration, but another involved the co-researchers connecting in various ways.

Theme 9: Fostering unity.

Pinnacles of communion. Connection and learning to communicate with others in new ways was an integral part of the co-researcher’s integration processes. For example, Jennifer shared:

I have the luxury of living with my sister, who has the same interests. Someone [to] watch documentaries and read articles about scientific progress that relates to spirituality... to share that conversation with, is huge. Some people don’t have that... where they can talk about their feelings in a spiritual way and have someone understand. That’s one great thing about Sham, you meet people who are the same and keep that up. I couldn’t imagine how tough a spiritual journey would be for people who don’t have a support system.

Jennifer also explained how thoughtful communication helped in “taking [my new understandings of self] on a daily basis – taking a step back to realize everyone

communicates differently. Every day I reword how I say things, watch how things come off, or when people express things toward me, realizing they probably don't mean it in certain ways." Larry James shared: "I'm able to communicate with friends and family more. ... Places like work, I'm able to converse with people I might not get along with." Stan Smith shifted his communication by endeavoring to "give everybody the best experience I could. ... After Shambhala there were some people who were sick of me, with all the positive vibes. I: So a big part of the integration process was spreading the love you had experienced? R: Yeah."

In addition to connecting and finding new ways to communicate with others, the co-researchers also found integration through synchronistic support, inner intention, and guidance. For example, Stan Smith shared: "I kept to my Sham group... and people I knew, spiritually, were on another level; I knew they would get it. I took a lot of advice from them." Jennifer shared insight found through depression and the synchronicity of coming across material to explain her EHEs:

I realized how unhappy I was. ... Everyone is depressed at some point, but it was one of those defining moments: 'I cannot keep feeling like this for the rest of my life.' In a bookstore, we were talking about [judging] a book by its cover... I was like, 'like that book?' I pointed to a book in self-help. [My friend] was like, 'I've read that book, it helped me change my life.' ... I read it and it... talked about the science behind [EHEs] and that's what really got me.

Though Ani did not actively seek help to integrate her EHEs, she felt a sense of inner intention supporting her: "It's the same as [the EHE], this inner intention that's there... of where I'm going, what I believe, and that guides me. It's like [the EHE] was a

mini-episode of what happens a lot of the time.” In contrast, Celeste shared searching for a mentor, and highlighted that the support of others and programming at festivals made her integration process easier:

I’ve been calling for someone, sending the message to the universe. ... I strive with that kind of relationship. I’m longing for a mentor. Everybody needs [one]. ... In a perfect world... it would be like [everyone seeing a counsellor]. ... It doesn’t mean you have problems, but would be a place you know [is] there. Shambhala... Burning Man [do] that. We’re there for each other. At Shambhala there’s the Sanctuary. I adore that, because when you know it’s there... you recognize when you need that service.

Celeste also disclosed guidance she had along her journey of integration:

[I have] multiple gurus. A lot of people I hold in high esteem and they’re guiding me. ... I used to have one person, we fell in love... he’s very spiritual. [We] met at my first Burning Man... were intimately connected for three years. ... I consider him like my guru – I wouldn’t be who I am without him. I’ve learned so much through him.

Similarly, Ani described the importance of finding a specific type of guidance:

I saw a therapist from an existential, non-dual perspective; what a difference... to operate from that place. [She] understands this is who I am, where I operate from and from there work with me. That’s a *huge* difference. ... That helps me integrate because when she is guiding me through things, I use this whole other space that this person can relate to. If the person guiding me to help myself can’t relate, it narrows down my tools. I: Because an entire aspect of your experience

is... not understood? R: Yeah and then I can't use that... I want to come from a place of constantly practicing that we are one, non-duality. It's so cool... to have a therapist understand that and help in that process... to process things.

Jennifer also shared the impact of spiritual guidance along her journey:

[The spiritual psychologist's] help with [integration] was good. Like finding out what your dominant chakra was, [that] was the most important thing. ... It shows your innate personality, what you unconsciously do, the way you interact, why you feel certain ways. She puts it into perspective. ... I have an amazing family, friends – like, 'I shouldn't be feeling this way.' But she has you sit and meditate through. Asked me about my mom... like, 'I don't know, when I was 8 years old we had that tornado but... I was not traumatized.' ... I'm explaining... being outside and my mom's sweater in the wind, like, 'I ruined [it], she told me not to.' ... Boom! Mommy issues. ... No one would have [figured] that out. I didn't. I didn't want to tell the story.

Acquiring various forms of support along the road to integration was important and also entailed the co-researchers sharing and realizing the EHEs' universal nature.

Fanning the ever-present flame. In order to integrate, it was also important for the co-researchers to share their EHEs and realize their universal nature: That they were not alone in their experiences. For example, Ani explained that upon connecting with individuals in India it was “comforting knowing it's not just me having these experiences of oneness and non-duality. That helped me integrate.” Larry James highlighted the importance of sharing his EHEs: “These stories, talking about this, touches home for people... and can, in and of itself, spark intense feelings... These [EHEs] aren't just

things you keep to yourself, because they could mean much more to somebody. ... After getting that all out, that jittery feeling [of nervousness] is gone... the leftover feeling is excitement.” During our conversation, Celeste realized the impact of sharing through this research project: “I: This, indirectly, is you putting this out there, in writing, through me. R: Absolutely. I: It’s beautiful, because it’s just a happening and it’s the first step. R: Totally. It is.” Similarly, Stan Smith shared: “Thank you for letting me be a part of this... [it] has energized me... I’m gonna happy cry. I’m going to think back on this and have a good one.” Stan Smith also described sharing his EHEs and difficulties he encountered:

I read [The Celestine Prophecy], gave it away to pass it on to other people. Also, people closest to me that weren’t lucky enough to go to Shambhala, I tried to explain what had happened. ... You get people who don’t want it at all and bring you down on your experience by being negative towards [it]. Trying to share it with them... it’s not a good time. People like being miserable; that’s what they know, what they love. That was one of the biggest lessons somebody was trying to teach me... like, ‘it’s awesome you’re doing this, but not everybody wants to hear it. ... I love that you’re so positive, but people at work are not going to get what you’re saying... [are] going to be negative towards you; they don’t get it and might never and that’s fine, they don’t want to.’ But he said, ‘for you to try and turn them into what you want them to be is not gonna happen.’

Connecting and sharing played an important role in integrating the EHEs, while another involved a sense of upping the ante through additional integrative processes.

Theme 10: Upping the ante. Balance was an integral part of augmenting the co-researcher’s integration processes. For example, Celeste shared her insight regarding

balance: “It’s a fluctuation. ... My reality is: I have to pay bills. I’ve been a workaholic... it doesn’t allow room for other things.” Stan Smith cultivated balance in various domains: “[I] quit smoking, drinking, tried to be... the best Stan Smith I could. And hoped that would rub off on others.” Ani also stressed the importance of balance along her journey:

I was living in a state of observing that helped me understand. ... To watch how pulled I get with society, ways of the western world, and also stay balanced. To stay balanced between spiritual stuff and participating in society, that’s been a huge integration for me. Burning Man helps... because you go, experience, and see these people go back into the world and it puts more trust for me. ... I’ll be doubtful that people are in the same frame of mind, have the same feeling of non-duality... that’s essentially what it is. Burning Man reminds that some people have the balance, they are functioning day to day and it’s just acceptance. Functioning here with their spiritual selves.

While balance helped to augment the integration process, meditative practices also played an important role. Larry James shared his hesitance in engaging in “meditation. I don’t do it as often... I do it on occasion, just not on a daily basis because I don’t want to invoke that much [in terms of lucid dreams] yet.” For Celeste, meditation involved “working on visualizing that what I’m doing right now in my life is so that I [become disciplined in integrating knowledge from festivals into daily living].” Jennifer also shared the impact of daily meditation:

Meditation does help. ... I am busy and if I want to relax I’m not going to sit in my room and think about nothing. I wanna do something about it! ... On a daily basis, I focus on breathing. That’s a big thing; if you can’t meditate that’s fine, but

taking a few minutes every day. When I get up I take 10 full deep breaths, through the stomach. It's amazing what that does for anxiety and stress.

After bolstering their integration processes, the co-researchers moved to a place of being able to surrender to the effects of the EHE that further aided with integration.

Theme 11: Dying to the realization.

Becoming one with the process. Surrendering to the process was also a vital part of integrating their EHEs and realizations. Nanigain illustrated its importance: "There's this divine essence that flows through everything. ... We don't consciously beat our hearts, our body does. We cruise around in bags of meat and bone to experience... all of it. Not just the good. You couldn't know good if you didn't have anything to experience it against. You have to experience the bad." He elaborated "[what helps integrate is] my willingness to try something different, a new experience... and information given through these experiences from outside myself." He also framed surrender in the context of the festivals: "Do you wish to give up something, look for a better way, are you willing to give up control of your situation? That's what going to these [festivals] is about. ... You have to let go to find something new. Let go of this reality, because there's a whole other reality that can be."

For Ani part of the surrender process was "integrating the magic into being, not magic, but real. ... I: Like the non-dual? It's all one and the same; the ordinary *is* the non-ordinary. ... There's no distinction? R: Yes!" Celeste connected to surrender in the context of "the arrogance to think that we know better [as a human race]. ... It's about becoming one with the truth of where we're at." She also described giving herself over to the integration process:

I want to understand better so I can explain it better to others. When I explain things coming from the center, like when I'm in the festival and talk about [it], it's really channeling. I'm not controlling what I'm saying! I lend myself to the elements, the combination of things... and they make me say these things. ... It's fueling and telling me it's the thing... I'm the best at! I: You feel in the flow, or existence is flowing through you and consciousness is communicating through you to other consciousness, to the same consciousness? R: It's exactly that. ... All the pieces of the puzzle are matching! It makes the wheel turn, it's an activation that's so high. ... I know what I'm getting from the festivals and it's time to translate that into the real world, into reality. What it spells is discipline. ... That's what I'm still lacking in my life.

Part of the surrender process for the co-researchers also entailed surrendering to altered life trajectories as a result of their EHEs.

A new adventure. As they integrated their EHEs, the co-researchers had a sense that their trajectories in life had been transformed and they embarked on new adventures. Ani shared settling into this: "Going to school, this program, was another this is real, this is exactly what I'm doing and where I'm supposed to be." Larry James expounded: "The first [EHE]... that's what sparked everything... the lucid/vivid dreaming. ... That was the catalyst. ... I: It reshaped the trajectory of your life? R: Yeah, I'd say so." Celeste illustrated allowing her EHE to lead her onto a different path:

I quit [my] job and that led me to a path... making clothing. ... I'm starting to sew again... it's this creative relationship, creative process. ... I'm heightened.

There's different things; an amazing summer with music festivals, you are part of

it, too. Since I've become aware of you, read stuff you've written, and we've talked, I'm in a very open, ripe place.

Nanigain also illustrated his understanding of allowing and accepting change in order to integrate:

Every person, wherever they're at, is exactly where they need to be in their experience of what life is. When they choose to move through it individually and as a group, that's what revolutions are: 'I no longer can accept what's happening.' [Looking] at life from that point of view, you understand why governments are doing what they're doing... forcing us to grow, they may not even realize it. It's up to us to change it, accept our part, rearrange our own reality, and no longer accept these things about ourselves. ... When we die, I believe we get to do it all over again. There's nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go.

