

**DEPRESSION AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to explore and gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of depression as a transformational experience through non-dual consciousness that could not be found in contemporary psychological theories alone. The intent is to stimulate conversation and understanding through the culmination of contemporary understanding and theory intertwined with feminist and transpersonal epistemologies to explore the lived experiences of five women who have experienced transformation through their experience of depression.

A phenomenological hermeneutics approach was used to approach the phenomenon of depression as a transformational experience in women to honour the lived experience of the five women who chose to participate in this research. This study allowed for conversations to emerge out of the lived experience of the women who have been embracing non-dual consciousness for two years prior to participating in this research. Analysis and interpretation of the transcripts resulted in the emergence of twelve themes. These twelve themes fell into three main categories including *Part A: The Descent*, *Part B: The Transformational Journey*, and *Part C: Transpersonal