Upon sharing their acceptance of their altered life trajectories, the co-researchers were asked one final question to ensure that they had shared all they were compelled to in regards to their EHEs. Not all of the co-researchers were compelled to share anything else, but those who did spoke of shadow issues.

Theme 12: Bringing the darkness into the light. The co-researchers touched on the shadow issues that can manifest from EHEs. Celeste described the shadow manifesting as lost knowledge in the context of our technological revolution: "The amazing progress with technology makes us think we're too good. ... We're creating new knowledge... but there's knowledge we've lost. It's up to us to bring it back." Jennifer mentioned the shadow specifically: "There's a dark side to everybody. You can't be completely trusting." She elaborated:

If you have any darkness, taking [psychedelics] at a festival full of people and [not understanding] how your body's going to feel, they can turn on you. ...

People think, 'I'm going to have this spiritual awakening, take acid, it's going to be awesome.' It's not for everybody. People who [have] said they regret taking acid are also people [who're] not comfortable with themselves. If you're scared going into it, it's going to show you, it's going to be scary. When you take something like that it's going to project your thoughts on the world around you... to think that it is happening to you. ... You have to be ready, in a good mental state. With Sham, you can go hesitant and come out in a great way. ... It's a place where people want to do [psychedelics] for the first time, I think that's a dangerous place to do it. ... You have to be very mentally stable. ... As amazing as Sham and the transformational festival is, you need to be safe. If you have stuff going on in your head, there are workshops there and people you can talk to.

In summary, the fourth chapter has elucidated twenty common themes that emerged from this research study. These themes were illuminated through three distinct parts of this chapter: "Part 1: Entering Mystical Kingdoms," "Part 2: Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience," and "Part 3: The Essential Gifts of the Exceptional Human Experience."

In the fifth chapter I will provide a summary and discussion of my understanding and conception of the study results through theoretical and other implications of the illuminated themes; implications for mental health, healing, integration, counselling, and potential experiencers; limitations; suggestions for further research; and a final conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The aim of this study was to articulate the lived experiences of those who have had EHEs, not only as a general phenomenon (as articulated in much of the pre-existing literature (Brown, 2000; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2013; Grof & Grof, 1986; White, 1994)), but in their manifestation in a specific context (i.e., the music festival). In the present study the phenomena of mystical and transcendent EHEs and their transformative effects were investigated in the context of two music festivals (i.e., Shambhala and Burning Man). The context of the festivals was important to explore to ascertain whether or not they played a role in setting the stage for the EHEs to occur, as well as the impact they had on the experiences. The qualities of the EHEs, their subsequent transformative effects, and the process of their integration into the experiencer's lives were also investigated. It was especially important to study the integration process as the literature highlights the transformative effect of EHEs if they are adequately integrated (Brown & White, 1997; Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1993; White, 1995b; White 1997a; White, 1997b). The following research questions were investigated to facilitate such exploration: What kinds of life-altering EHEs are occurring or being facilitated at music festivals, if they are occurring? How are people responding to these experiences? And, what are the impacts of these experiences on the experiencer's life?

This chapter is broken down into eight areas: 1) theoretical implications of themes, which reviews the preexisting literature as it relates to the findings from this study; 2) implications of themes, which examines elements outside of the literature review that are unique to this study; 3) implications for mental health, which highlights the impacts of mental health issues that may arise as a result of the EHE and integration

process; 4) implications for healing, integration, and counselling, which offers useful therapeutic tools to aid experiencers in integrating their EHEs and promote continued healing and growth; 5) implications for potential experiencers, which provides guidelines for those who are open to and may have EHEs; 6) limitations of research; 7) suggestions for further research; and 8) conclusion, which summarizes the main tenets of this thesis.

For ease of reference, table 4 provides a summary of the twenty themes and subthemes within the parts.

Table 4

Summary of the Twenty Themes in Three Parts

Part	Theme	Sub-themes	
1 Entering Mystical Kingdoms	1 Rediscovering Godliness	Beautiful beings	
		Anything goes	
		Authentic connection	
		Your self is enough	
		Loving and feeling everybody and everything	
		Rocking world views	
2 Illuminating the Exceptional Human Experience	2 Paradise on Earth	Capturing the flow	
		Plugging in	
		Sacred wholeness	
		1 All Roads Lead Here	Foreshadowing
			Basic trust and beyond
			100% surrender
2.1 Igniting the Flame	2 Slaying the Mind	The mind in bloom	
		Down the rabbit hole: Amassing intensity with entheogens	
		3 Creative Sanctuaries: Paradise Found	
2.2 Into the Fire	4 Leaving it All Behind and Below	Transcendence: Rising above	
		Feeling, seeing, sensing	
		Goodbye to the self	
		Mind blowing coincidence	

			(and <i>Lucid Dreams and EHEs</i>)	
			5	
			Surrendering to Feel It All	
			6	
			A Phoenix from the Ashes	
			Injections of truth	
			Seeing through new eyes	
			Breaking through	
			Medicine for the soul	
			It is what it is	
			Igniting others	
3 The Essential Gifts of the EHE	3.1 What's Up Is Down	1	Into the Beyond	
		2	Diving into the Depths	
		3	Thrust into <i>What Is</i>	
	3.2 This Changes Everything	4	Seek and Ye Shall Receive	Free flowing connection
		5	Augmenting Reality	The pilgrimage to the spiritual self
				Piercing the veil
	3.3 Now What?	6	Showing Up	Marrying authenticity and connection
		7	Continuing the Climb	Walking the talk
				Owning it
	3.4 Embracing the EHE			Already okay
				A second dose of medicine for the soul
		8	Leveraging Awareness	You're on your own
			Deeper, deeper	
			Shining the light	
	9	Fostering Unity	Pinnacles of communion	
			Fanning the ever-present flame	
	10	Upping the Ante		
	11	Dying to the Realization	Becoming one with the process	
			A new adventure	
	12	Bringing the Darkness into the Light		

Theoretical Implications of Themes

Part 1: Entering mystical kingdoms. Herein there were two themes that conveyed the co-researchers' experiences of Shambhala and Burning Man: 1) Rediscovering Godliness and 2) Paradise on Earth. These themes reflect characteristics of the festivals that played a role in creating a sacred space in which the EHEs could occur, as well as the role they played in providing novel understandings of the world and the feelings incited from these spaces. Particularly, the co-researchers highlighted strong and meaningful characteristics of the festivals such as the people in attendance and the festivals' overarching community emphasis; open-mindedness, acceptance, and lack of judgement permeating the festivals; fostering of authentic connections on many different levels (e.g., with others, themselves, the universe, and even their child-selves); free expressions of self, cultivating self-reliance, and an emphasis on gifting; experiences of boundless love and positivity; and intense experiences of energy and feeling energized. Novel understandings were formed as the festivals modelled alternatives to conventional societal systems; provided experiences of synchronicity and flow; allowed the co-researchers to reach new levels of connection with themselves and others; and left the co-researchers feeling empowered, loved, whole, and permeated with a deep sense of sacredness.

It was hypothesized that the festivals could be providing a space for optimal mirroring (i.e., mirroring what one's soul or essence is capable of (Almaas, 2001)) for the attendees. By doing so, this mirroring points to another, deeper reality for the attendee to consider. The availability of such optimal mirroring was supported by the co-researcher's

descriptions of the overarching qualities of the festivals in theme 1, that included descriptions of non-judgement and acceptance from others, authentic connections, the ability to express oneself unabashedly, radical reliance on oneself, and experiences of love and positivity. The co-researchers resonated deeply with these qualities and embodied them during their time at the festivals, as well as beyond them and into their lives afterwards.

In theme 1, the community aspects, authentic connections, and feelings of love and positivity fostered by the festivals speak to them as sacred spaces that are comparable to the characteristics of ashrams (Klaudt, 1997). Furthermore, as illustrated in theme 2, the co-researcher's descriptions of new understandings and overwhelming feelings from the festival environments suggest a depth of respect, devotion, and spiritual undertones that align with the notion that these festivals may be acting as gurus or ashrams (Partridge, 2006). Similar to festivals acting as gurus, in theme 1 the co-researchers described the festivals as energetic spaces that can be likened to the spaces established by caregivers or counsellors. These energetic aspects point to the co-researchers accessing fields of spiritual resonance at the festivals, wherein system coherence is increased as their systems couple to other systems and are pulled into increased synchronization and efficient functioning (McCraty & Childre, 2010). Laszlo's (2009) notion of an interconnecting, universal field that transcends the constraints of ordinary reality (e.g., space/time and the body) may provide an explanation for the energetic space of the festivals wherein spiritual resonance occurs. As the co-researcher's described in theme 1, embodied resonance (i.e., bodymind experience of internal and external energetic vibration (Siegel, 2013)) appeared to become amplified by the shared experiences at the

festival and resonance with others within that space. As hypothesized, the festival environment with its aspects of safety, empathy, and love (as illustrated in theme 1) provide a “therapeutic womb” (Jakel, 2001, p. 122) in which existential issues and transcendence of the self occurred in the context of the co-researcher’s EHEs. Furthermore, as evidenced in theme 2, the co-researchers experienced deep felt senses interpreted as intricate wholes, which further points to their tapping into fields of spiritual resonance at the festivals. For example, a study of participant’s descriptions of experiences of spiritual resonance in therapy sessions (Siegel, 2013) parallels the co-researcher’s descriptions of the festivals in themes 1 and 2 as spaces of transformative, energetic interconnection.

In considering shared numinous, utopian-like states of collective consciousness/effervescence (Hunt, 2010), descriptions in theme 1 (e.g., the focus on intimacy/connection, radical self-expression and participation) appeared to play a role in creating optimal conditions for collective effervescence and instigate the “retempering” of prior collective representations of ordinary societal structures (Olaveson, 2001). This retempering seemed fortified by the stimulation of individual energies through the EHEs, as transpersonal development occurred on a personal level *within* these shared states of consciousness provided by the festivals and their environments. As evidenced in theme 2, the co-researcher’s experiences of synchronicity throughout the festivals also point to experiences of collective effervescence (e.g., group-based consciousness and higher, transpersonal states and experiences). The festivals as alternative models of societal functioning were evidenced in the co-researcher’s description of acquiring new understandings of the world through their festival experiences. This supports St. John’s

(2011) examination of rave and rave technologies. Specifically, St. John's understandings of festivals paralleled the co-researcher's own experiences of self-expression, self-transcendence, and conscious alternatives to ways of life as illustrated in both themes 1 and 2. Surprisingly, however, the role of electronic music in particular was not discussed by the co-researchers as an important or precipitating factor in the festival environments, nor in their EHEs.

The qualities of the festivals also appeared to serve as important catalysts for the EHEs, which will be examined further in the following section. Specifically, the settings of Shambhala and Burning Man seemed to lay the foundation for the transformative EHEs to occur. For example, in theme 1 the co-researcher's descriptions of community and unconditional feelings of acceptance add to the consensus of the literature and study of rave communities (Hutson, 2000; Partridge, 2006; Rill, 2006; St. John, 2011). Similarly, the festival spaces also acted as *communitas* (i.e., states of equality and community outside of ordinary social roles and hierarchies that allow attendees to move from rational to emotional realms) in which the EHEs could arise. These spaces further reduced isolation and alienation for the co-researchers, as evidenced in their descriptions of authentic connection in themes 1 and 2, providing an impetus for social change within the festival space and the individual as their EHEs occurred. We will now turn to an investigation of the implications of the themes of the EHEs themselves in accordance with the literature.

Part 2: Illuminating the exceptional human experience. This investigation was broken down into two parts (i.e., Igniting the Flame and Into the Fire) comprised of a total of six themes. In the first part, there were three main themes that elucidated the

common elements that appeared to spark the co-researchers' EHEs: 1) All Roads Lead Here, 2) Slaying the Mind, and 3) Creative Sanctuaries: Paradise Found. The co-researchers found that their prior experiences and interests, personal characteristics, loss of fear, and surrender and commitment to their experiences at the festivals set the stage for the EHEs to occur. The co-researchers' states of mind, including open-mindedness and altered mind states via the use of substances, also played a role in sparking their EHEs. In addition to this, the importance of the festival environments themselves, as well as aspects of isolation and aloneness, functioned in opening the co-researchers up to their EHEs.

In the second part, there were three main themes that described the strongest and most meaningful qualities of the EHEs: 4) Leaving It All Behind and Below, 5) Surrendering to Feel It All, and 6) A Phoenix from the Ashes. The co-researchers EHEs entailed many aspects of transcendence that included transcending reality, space and time, accessing other realities, altered senses of their current reality, and transcendence of the self that facilitated experiences of oneness and deeper connection and allowed for the emergence of synchronicities. A variety of feelings were evoked by the EHEs, some of which were particularly overwhelming and culminated in a process of surrender to the experiences. As the EHEs drew to a close the co-researchers were left with experiences of truth and newly acquired knowledge and understandings; altered senses of themselves and reality; breakthroughs into novel consciousness and enhanced learning states; a sense of healing; affirmation and validation; and the desire to help and share their experiences with others.

The EHEs were immensely startling in their shifting of the co-researcher's perceptions of the world and brought to light deeper issues of transcendence and development that resulted in the co-researchers moving to more deeply examine themselves and their experiences. In this way anomalous experiences are distinguished from EHEs by confirming that they set into motion a lengthy process of integration and understanding that extended into the future for the co-researchers (Brown, 2000; White, 1997a). This will be substantiated further in part 3. The EHEs, as described by the co-researchers, fulfilled all 10 characteristics common to most EHEs (White, 1993): Their spontaneous, non-personally induced occurrences (themes 1-3); connectedness within the experience (theme 4); insights into novel experiences and understandings of self (theme 6); at times, an orgasmic loss of separation between body and mind (i.e., "no boundary" moments (Wilber, 1979)) (theme 4); opening into new realities beyond one's ordinary, conditioned experience that brought the spiritual realm into ordinary reality, as a sense of communion with the divine *within* the self was experienced by the co-researchers (theme 4); a non-stop, unfolding process that required conscious cooperation in the form of surrender by the co-researchers (theme 5); becoming linked to the sacred (e.g., the co-researchers being filled with senses of connectedness, calmness, peace, wholeness, and healing) (themes 4-6); their life-changing effects (e.g., initiating self-discovery, transcendence of what one was prior to the EHE, as well as affecting the world at large as the co-researchers acted upon their experiences) (Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1995a; Walker, 1992)) (theme 6 and part 3); and the sharing of their EHEs as heightening their sense of meaning and the very reality of the experiences for the co-researchers (theme 6). Furthermore, theme 6 speaks to the co-researcher's experiences fulfilling the criteria for

EHEs as they sparked the impulse to become more connected in many aspects of their lives (White, 1997a).

In part 2.1, themes 1-3 elucidate the co-researcher's perceptions of what sparked their EHEs. In regards to psychedelic use, as outlined in the literature review, theme 2 is relevant. It was hypothesized that the EHEs had transformative effects on the co-researchers, even if they were induced by psychedelics. The current study illustrates such an opening into mystical experiences and non-ordinary realms (part 2.2, theme 4) that further acted to magnify implicit or unconscious knowledge in the co-researchers, as evidenced in theme 6. Other elements that facilitated the EHEs align with research from Grof and Grof (1986) and Brown and White (1997) that included psychedelic drugs, meditation, surrender, and human interaction (themes 1-3). As previously examined in part 1, as well as within theme 3, the music festivals themselves held the space for the aforementioned elements to ignite the EHEs. The use of psychedelics by all but one of the co-researchers speaks to their ability to provide access to deeper knowledge and new methods and concepts (Masters & Houston, 1966) through the EHE and allow for communion with spirituality as an inherent property of the human psyche (Grof, as cited in Walsh, 2007). Interestingly, some of the co-researcher's experiences confirmed Harner's (1980) study of shamanic altered states of consciousness (i.e., as they are facilitated via the use of mind-altering substances and other means such as drumming), wherein the co-researchers described occupying and experiencing in one reality while becoming aware of additional realities beyond their ordinary experience (theme 4). In accordance with Walsh (2007), whether or not the co-researcher's mystical experiences were drug induced, they reported similar effects on their states of consciousness (i.e.,

perceptions, identity, emotions, and attention) as elucidated through their common themes and narratives (themes 4-6). In theme 6 the co-researchers reported experiencing additional wisdom and understandings, as well as being afforded new concepts and novel understandings of the meaning and the structure of the universe, which aligns with the research on the effects of psilocybin and LSD (Ebin, 1961).

Siegel (2013), in studying the experience of counsellors and spiritual resonance, found that the counsellor participants believed they carried a vibrational frequency that their clients could choose to resonate with. I hypothesized that the festival environments may be setting up a similar vibrational frequency, as evidenced in the unconditional love, acceptance, and openness of attendees, that others could choose to resonate with and, thus, could open them up to EHEs. Given that the co-researchers discussed these particular aspects of the festival environment as important to facilitating their EHEs (theme 3), it is possible that the co-researchers were opening up to this loving space of resonance and experiencing immediate transformative effects from it. Furthermore, upon completion of the study, Siegel's (2013) definition of spiritual resonance (i.e., "a vibrational pattern of greater cosmic wholeness, which is experienced as being accessed by soul awareness" p. 69) matches the transcendent oneness the co-researcher's felt during and after their EHEs as illustrated in theme 4. Additionally, Siegel's (2013) accounts of client transformation parallel the transformative effects of the co-researcher's EHEs in theme 6 and part 3. For the purposes of this discussion point, I will briefly elaborate on the characteristics of part 3 that exemplify such expanded spiritual consciousness. Specifically, this was described by the co-researcher in their practices of meditation, reading spiritual material, and becoming more aware of themselves and

higher consciousness. Theme 6 provides additional support for expanded spiritual consciousness, as gleaned from the co-researcher's descriptions of feelings of peace, wholeness, a greater sense of themselves, acceptance and surrender to altered life trajectories, and becoming more self-aware.

The fourth theme "Leaving It All Behind and Below," affirms the power of the EHE to reveal inconsistencies within one's senses that provides movement beyond their prior understandings (i.e., as they are largely grounded in mechanistic and behavioral sciences) and offers an evolution of consciousness awareness and potentials (Brown, 2000; White, 1994). This points to a shift away from viewing EHEs as delusional, illusory, and coincidental to viewing them as opportunities to access truths that may guide one's life, as is already prevalent in Eastern traditions (Solowoniuk & Nixon, 2010). Furthermore, the energetic effects of the EHE align with the Eastern concept of *shaktipat*, and were exemplified by the co-researcher's experiences of positive inner-direction, amplified energy and creativity, and the dissolution of negative habits, thoughts, etc. (Dunn & Magnarella, 1983). The transcendent aspects of the EHEs described by the co-researchers in theme 4 point to similarities between EHEs and *shaktipat*, wherein unity and oneness were experienced and left the co-researcher with a sense of healing and wholeness. Theme 4 also illustrates Siegel's (2013) description of expanded awareness, that is a "nonspecific state of consciousness in which boundaries diffuse, ego identification is diminished, and cosmic interconnectedness to all things can be experienced" (p. 51). Such expanded awareness is present within a shared, spiritually resonant field that parallels the transcendent interconnectedness experienced by the co-researcher's during their EHEs. Given their transformative effects (theme 6 and part 3) the meaningful and

spiritual significance of the EHEs, as found in other studies (Bower, 2006; Masters & Houston, 1966), can also be inferred. Such transformational effects of the EHEs will now be examined in the context of this study's findings and the relevant literature.

Part 3: The essential gifts of the EHE. This exploration was broken down into four parts (i.e., What's Up Is Down, This Changes Everything, Now What?, and Embracing the EHE) comprised of a total of 12 themes that elucidated the transformative effects of the EHEs as well as the co-researchers' integration processes. In the first part there were three main themes that illustrated the ways in which the co-researchers' perceptions were shifted by their EHEs: 1) Into the Beyond, 2) Diving into the Depths, and 3) Thrust into *What Is*. The co-researchers realized that their previous perceptions of reality were transcended after their EHEs; they were able to access depths of knowing, gnosis, as well as knowledge and acceptance of themselves; and they began to surrender to life and its flow and experienced their life focus/paths shifting along with their perceptions. In the second part there were two main themes that described the impact of the EHEs on the co-researchers' lives: 4) Seek and Ye Shall Receive and 5) Augmenting Reality. The co-researchers began to search for answers given their EHEs and attained novel knowledge and understandings, as well as felt their realities were augmented by openness, greater connection, spirituality, and introspection. In the third part there were two main themes that elucidated how the co-researchers acted upon their EHEs: 6) Showing up and 7) Continuing the Climb. The co-researchers began to connect and act from their true, authentic selves which led to creating new and meaningful connections, allowed them to take physical action in the world, and apply their insights to their lives outside of the festival contexts. They also realized the importance of cultivating independence and

taking responsibility for their lives that led to further acceptance of themselves and life as it is, and set the stage for the continuation of their healing journeys. In part four there were five main themes that illustrated how the co-researchers integrated their EHEs: 8) Leveraging Awareness, 9) Fostering Unity, 10) Upping the Ante, 11) Dying to the Realization, and 12) Bringing the Darkness into the Light. The co-researchers implied that integration was a personal process that allowed them to more deeply understand themselves, and pushed them toward additional self-exploration and the search for additional knowledge/information about their EHEs. They experienced integration through connection and enhanced communication with others; synchronistic forms of support and guidance, along with their own inner intentions; and by sharing their experiences to realize their universality. They augmented their integration processes by cultivating balance and utilizing tools like meditation and mindfulness. They realized the importance of surrendering to the integration process and allowing their life trajectories to become altered by it and their EHEs. Finally, they were compelled to share shadow issues that arose during and after their EHEs.

The EHEs significantly shifted the co-researcher's perceptions, as reflected in themes 1-3, wherein the co-researchers reported experiences of expanded human potential, identity, worldviews, and relationships (Brown & White, 1997). White's (1993) discussion of EHEs as "preparadigmatic experiences" (p. 195) fits with themes 1 and 2, as the EHEs shifted the co-researcher's understandings of their lives and reality in general. As is consistent with the literature, the co-researcher's EHEs significantly increased their levels of spirituality and altered and increased their understandings of their meaning and purpose in life, thus thrusting them into life changes (Palmer & Braud,

2002; White, 1993). Theme 5 affirms the ability of the EHEs to initiate new paradigms and seeds of spiritual growth that increased the co-researcher's quality of life in the realms of connection, spirituality, and introspection (Brown, 2000; White, 1995a).

Themes 4 and 5 also reflect how the EHEs changed the co-researcher's lives. These findings parallel those in Brown and White's (1997) study (i.e., of transformative EHEs: psychical, mystical, death-related, encounter, or enhanced) and Wilde and Murray's (2010) study (i.e., of out of body, near-death EHEs), wherein the co-researchers in the present study experienced many similar EHE aftereffects (e.g., altered outlook, changed attitudes, personal growth, joy, new meaning, wonderment, increased spiritual interest, awe, and increased well-being). Additional overlap in the lasting effects of the EHE aftereffects can be found in themes 6-9, wherein the co-researcher's described lasting changes of attitude or vocation; exploration of new life interests; senses of personal healing; novel ways of envisioning their senses of self, identities, and potentials; and alterations to their understandings of relationships and life decisions. The redirection and shift of the co-researcher's life paths and trajectories in theme 11 also mirrors the findings of the aforementioned studies.

Moreover, in a recent qualitative, grounded theory study of the effects of self-transcendent experiences on 15 individuals, Garcia-Romeu, Himmelstein, and Kaminker (2015) found similar contexts and transformative effects as those illuminated in the present study. Their findings included similar contexts and catalysts such as being outdoors in nature, group festivities, psychoactive substances, and dance; similar somatic manifestations (e.g., loss of control of body, physical connectedness, lightness), perceptual alterations (e.g., shifts in self-boundaries, egolessness / timelessness /

spacelessness, hallucinations, channeling, out of body experiences, and clarity), and cognitive-affective shifts (e.g., paradox/ineffability, omniscience/direct revelation, positive affect, surrender/openness, and emotional catharsis); similar short-term effects (e.g., increased energy, insight, and sociability, decreased anxiety, and sustained positive affect), long-term effects (e.g., value re-orientation, increased positive affect, disidentification from old patterns of thinking/behavior), and perceived meanings (e.g., defining self-transcendence, all-pervading Spirit/energy, and self-transcendence as a tool for transformation).

In accordance with the literature, integration of the EHEs involved a lack of separateness from the phenomenon and active reception and response to it (White, 1993; 1997b) as evidenced in themes 3, 4, and 6-11. Furthermore, the co-researcher's experiences in theme 2 affirmed that communion with the all-self, facilitated by the EHEs, instigated a collaborative process that offered the co-researchers additional knowledge and understandings as they worked toward integration, a process that they built upon in theme 8. The changes in the co-researcher's lives, as elucidated in themes 4-7, spoke to the integration of the EHEs into their lives as becoming woven into their narratives (i.e., life-potentiating narratives (White, 1997b)) and existing realms of the ego self. This integration allowed the co-researchers to experience transcendence of the ego self and realize that reality is malleable and inconsistent across time, space, and persons. The end of the separate self was elucidated in theme 9, as the co-researchers moved to facilitate new senses of self and understandings of connectedness to a self that encompasses all (White, 1995b).

As evident in themes 8 and 9, the co-researchers found outlets for their integration (e.g., seeking additional information and guidance) and did not report instances of life-depotentiating narratives which could have stalled their growth and reinstated confirmation of the “status quo” (White, 1997b). Nor did they experience the maladaptive effects of inhibition and nondisclosure of EHEs, as outlined by Palmer and Braud (2002), but rather the adaptive effects of positive psychological attitudes, well-being, and meaning and purpose in life (themes 6 and 7). In addition, the co-researchers did not describe psychological disturbances or spiritual emergencies that can occur if spontaneous awakening experiences, like EHEs, are not integrated into body and mind (Almaas, 2001; Epstein, 1986; Grof & Grof, 1986; Wilber, Engler, Brown, & Chirban, 1986).

While there were no interview questions that explicitly asked about shadow issues that could have manifested in the wake of the EHEs, in theme 12 two of the co-researchers discussed shadow aspects that arose along their journeys. This entailed the co-researchers realizing limitations that arise from a false sense of progress that then results in a paradoxical disconnection from knowledge. It also entailed a recognition of the shadow and how it may manifest during EHEs. Disconnection from the knowledge that EHEs appeared to reconnect the co-researchers to could be viewed as fear of shadow manifestations (i.e., of facing the shadow aspects of not knowing) and resistance to the shadow itself. Another shadow aspect was viewed by one co-researcher as spiritual seeking and focus on the positive aspects of EHEs, while avoiding the darkness that may be located within the self. This co-researcher realized that the shadow, in this way, is avoided and yet still plays a role in the EHE depending upon the mental state of the

experiencer. Similarly, while not explicitly stated in theme 12, egoic inflation (i.e., ego ownership of the transpersonal opening afforded by the EHE) could be determined by the tendency of the co-researcher to want to hold onto their experience, especially as they felt their spiritual feelings fading. For example, Stan Smith described two instances of this: “I stick with [spiritual drugs], see how that works out, and if I can keep this going,” and “I’ve kind of lost the Shambhala mentality. . . . I want [it] back. I miss it.” Rebel shadow issues (i.e., assuming a novel path that is rebellious in comparison to a previous path) did not seem to arise for the co-researchers, as they spoke of the ordinariness of their experiences and appeared able to transcend novelty as they integrated their EHEs into their lives and surrendered to the integration process (theme 11). For example, Ani described: “Before if they were transcendental experiences they were so fresh and new I was like ‘this is weird, I feel different.’ Now . . . it comes in waves, but that’s the wave of truth; the ordinary, the realness.” While the following section has included content from the literature review as it relates to this study’s findings, the next section will speak to the implications of the themes that are not directly addressed in the literature review.

Implications of Themes

This study provides new understandings and “maps of the territory” for the phenomenon of mystical and transcendent EHEs as they occur in the contexts of Shambhala and Burning Man. Additionally, the lack of research into this specific context of the EHE phenomenon means that this study adds to the current body of literature regarding triggers and contexts of mystical and transcendent EHEs as well as their transformative impacts and integration processes. There are several implications of this study’s themes that include the utility and consideration of festival environments, triggers

that facilitate EHEs, the unfolding of EHEs, their implications, their transformative qualities, their integration, and shadow issues that may arise.

The utility of the festival environment and beyond. If there is a desire to fashion sacred spaces in which individuals might experience transformative EHEs, those creating music festival environments should consider the factors outlined in part 1 as important elements to include and foster. Furthermore, these characteristics could be applied in contexts apart from music festivals in order to cultivate new ways of being in and interacting with the world, ourselves, and each other. Of importance here is the need to cultivate senses of community that are characterized by non-judgement, acceptance, open-mindedness, self-expression, self-reliance, gifting, love, positivity, and energetic exchange that could benefit all persons involved. The results of this study indicate that these spaces foster authentic connections to self, others, the universe, and even forgotten aspects of self (e.g., the child-self). The results of these characteristics, as explicated in the emergent themes, include novel understandings of the world that model alternatives to current systems, experiences of synchronicity and flow in life, increased ability to connect, and overarching feelings of empowerment, love, wholeness, and sacredness. In a world that is increasingly individualistic and isolating (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009) it is important to consider how we view and interact with conventional systems and how we may be able to cultivate new environments that are conducive to fostering togetherness, healing, and expanded awareness. In addition to these environmental contexts that acted as triggers for the co-researcher's EHEs, we will also examine the implications of the other triggers of their EHEs.

On the triggers of EHEs. For those who find themselves opening up to EHEs in any context, the triggers of the EHEs as elucidated in the current study are useful to consider. For example, part 2.1 illustrated the realization that one's prior experiences and interests, personal characteristics, and any elements of fear that arise are going to play a role in their subsequent EHEs. That is, it is useful to know that what one brings into the experience is going to have a significant impact upon it. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly due to its repeated occurrence throughout the interviews, the role of surrender and commitment as triggers of the EHEs are important to consider as the experiences themselves entail a seemingly unstoppable, unfolding force. As outlined in the literature review, if one resists this unfolding, either during or after it happens, one is at risk for developing life-depotentiating narratives (i.e., stalling growth) and negatively impacting one's mental health and well-being. The mind-state of the co-researchers as a trigger of their EHEs entails a more controversial implication of the impact of psychedelics in sparking and guiding the experiences. As the co-researchers were using psychedelics of their own volition at the festivals, it is important to consider their effects on mental health and well-being in both the context of EHEs, but also in the broader contexts of the aftereffects of such experiences. We will now examine this impact, specifically, as it has many implications in the realm of psychotherapy.

On psychedelics. An increasing amount of studies have emerged regarding the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy for treating a number of mental health conditions such as psilocybin for smoking cessation (Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, Cosimano, & Griffiths, 2014), depression alleviation (Grob et al. 2011), and treatment of alcohol dependence (Bogenschutz et al. 2015). Furthermore, Hendricks, Thorn, Clark, Coombs, and Johnson

(2015) analyzed data from over 190,000 American adult respondents of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and found that lifetime classic psychedelic use (i.e., DMT, LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline) was associated with significantly reducing the respondent's odds of psychological distress, suicidal thinking, suicidal planning, and suicide attempts. While these studies are conducted outside the contexts examined in the current study, their implications on the impact of psychedelic experiences are useful to apply and compare to psychedelic-induced EHEs. For example, an fMRI study of ten participants receiving intravenous psilocybin provided evidence for increased memory vividness and enhanced subjective well-being upon follow-up (Carhart-Harris et al. 2012). Such augmented autobiographical recollection could be utilized during psychotherapy to facilitate salient memory recall and reverse negative cognitive biases, such that the combination of psilocybin with positive memory cues could be applied to treat depression (Carhart-Harris et al. 2012). If EHEs are paired with such positive memory cues in the context of music festivals, it follows that they may be providing indirect treatment of analogous mental health concerns. In a similar vein, Grob et al. (2011) found decreased scores of depression for advanced-stage cancer patients with anxiety six months after only one single psilocybin treatment. Additionally, Carhart-Harris et al. (2016) utilized neuroimaging techniques to study the effects of LSD on the brain and found evidence to support its use in treating various pathological states (i.e., by inducing network desegregation and simultaneous disintegration). This means that for psychiatric disorders wherein the brain is fixed in pathology, manifesting in automatic and rigid behaviors, psychedelics may aid in breaking down the disorders by dismantling their patterns of activity. Carhart-Harris et al.'s (2016) study of LSD also supports other

research (i.e., the study of neural correlates of ego dissolution under psilocybin (Lebedev et al. 2015) and the effect of LSD on inhibiting mental time travel to the past, thus promoting the deconstruction of the narrative self/narrative identity (Speth et al. 2016)) which suggests that psychedelic-induced neurobiology that influences ego-dissolution can have subsequent effects on the neurobiology of the self or ego. The current study provides similar, qualitative results wherein the co-researchers found themselves deconstructing and dissolving their own automatic and rigid behaviors and conceptions of the ego/self during and after their EHEs. Lebedev et al. (2015) also highlighted an important point when considering drug-induced ego-dissolution versus “endogenously occurring ego disturbances” (p. 3148) (e.g., schizophrenia), wherein the former differs from the latter in that it is expected, welcome, and less likely to be resisted. This has significant implications in regards to the EHE, as it further points to the importance of the theme of surrender and acceptance on the part of the experiencer as the EHE unfolds. We will now examine the implications of such unfolding.

On the qualities of EHEs. In regards to part 2.2, the qualities of the EHEs, the current study provides a roadmap for understanding their unfolding and impact on the co-researchers. For example, the overarching theme of transcendence on multiple levels mirrors and places the EHEs within the transpersonal realms of development (Wilber, 2000). When framed in this context, one is able to categorize and create a scaffolding for the understanding, meaning-making, and integration of such transpersonal experiences. The effects and application of such a developmental model will be further elucidated in the Implications for Healing, Integration, and Counselling section.

The examination of the emotions felt during the EHEs also provide a valuable framework for better understanding such experiences. Specifically, it is important to realize that EHEs entail a variety of perceived positive and negative feelings and can be overwhelming for experiencers. Most importantly, however, is the experience of surrender that the co-researchers moved into as their EHEs progressed. This has other therapeutic benefits that will be unpacked further below.

The resultant effects of the EHEs for the co-researchers also brings up noteworthy implications. Understanding what occurs for experiencers following their EHEs is important as the thematic analysis suggested a radical shift in understandings of the world and reality, alterations to the experiencer's sense of self, breakthroughs into expanded consciousness states that were novel and provided opportunities for increased learning, resultant healing effects, and affirmation and validation that led the co-researchers to share their experiences with others. In a sense, the co-researchers have honoured their EHEs by sharing them in the current study. This sharing could also serve as an important part of their transformative effects, the implications of which we will now examine.

On the transformational effects of EHEs. The EHE brought many transformative gifts to the co-researchers and it is important to consider the effects of such gifts on potential experiencers. One important implication to consider entails the radical shifts in one's perception of reality and ability to access depths of knowledge that seemed previously unavailable apart from one's prior interests and knowledge. Another significant implication involves the potential movement of the experiencer into a process of surrendering to *what is*, no matter how it manifests in their life, and the subsequent effects of the EHE and surrender process on shifting one's life focus or path. Both of

these implications point to a re-structuring of experience, self, and being for experiencers that can have a profound impact on their lives following an EHE. Furthermore, the impacts of these gifts may spark an experiencer's search for answers and allow them to attain more knowledge in regards to themselves and their experiences. This may then open them up to experiences of augmented reality in the areas of openness, connection, spirituality, and introspection.

It is also worth considering the implications of the EHEs occurring in the group context of the festivals. For example, can an experiencer "stand on their own two legs" in regards to the EHE, that is, do they have the ability to continually hold the experience in their own awareness? It is possible that this ability exists solely, or is only augmented, within the festival container. The findings from the current study, however, illustrated that, while the EHEs occurred and were facilitated in large part at the festivals, their integration and insights continued beyond the festivals and required a level of independence, responsibility, acceptance, and surrender on the part of the experiencer.

The fact that the co-researchers were called to action by their EHEs also speaks to the implications of their powerful transformative qualities. As evidenced by the current study, when individuals connect with their authentic selves they open themselves up to increased and meaningful connection to others. Furthermore, by taking physical action on their EHEs in the world outside of the festival context, one spreads these effects beyond themselves and thus potentially transforms the world and others around them.

Continuation of one's healing and introspective journey also has important implications, as one cultivates independence in and responsibility for one's life and begins to accept oneself and life as it presents itself. These implications should not be understated, as they

entailed shifts in the being of the experiencer and produced effects on their lives and possibly on those around them as such effects ripple out into the world. This also has larger implications for healing psychological and emotional wounds, which we will explore further in the Implications for Healing, Integration, and Counselling section.

On the integration of EHEs. In regards to the EHE integration process, there are other important implications to consider. Furthermore, while the existing literature addresses the integration process by providing guidance for counsellors and helping professionals, there are little to no studies that showed the process of integration by experiencers apart from clinical recommendations. For example, White (1998) spoke about her own near-death EHE and extensive research into the EHE phenomena, and made recommendations for integration that mirrored many of the themes in the current study. These included, but are not limited to: Meditating on the experience; seeking guidance, both external and internal; going with the flow and allowing synchronicity in the form of help to come into one's life; reading about the phenomenon or finding literature that speaks to one's experience; surrendering and committing to the experience and the change process; delving into spirituality; and using one's life, others, and additional experiences and EHEs to amplify the integration process.

The current study adds to the literature around EHEs by offering the processes of integration that the co-researchers employed largely outside of the therapeutic context. The integration process is just that, a process that has many different elements involving the journey through the EHE itself as well as its transformation into a life-potentiating narrative with rich meaning and substance for the experiencer. One implication involves the realization that this process entails a level of independence and induces a personal

journey for the experiencer that may require further self-exploration and the acquisition of additional information to understand the experience. Another important complementary implication is that integration is not a completely solitary endeavour, as it involves connection to others and the cultivation of new ways of communicating. This can entail the acquisition of synchronistic support systems and guidance. In the co-researcher's integration processes, it was also important to share their experiences and realize their universal nature. This highlights an implication regarding the availability of transformative EHEs. Such availability has been touched upon in studies of the awakening process into non-duality (i.e., the realization of the no-self or egoless state (Wilber, 1982)) (Tzu, Bannerman, & Griffith, 2015; Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallum, 2015; Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallums, 2015) as well as in writings of the accessibility of such non-dual states (Adyashanti, 2004, 2008; Blackstone, 2006; Foster, 2007; Katie, 2002; Nixon, 2010; Nixon & Sharpe, 2009; Prendergast, 2003; Prendergast & Bradford, 2007; Solowoniuk & Nixon, 2009; Tolle, 1997, 2005; Tzu, 2014a, 2014b). Another implication is realizing how to augment the integration process through the cultivation of balance and use of tools like meditation. Again, a theme of surrender arose for all of the co-researchers. It is important to note that this meant surrendering not just to the EHE itself, but to the integration process, whatever that entailed, as well as allowing it to alter one's life trajectory. A valuable part of the integration process can also entail working with shadow aspects and issues that arise.

On the shadow. Somewhat surprisingly, the issue of the shadow did not manifest overtly in the current study. It is important to note, however, that shadow issues could still arise along one's journey toward integration and wholeness. For example, there are

three relevant shadow issues surrounding spirituality and transpersonal experiences. The first involves the concept of spiritual bypassing; that is, despite deconstructing the mind's reality, prior experiences, and identifications one may become fixated on spiritual and transpersonal experiences of nothingness or oneness (Adyashanti, 2008). This bypassing may also entail the use of spiritual practices in order to avoid personal and emotional unfinished business (Welwood, 2002). In the current study, it appeared that most of the co-researchers avoided spiritual bypassing by thrusting themselves into deeper introspective examination following their EHEs. The second shadow issue involves the risk of adopting a superior position (e.g., in life, towards others, etc.) if one does not see through the illusion of spiritual progress. The third shadow issue follows the second and entails movement toward spiritual seeking (i.e., spiritual materialism) and egoic identification with one's experience, wherein the ego continues to seek out further transcendental knowledge and comfort (Trungpa, 1973). Such spiritual materialism could be demonstrated by relentless seeking to maintain the vibrational energies and connection to the sense of oneness as experienced during the EHEs. It should be noted that in the current study, the co-researchers took on additional spiritual practices and exploration; however, these practices were not discussed in the context of spiritual materialism and, thus, cannot be ascertained as evidence for or against it. As aforementioned, there was some evidence of co-researchers longing for the feeling and connection from the EHE when they felt it had not lasted, which could be indicative of spiritual seeking behavior.

It is important to consider these and other potential shadow issues that could arise, and utilize them to further the integration process by also incorporating them into the one's life and narrative. One way to accomplish this is by highlighting the ordinariness

and availability of transpersonal experiences in day to day life. While the EHEs seemed extraordinary in the moment and upon reflection, some of the co-researchers appeared to realize the ordinariness of their EHEs during the process of integration. For example, Ani shared: “My [EHE] took away that ‘out-of-ordinariness’ of [transcendence]. ... It doesn’t seem out of ordinary. ... It feels natural... that transcendence.”

Having explicated the implications of the themes, we will now move to explore the implications of this study’s results where mental health is concerned.

Implications for Mental Health

Consciousness can be experienced in many different ways. Comprehensive studies of human consciousness, via EHEs in the context of this study, are thus important to ensure that alternate ways of understanding and experiencing reality are not ignored. A mystical or transcendent experience that points to the interconnectedness of all things ought to be understood by practitioners in order to facilitate integration for clients who experience them. The importance of integration is reflected in the negative effects on mental health and well-being that can transpire should EHEs become ignored, denied, or repressed (Pressman, 1992; White 1997b). Similarly, if EHEs are pathologized (e.g., explained away or diagnosed as mental illness/psychosis) the risk of detriment to the experiencer increases. Furthermore, helping professionals follow codes of ethics that dictate that they do not harm their clients; however, given the existing research, it can be suggested that pathologizing clients who have had EHEs directly interferes with such ethics. We have seen the negative and limiting effects of the labels of mental illness, as clients internalize such labels and may develop life-depotentiating narratives around them. In order to integrate non-ordinary states of consciousness coherently and continuously to develop an

old identity, one must avoid denying, repressing, and dissociating from them or risk chaotic disintegration and confusion that can result in additional mental health difficulties (Pressman, 1992). It is important to consider the potential of EHEs to provide direct encounters with improvement of quality of life in the present moment (White, 1997a), as well as into the future as the EHE is surpassed. This means that EHEs can incite positive and profound effects in the therapeutic process when viewed as potential and powerful change-agents. Moreover, the expansion of conscious awareness, as elucidated in the co-researcher's narratives of the transformative effects of EHEs and their integration, has incomprehensible implications for holistic healing and growth.

For example, while not specifically focused on EHEs, Moran and Russo-Netzer (2016) explored universal enablers of positive change processes in both recovery from mental illness and spiritual change in a sample of 31 American mental health peer providers (i.e., individuals with psychiatric disabilities who provide support to similarly afflicted individuals) and a non-clinical sample of 27 Israelis. They found that self-transcendent experiences (similar to some EHEs) facilitated recalibration of self and life views that led to increased wisdom, augmented existential/spiritual outlook, enhanced resiliency, decreased reactivity to external pressures, and provided clear awareness of personal values and goals that assisted self-guidance through life. Moreover, such experiences acted as positive reinforcement for agency enhancement and meaning-making processes. Therefore, incorporating such self-transcendent experiences, like EHEs, into one's life one promotes holistic and nonlinear healing approaches that maximize the benefits of such universal change enablers and transcend prior clinical and functional approaches.

Non-ordinary states of consciousness are already utilized in many therapeutic modalities (e.g., guided visualizations, holotropic breathwork, etc. (Grof, 1980; Grof, 1985; Grof, 2010; Grof & Grof, 1986; Pressman, 1992)) and allow one to access material out of the reach of the conscious mind. Transpersonal, transcendent experiences during which individuals are accessing knowledge that contrasts their prior conceptions of reality provide an impetus for such exploration. As previously elucidated (see Chapter 2), the groundwork for the use of altered states of consciousness in therapy was laid by Grof's extensive work with psychedelics (Grof, 1980) and his more recent holotropic breathwork (Grof, 2010). An aforementioned study of altered states of consciousness (Thapa & Vinoda, 1985) illustrated that emotional and social supports, guidance, and cognitive restructuring from religious or philosophical systems were important in contributing to the positive integrative consequences associated with those who had experienced meditative, altered states of consciousness. While it is possible that the structural framework of the festivals in the current study provided the co-researchers with some of this support, it is important that counsellors are able to provide and hold a space for their clients to supplement such support for further integration and potentiation of EHEs. The well-being and holistic healing offered by working within as well as processing prior altered states of consciousness cannot be ignored, and the results of this study provide evidence that they should be embraced and worked with for optimal integration and healing. This points to a need in the professional community, especially within addictions counselling, to overcome any biases against the use of altered states of consciousness (even those facilitated by the use of psychedelics). This study has shown

that drugs may be providing more than vision experiences, as they are inciting a very real, transformative effect on their experiencers.

Given that previous research, in conjunction with the findings from the present study, point to the psychological and spiritual healing potentials of EHEs, it follows that counsellors should support their integration and meaning-making by facilitating the incorporation of EHEs into life-potentiating narratives with clients. As aforementioned, Grof's Spiritual Emergency Network serves to connect clients with counsellors who have knowledge and experience with anomalous experiences like EHEs. Since EHEs spark radical shifts in world-view and perceptions of self, other, and reality, it follows that they could be especially effective if integrated into the therapeutic process to affect change in regards to existential issues. This means that both light and dark aspects of experience are integrated and accepted as inextricable aspects of *what is*, which can result in a transformation of perceived "negative" phenomena and circumstances (Grof as cited in Pressman, 1992). As the co-researchers illustrated, acceptance and surrender to their EHEs was important both during and after their experiences and parallels William James' (as cited in Pressman, 1992) understanding of the importance of cultivating wholeness by allowing and surrendering to life's difficulties and transforming them into fulfilling and purposeful experiences. Furthermore, Maslow (as cited in Pressman, 1992) spoke of shifts in cognition as a result of peak experiences like EHEs. Maslow understood this as shifting into wholeness from cognition focused on deficiency needs to cognition focused on being. This parallels non-dual therapy approaches that highlight the importance of moving toward *being*, where individualistic, egoic states are transcended (Tzu & Damgaard, 2015). As emphasized by many of the co-researchers in their themes of

surrender to *what is*, non-duality promotes complete integration of the perceived positive and negative aspects of one's life (Nixon, 2010). In the next section we will further examine a non-dual approach to the holistic integration of EHEs.

Implications for Healing, Integration, and Counselling

While integration may or may not require a specific context (i.e., structured counselling vs. a spontaneous, personal process), the use of non-duality as a therapeutic approach to helping clients integrate EHEs could be especially beneficial. For example, in the non-dual approach mindful states of attunement are cultivated in order to allow one to align with their observations and experiences of the self that promote expanded awareness (Siegel, 2013). In relation to the EHEs themselves, the co-researchers experienced expanded awareness and insights both during and after their EHEs that could be leveraged by a therapeutic process of integration that continues to build upon and expand such awareness. Moreover, transcendence of one's ego during the EHEs could be viewed as a temporary state and, thus, working to continue to release the notions of a separate, illusory egoic self may be important upon the journey to holistic healing and integration. This could be viewed as the next step in integration, should the experiencer feel drawn to continuing down this path of transcendence and awakening.

It is important to note that integration is viewed here as more than just a concept or process of "boxing up" the EHE, but instead as surrendering to the experience and releasing "my life/my self" into the infinite emptiness of one's newfound realizations. In this way, integration is largely out of our "control." For example, Adyashanti (as cited in Fenner, Krystal, & Prendergast, 2003) spoke of integration as a release of personal control, as something we are not *doing* but giving ourselves over to (i.e., quite literally,

giving up our illusory concept of “self”). This can feel extremely threatening to the experiencer, akin to a psychic-death and can comprise the death of the illusory, separate “self” (Tzu, 2014a). If one can reference an EHE that opened them to a pervasive, underlying interconnectivity and awareness of oneness, however, there is a possibility that they may feel more inclined to give up their separate sense of self and continue their journey into transcendence and wholeness.

An important caveat for counsellors is that while the EHEs appear to open up without instigation by the experiencer and entail transpersonal experiences at the higher levels of Wilber’s (2000) developmental model, a client may require additional support and re-structuring of prior developmental levels in order for successful, on-going integration and movement into higher, transpersonal developmental levels. For example, as outlined in greater detail in Chapter 2, Wilber’s (2000) lower developmental fulcrums (i.e., 1-5) highlight issues of the unique sense of self that appears to be transcended (at least momentarily) during EHEs as one experiences higher, transpersonal developmental fulcrums (i.e., 7-10). If, however, a client has unresolved issues or splits (e.g., wounds or traumas concerning rules/roles one uses to belong, including false scripts like family of origin or relationship scripts at the level of the rule/role mind) it may affect their EHE, integration process and, perhaps, even obstruct integration from occurring. Splits refer to split off aspects of the self through dissociation, numbing, blocking, etc. as is often witnessed in clients with trauma (Carnes, 1997), but can also entail split off aspects of the self that the client does not want to embody (e.g., shadow aspects (Ford, 1998)). Furthermore, focus on Wilber’s (2000) transpersonal levels 7 and 8 (i.e., the opening of the third eye and white light experiences, respectively) may be limiting in that

experiencers also need to transcend these levels to move into full integration and realization of levels 9 and 10 (i.e., realization of the ground of being and the total dissolution of the separate self, respectively).

This brings us to another caveat, which involves the difference between transpersonal states and stages, and whether or not the experiencer is actually transcending into higher developmental stages. EHEs appear to allow the experiencer access to transpersonal states, but may not involve transcendence of the psyche into higher transpersonal levels as stages. In order to move from state experiences into stages of awakening and transcend lower developmental levels, the non-dual method of no techniques, constant surrender, and release into any and all experiences without judgements or preferences could be utilized (Tzu, 2014a; Tzu, 2014b). Thus, effective counselling and integration for a client who has had an EHE should include a holistic framework in which all of the client's developmental levels can be considered and any splits, wounding, and trauma along the way are processed, integrated, and healed. This could allow for movement from awakened, state experiences into higher transpersonal developmental stages, to which we will now turn.

Given the co-researcher's themes, it is clear that the EHEs planted the seeds to propel the co-researchers into an expanded sense of awareness that can be likened to an awakening process. For example, there are many thematic parallels to the awakening journey of novices from separation (i.e., separate, egoic self) into non-dual being (Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallum, 2015). Specifically, common themes of the awakening process and the EHE include ego deconstruction and questioning reality; experiences of gnosis and intuitive knowing; and direct experiences of non-duality (i.e., oneness). Interestingly,

an examination of the continued transition of novices into embodied non-dual being (Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallums, 2015) further parallels the EHE and integration process. For example, common themes include awakening moments and encounters with the abyss; realizing the adage “nothing to do and nowhere to go;” learning to live in and trust the ordinariness of each moment; experiences of expansion, connection, and love; residing in one’s own essence and authenticity; and coming to rest in an underlying peace, freedom, and wholeness. By comparing these two streams of research, one can view the EHE and integration process as an opening into awakening and non-dual being. In so doing, counsellors could become better prepared to aid clients through this transcendent process. This also provides the counsellor with a roadmap and markers that can be utilized as they work with clients to integrate and move beyond their EHEs.

Each experiencer is going to bring unique wounds, traumas, splits, and additional experiences to therapy, but utilizing the EHE as important scaffolding for further experience and understanding of whatever manifests in one’s life can be an invaluable tool for counsellors. The most significant method counsellors can utilize when navigating these territories is informed by transpersonal, non-dual therapeutic concepts of expanded awareness, acceptance, surrender, no judgement, and choiceless awareness. These themes arose in the co-researcher’s EHEs and can be expanded upon by counsellors working with clients who have had and are seeking to integrate EHEs. Expanded awareness sparked by the EHE can be built upon in the context of therapy, as one continues to deconstruct their sense of self and their EHE and construct greater awareness around it and their insights. This work allows new insights to emerge from the place of expanded awareness. Acceptance and surrender must be fostered and mirrored by the counsellor,

especially in the context of accepting the client's lived experience whether or not that entails an EHE or an additional awakening experience. No judgement and choiceless awareness (i.e., perceiving *what is* and understanding that process without judgement, identification, or justification (Patterson, 2001)) can also be valuable tools in the therapeutic process of EHE integration and further awakening into non-dual being. The experiencer has already encountered the ability to exercise choiceless awareness during their EHE, something that could be further fostered and leveraged in the therapeutic setting to aid with integration and promote continued choiceless acceptance of life however it manifests. It is important to note that the view of integration as a giving of one's self over to the process also points to the notion that time may not be necessary for integration; rather, it can occur spontaneously, immediately, and continue to unfold over time. It must be noted, however, that the co-researchers found that their integration processes entailed a lengthy course. As such, counsellors should be aware of this quality of integration as they work with clients who have had EHEs.

In conclusion, implications for healing and counselling suggest that counsellors bring awareness to alternative models of holistic healing (e.g., transpersonal and non-dual methodologies) as they encompass the realms in which EHEs are taking place. Acceptance and non-judgement are especially important so that counsellors meet their clients in the here-and-now with unconditional positive regard and acceptance of their EHEs in order to process, work through, and integrate them. Given the transformative power of EHEs, it follows that counsellors remain open to non-conventional paradigms of human experience and the use of and openness to non-ordinary states of consciousness as alternative avenues toward holistic healing, transformation, and growth. As EHEs are

likely to occur outside the context of the therapeutic session the results of this study provide some guidelines for experiencers and potential experiencers, to which we will now turn.

Implications for Potential Experiencers

Energetic guidelines for EHEs can be elucidated from the themes and experiences of the co-researchers in the current study. Such guidelines may aid potential experiencers in fostering more positive, transformative EHEs should they find themselves opening up to, or implicated by, them. The following are three guidelines for potential experiencers:

1. **Setting:** Depending upon the context in which the EHE may occur, the setting is important to consider. To maximize the potential and possibility of an EHE occurring, one could surround themselves with positive, loving, and open-minded individuals with whom they feel able to authentically connect. A creative sanctuary, as fostered at Shambhala and Burning Man, would likely provide the ultimate context of transformation, safety, comfort, and intentionality. If one is inclined to use psychedelic substances in an attempt to facilitate an EHE, there are several caveats to keep in mind. First, one needs to be aware that EHEs appear to be non-inducible experiences and, thus, taking a psychedelic does not guarantee an EHE. Second, psychedelics may act to open the mind and provide the impetus for the EHEs to occur, but need to be taken with caution (e.g., awareness of context, safety and purity of the substance, and availability of support both during and afterwards). Finally, psychedelics act as mind-manifesters and, as a result, what one brings into the experience cognitively and emotionally will likely have a profound effect upon it. Similarly, one should consider that their prior

experiences, interests, and characteristics will play a role in facilitating the EHE and the content therein, whether or not psychedelic substances are involved.

2. **Surrender:** The most important thing to remember during an EHE is the aspect of surrender (especially surrender and openness of the mind), of giving one's self over to the EHE as it unfolds, and of going with the flow of the experience without judgement or fear. This involves an element of risk-taking, such that one does not set limits or minimize their experience prior to, during, or after. Akin to surrender are the integral qualities of openness and vulnerability that could also be cultivated to ease this process. While the EHEs appeared to be comprised of similar qualities or characteristics, their manifestations can vary across individual experiencers; therefore, one cannot expect their EHE to look, feel, or be the same as another's. One could, however, expect to be met with novel understandings and perceptions of the world, others, reality, and themselves. Such novel understandings and perceptual shifts can facilitate personal breakthroughs, healing, and acceptance of life *as it is* that has a profound impact on the experiencer's life. One's life trajectory or path may be altered in light of such profound experiences, which constitutes another reminder of the necessity of nurturing ongoing surrender.
3. **Integration:** Where integration is concerned, the experiencer could continue to cultivate openness to their new understandings and perceptions. It is important not to deny, repress, or minimize these experiences. One may be moved to seek additional information about their experiences or insights, and could become open to greater depths of introspective and spiritual exploration. Acting upon one's

EHE and the insights gleaned from it by fostering enhanced authenticity and acceptance are also important pieces of the integration process. This process may occur independently, or the experiencer may reach out for support and help during the integration process or parts of it. Sharing the experience with open-minded individuals or counsellors can be extremely significant during the integration process. Continuing to cultivate authentic connection (i.e., with the self, others, and the universe) as well as integration methods that align with the experiencer spiritually and enhance integration (e.g., meditation and refining balance) are also important. Again, surrender to the integration process and the changes and new adventures that unfold as a result of the EHE is of the utmost importance. One could also become aware of the shadow issues that can manifest (e.g., spiritual bypass, the rebel's path, and egoic ownership of the EHE) along the way to ease and maximize integration. Finally, one needs to understand that this process is likely to rock world views and change one's life, but if accepted, surrendered to, and integrated it can also thrust one into increased connection, wholeness, and healing that can have profound positive impacts on one's life.

These guidelines, based upon the experiences of the co-researchers in this study, are not meant to comprise an ultimate authority or complete understanding of the transformative EHE and its integration process. Instead, they offer pieces that may be helpful and can provide potential experiencers with a roadmap when navigating the EHE. We will now move to discuss the limitations of the current study.

Limitations

There are five limitations of this study. This first limitation may have had an effect on validity as it entails the issue of non-state specific memory recall of the phenomenon. It was not possible, nor ethical, to promote state-specific recollection of the EHEs given that they entailed particular contexts (i.e., the music festival environments) and the use of psychedelic substances. Furthermore, Skype interviews or phone calls may have altered the content that the co-researchers were willing to share, and thus may have affected the validity of the study results. In-person interviews may have provided additional feedback in regards to non-verbal cues and energetic resonance, although it is worth noting that the researcher experienced intense moments of resonance, goosebumps, overwhelming ecstatic energy, and resonance with the co-researcher throughout the interviews no matter the interview format.

The second limitation entails the context of the interviews (i.e., either three months to 10 years after the EHE), which could have had an effect on the results depending upon the timeframes between experience and recollection. For example, if one co-researcher has been on the transformative and integrative path for seven years, while another has been on the path for only three months, it could confound the results. The common themes across the co-researchers, regardless of the length of time that had passed since their EHEs, however, may remedy this limitation. In further consideration of time constraints, this study constitutes a particular snapshot (i.e., the 60-90 minute interview) that then reveals another snapshot in time (i.e., the occurrence of the EHE) as well as an additional process of capturing themes and writing by the researcher over a period of months. In addition to this, the current study was not a longitudinal study, so it is unclear

whether or not the effects of transformation shift or change over time and whether they require additional working through or EHEs to maintain them. Given the commonalities across the co-researcher's themes of EHEs it is likely that the gaps in time did not affect the reporting of the phenomenon, however, they may have affected the co-researcher's integration processes. Despite these time constraints, capturing the lived experience of the co-researchers by investigating the "whatness" of the EHEs and their transformative effects and then elucidating their "isness" through the thematic analysis required the passing of time in order to capture any transformational effects.

The third limitation involves the context in which the phenomenon was studied. The focus on EHEs in the context of the music festival may have excluded other individuals who have had similar mystical and transcendent experiences outside of such contexts, and who may or may not exhibit similar qualities of experience and paths toward integration and understanding. It was important, however, to study this phenomenon in this particular context, especially given the rise in music festival attendance in recent years. Another contextual issue involved comparisons made in the Implications for Healing, Integration, and Counselling section between the EHE and awakening experiences that drive individuals towards non-duality, as this framework may not fit for all of the co-researchers nor for those who have EHEs in other contexts.

The fourth limitation is in regards to generalizability. Because the phenomenon was studied in a small, homogenous, and geographically confined sample of festival attendees the generalizability of the results are limited. It is worth noting, however, that in regards to external validity, similar experiences in other EHE studies, as well as research on transformational awakenings, provide evidence for some generalizability. That is, EHEs

occurring outside of festival contexts were noted to have similar transformative effects on their experiencers.

The final limitation involves the implicated researcher. The majority of the themes aligned with the researcher's own personal experiences and could be a result of the EHE phenomenon itself, or could indicate bias in the data analysis. Furthermore, this phenomenon is being viewed through a very particular lens and, as such, may omit outside perspectives and understandings. It was noted, however, in Chapter 3 that bracketing would not be utilized in the study and that it is impossible to separate the researcher's own experience from the study of the phenomenon itself. Instead, this limitation was addressed by ensuring exploration of the researcher's own reflections and understandings of what was occurring in the EHE disclosures. Moreover, the researcher's interpretation, as it is closely involved with the phenomenon under study, adds additional and essential profundity and meaning to the understanding of the EHE in this context.

Despite these limitations, the current study has added depth to the understanding of the phenomenon of mystical and transcendent EHEs in a previously unexplored context, their transformative effects, and the process of integration for experiencers. It has provided a picture of the manifestations of such phenomenon, as well as a framework for understanding their integration that can assist both experiencers and helping professionals.

We now move beyond the scope of this thesis to explore suggestions for further research.

Suggestions for Further Research

The analysis of this study sparked five potential areas for further research. The first is to ask experiencers of EHE phenomenon questions that ascertain their developmental levels according to Wilber (2000) and to identify any stuck points or splits therein. This would allow for an investigation of the effect of the experiencer's developmental level on the experience and integration process of EHE phenomena. Moreover, one could examine the various modalities that experiencers are using in the process of therapy to integrate and work with their EHEs. For example, one may utilize art therapy to better express the EHE and its qualities outside of the constraints of the language domain or, perhaps, utilize cognitive behavioral therapy to make room for novel, altered perceptions and beliefs via the restructuring of one's cognitions. The second area for further research involves more deeply examining shadow issues that may arise before, during, and after EHEs to provide a fuller picture of what experiencers and counsellors could address during the integration process. The third is to investigate the occurrence of EHEs at other music festivals (if they are occurring), the environmental impact of such festivals on the EHEs, and the subsequent transformative effects and integration processes given those contexts. The fourth is to follow up with those who have had EHEs using a longitudinal, qualitative methodology in order to ascertain whether or not the transformative effects of the EHEs are, in fact, long lasting, as well as how they continue to unfold and shape the experiencer's life over time. Finally, the effects of EHEs in driving individuals toward non-duality and awakening could be investigated, especially given the parallels between EHEs and studies of awakening into non-duality. In this way, one could ascertain how

these processes complement or augment each other and affect integration and further transformation for the experiencers.

Conclusion

In summary, this research has diverged from the general study of the phenomenon of transformational EHEs in order to examine their occurrence in the context of the music festival. The transformational effects of EHEs at Shambhala and Burning Man have been ascertained and their processes of integration into the co-researchers' lives have been illuminated. Furthermore, the environments of the aforementioned festivals as they impact the EHEs have been explored. It appears that EHEs, in the context of both music festivals, had profound transformative impacts on the co-researchers that extended out into their lives beyond the festivals. Surrender to such EHEs and the changes that they bring was elucidated as, perhaps, the most important component of the transformative capacity of such experiences. Through their own processes of integration, the co-researchers were able to come to terms with and embody their EHEs and the realizations and understandings they bestowed.

This thesis has explored the lived experience of individuals who have had transformative, exceptional human experiences at music festivals (i.e., Shambhala or Burning Man) and the process of integrating such experiences into their lives. As I analysed the transcripts in order to answer the research questions that informed this study, I was struck by my own feelings of resonance and connection with the co-researchers' experiences, understandings, and insights. This resonance only grew stronger as the thematic analysis, and the insights therein, deepened and aligned with my own journey of EHE integration and personal growth. The themes and insights that the co-researchers

described were truly brought to life in the context of my past and present experience. I felt that the co-researchers' understandings were "wise beyond their years," a feeling that truly speaks to the depth and intensity of the perceptual shifts ignited by the EHEs. I believe that I have answered my research questions, and also feel as though these findings add to an important body of research that includes and does not marginalize non-ordinary experiences and states of consciousness that can have profound impacts on individuals and society at large. This study has afforded me healing, growth, and ignited a passion for continuing to examine altered states of consciousness and their effects on the lives of experiencers, especially in the context of psychotherapy. I now move forward in my endeavours to continually honour the phenomenon of EHE and the experiences of the co-researchers who contributed their time, their stories, and pieces of themselves to this research.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster and Scripts

Online Group Pages / Facebook Recruitment

Hello (*insert community name if applicable*),

My name is Brittany Bannerman and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge. I am interested in exploring exceptional human experiences [EHEs] at music festivals and their subsequent transformative effects as a part of my graduate thesis. An EHE is defined as an experience that is out of the ordinary, such as an awakening experience, and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary, every day experience. For my research I am looking for individuals who have had an EHE at either Shambhala Music Festival or Burning Man and who have been transformed by that experience and are willing to explore and share their experience during an interview. This study would require approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time in total and would include a telephone screening process, an interview, and a follow-up discussion to review preliminary results. Your participation in this research would make you a co-researcher who would collaborate and provide feedback during the research process to better shed light on these life-transforming phenomena. In this study, the procedures and methods have been designed in order to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to any potential co-researchers. Participation is voluntary and there are no negative consequences if a co-researcher chooses to withdraw.

If you wish to share your story as a part of this research project or would like to know more about the study, please contact me using the following information:

brittany.bannerman@uleth.ca

or

(403) 330-6571

Recruitment E-mail

E-mail Subject Line: Transformative, Exceptional Human Experiences at Music Festivals
– University of Lethbridge Study

My name is Brittany Bannerman and I am inviting you to share your personal exceptional human experience(s) (EHEs) as experienced at Shambhala Music Festival or Burning Man. I am also interested in exploring the transformative effects of your EHE(s). EHEs are defined as an experience that is out of the ordinary, such as an awakening experience, and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary, every day experience. As a part of the graduate program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, I am carrying out this research for my graduate thesis. This study will consist of a telephone screening, an interview, and a follow-up discussion session. The study will require approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time in total. In this study, the procedures and methods have been designed in order to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to any potential co-researchers. Participation is voluntary and there are no negative consequences if a co-researcher chooses to withdraw.

You were suggested for this study by (*insert name*) from the (*insert name*) community (*if applicable*).

Participation in this study may cause some inconveniences and risks to you that include the triggering or emotional or psychological discomfort, discomfort around the discussion of illegal substance use, and possible breach of confidentiality (e.g., theft of research material or its seizure by legal authorities). But, according to my research, disclosing EHEs may actually be psychologically and spiritually beneficial for participants. If required, however, contact information for counsellors and psychologists will be provided. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge. If you have any questions about your rights as a co-researcher in this study please feel free to contact:

Office of Graduate Studies and Research in Education

(403) 329-2425

edu.masters@uleth.ca

Thank you for your time and consideration!

If you have any questions or would like more information please feel free to contact me at:

brittany.bannerman@uleth.ca

(403) 330-6571

Recruitment Poster

(The University of Lethbridge's Fiat Lux Logo will be affixed to this poster and tear-off contact information will be included on the bottom of the poster.)

Have you been to Burning Man or Shambhala Music Festival?

Have you had an *exceptional human experience* at one of these festivals that *transformed your life*?

**This study is a part of the graduate research project on
Transformative, Exceptional Human Experiences at Music Festivals:
A Transpersonal Phenomenological Exploration**

Principal Researcher: Brittany Bannerman, M.Ed. (Student)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Gary Tzu Ph.D.

Volunteers for this study will be asked to explore and share their *life-altering*, exceptional human experience(s) (EHEs) that occurred at one of the above music festivals.

An EHE includes: an experience that is out of the ordinary, such as an awakening experience, and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary, every day experience.

Participation in this study would require approximately 3-4 hours of your time (in total) as a part of a phone screening, an interview, and a follow-up discussion.
In this study, procedures and methods have been designed to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to the co-researchers.

If your experience at either Shambhala Music Festival or Burning man is illustrative of an EHE that has changed your life and you are interested in participating as a co-researcher in this Master's thesis, or would like more information, please contact:

Brittany Bannerman

brittany.bannerman@uleth.ca

(403) 330-6571

Appendix B

The Initial Screening Process

I will use phone contact to screen interested, potential co-researchers. I will introduce myself and explain my current role at the University of Lethbridge in the Graduate program, as well as my interest in transformative exceptional human experiences that occur in the context of music festivals. I will then outline the objectives of the study and explain that I will personally interview the co-researcher either in person or over Skype, depending upon their location. I will explain that the interview will be 60-90 minutes in length and will be audiotaped and transcribed by myself for use as data in the study. I will explain that the interview will occur after the initial screening interview is complete so long as the co-researcher meets all of the inclusion criteria. Demographic information will also be recorded at this time. The following questions will be used to start the screening interview:

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Have you been to either Burning Man or Shambhala Music Festival, or both?
- Have you had an exceptional experience (i.e., an experience that is out of the ordinary and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary experience) at the previously mentioned festival?
- Did the experience occur spontaneously (i.e., not induced by you)? Was it transcendent (of either space or time, your body, or life or death)? Did it provide a new experience that was previously unknown to you? Was there an experience of any sort of connection (to others, the planet, the divine/sacred, etc.)? Did you experience being *there* (i.e., a reality unlike our ordinary reality)? Did you feel a

separation between body and mind? Have you had any additional non-ordinary experiences since then? (For the sake of time, I will require only yes or no answers to these specific questions.)

- Does uncertainty make you feel uncomfortable?
- Would you describe that experience as transformative, meaning it produced significant changes in your life or made you rethink and reevaluate thoughts, ideas, or incidents in your life?
- When did this experience occur (chronologically)?
- Briefly summarize any key or identifying features of the experience (e.g., things that stuck out for you, things you felt were particularly transformative)?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with a significant mental health issue (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc.)?
- Sometimes disclosing and discussing these types of experiences can bring up intense emotions, would you rate yourself as currently being in a stable emotional place in your life?

Other questions may be added during the initial screening interview to probe for more information or provide clarification of the inclusion criteria. The co-researchers will be selected based on whether or not their answers to the questions during the initial screening interview meet the inclusion criteria as outlined further in the methods section of this thesis.



Appendix C PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

Transformative, Exceptional Human Experiences at Music Festivals: A Transpersonal Phenomenological Exploration

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Transformative, Exceptional Human Experiences at Music Festivals: A Transpersonal Phenomenological Exploration” that is being conducted by Brittany Bannerman. Brittany Bannerman is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by e-mail: brittany.bannerman@uleth.ca or by phone: (403) 330-6571.

As a Graduate student I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters’ Degree in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gary Tzu. You may contact my supervisor at (403) 329-2644 or by email: gary.tzu@uleth.ca

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experience and meaning of transformational, exceptional human experiences (EHEs) at music festivals and the experiencer’s journey thereafter. EHEs are defined as an experience that is out of the ordinary, such as an awakening experience, and provides some awareness of a reality that is in contrast to our ordinary, every day experience. Through this exploration, particular themes will emerge and illuminate the meanings and transformative potentials of the lived experiences of adults who have had EHEs in the context of particular music festivals (i.e., Shambhala Music Festival or Burning Man). This research study positions itself from the theoretic perspective of transpersonal, phenomenological, heuristics, and hermeneutics with the purpose to delve into and understand the phenomena of EHEs at music festivals and their subsequent transformative effects in the lived experiences of adults.

Background Information

Published research in this area of study, at least in the context of music festivals, is virtually nonexistent. Research on EHEs, anomalous experiences, and nonordinary states of consciousness in particular have shown their transformative effects in the lives of experiencers if they are appropriately integrated into the experiencer’s self-concept. The contextual factors and transformational effects of EHEs that occur in the increasingly popular music festival movement, however, are nonexistent. The goal of this study is to bring more awareness into the field of psychology and counselling psychology surrounding the lived experiences of those who are having EHEs at music festivals, what

the EHEs entail, what the EHEs mean to the experiencers, and how the EHEs effect the lives of experiencers. This process is also inclusive of my own EHEs, insights, perceptions, reflections, and the shared understanding between co-researchers (yourself) and myself.

Study Applications

If mental health counsellors and practitioners are aware of the psychological and spiritual themes that impact those who attend music festivals and experience EHEs, this information may provide these counsellors and practitioners with new ways of understanding and approaching work with these clients. Utilizing EHEs for transformation and further psychological and spiritual growth can be integral to the counselling process. Furthermore, if a client is struggling with the integration of an EHE, the counsellor will have new insights from which to approach the presenting concern. The study may also provide information and insights to individuals who seek to move from a lesser sense of self to a greater, consciously evolved state.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have met the following criteria for inclusion in the study. You are an:

- Adult not younger than 18 years of age.
- Adult who has had an exceptional human experience that is mystical (i.e., unitive, oneness, or everything is everything else experiences) or transcendent (i.e., white light, union with unmanifest source, total dissolution of the separate sense of self, or egoic death experiences) in nature. Your experience occurred no more than 3 years from the date of participation in the study, and at least 3-6 months prior to participation in the study (to allow time for transformative effects).
- Adult who has been transformed by your experiences (i.e., have had significant life changes) to move toward a quest for wholeness in your lives.
- Adult who is capable of identifying and articulating your experiences, especially because of the abstract nature of the material.
- Adult who is motivated to authentically share your experiences and engage in the study as a co-researcher.
- Adult who is not currently in an emotional crisis.
- Adult who is not diagnosed with a significant mental health issue (i.e., absent from psychopathologies) as, ethically, I do not have the resources to interview this population.

Gender, employment, race, ethnicity, religious values, or exposure to the counselling process were not considered to meet inclusion criteria in this study.

Participation

This study will require approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time in *total*. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include one, audiotaped 60-90 minute face-to-face or Skype interview, depending upon your geographic location, as well as a follow-up discussion to review preliminary results. In this way, you are regarded as a co-researcher who works in collaboration with me to ensure the accuracy and truth of your lived experience and any emerging themes or results. Participation in this study involves a level of trust and understanding between us. It is important that we

are open, honest, and authentic with one another in regards to our experiences and any feelings that arise throughout the research process.

If face-to-face, the interview will take place in a non-threatening, private, and mutually agreed upon location. If over Skype, I ask that you please find a private and comfortable location and I will do the same. You will be given copies of your transcribed interview and asked for feedback to ensure the content of the transcript is valid. If it is not, you may suggest any clarifications or you may choose to withdraw from the study without penalty or consequence.

I will analyze your transcript using an insightful, open, transpersonal lens that will allow any underlying themes to naturally and spontaneously emerge. This will be accomplished by grouping various statements and creating clusters of emerging themes. Overarching themes will then be grouped and presented in the form of quotations in the final thesis project and in any subsequent publications.

Please note that you will be excluded from the study if you disclose any information regarding current harm of self (including suicidal ideation), harm of a minor or other vulnerable populations; if you disclose any information regarding physical or emotional abuse of a minor or other vulnerable populations; or if you disclose any information regarding neglect of a minor or other vulnerable populations. If you do disclose such information the researcher has the ethical obligation to report the information to the appropriate authorities and confidentiality may be breached.

Risks

There are some potential risks and inconveniences to you by participating in this research and they include the triggering or emotional or psychological discomfort, discomfort around the discussion of illegal substance use, and possible breach of confidentiality (e.g., theft of research material or its seizure by legal authorities). While the researcher is currently in counsellor training, it is important that you disclose any distress during or after the interview. To prevent or to deal with these risks counselling services referral numbers will be attached to this consent form and it is integral that you contact appropriate counselling if you are experiencing any distress as a result of participation in the study.

Co-Researcher Rights

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. You will not directly benefit from participation in this research, although it has been found that disclosing and sharing EHEs can have positive psychological and spiritual effects. You may, at any time during the interview process or within the first two weeks after reading the transcribed interview, withdraw your information from the study. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be completely destroyed.

In order to protect your anonymity you will be identified with a pseudonym of your choice and your original name will be placed in a locked cabinet. Interviews will only be

heard and transcripts viewed by my supervisor, you, and myself. You may also ensure any identifying information is deleted from your transcript. Your confidentiality, and the confidentiality of the data, will be protected by using secure passwords for electronic information; while any printed data will be kept in a locked cabinet.

Results

It is anticipated that this data and the results of the study will be shared with others in the following ways: it may be presented at conferences and/or University classes, or published in academic journal and/or a book. The results of this study will be shared with you, the co-researcher, and my supervisor as well as with other academics during an oral thesis defense. You may request an executive summary of the study upon completion.

Data from this study will be disposed of once the study is completed and the results of the research are published. Files will be stored on a digital audio recorder, an external storage drive (USB), Dropbox cloud storage, and a laptop computer, all of which will be password protected. Print copies of the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at the University of Lethbridge. Electronic and hard copy data will be deleted after five years.

Other Contact Information

You may contact the researcher and supervisor at the above phone numbers and email addresses. You may also verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403) 329-2425.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Co-Researcher	Signature	Date
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A copy of this consent will be left with you and the researcher will take a copy.

Appendix D

Interview Questions

The intention is to ensure that the interview is semi-structured to allow for the experience as it was lived to unfold in the co-researcher's own words. The entire interview should take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. The following open-ended questions will be used during the interview to facilitate a deeper exploration of the EHE, the context surrounding it, and any subsequent transformative effects. It is important that flexibility is also used in these questions so that any and all other information can come up as it reveals itself in the co-researcher's lived experience. Subsequent questions or probes may be included during the interview to further illuminate the co-researcher's experience and subsequent transformation.

- Which music festival did you attend? Was it your first time?
- Describe your EHE in your own words in a way that best illuminates the experience.
- What aspects stood out most from the experience? What was most striking, vivid, or jarring? What was most important to you?
- Looking back, was there anything that you felt sparked the EHE?
- What was the context around its occurrence: What were you doing at the time? Where exactly were you at the music festival? Were you under the influence of any substances at the time that the EHE occurred?
- What were some of the strongest qualities or characteristics of the music festival you attended? Of those, which were most meaningful to you?

- Did you pick up on any intense energies or overwhelming feelings at the music festival? If yes, when / in what context did these occur?
- How did your experience change your perception of yourself, others, or life in any way?
- Do you feel that your experience changed your life in any way? How?
- How did you act on your experience?
- How do you feel you have integrated your experience into your life, daily or otherwise?

Appendix E

Counselling Services

Contact Information for Counselling Services:

Associates' Counselling Services, Inc. (403) 381-6000

Lethbridge Family Services (403) 327-5724

Strength Counselling Services *web-based counselling services (250) 888-0895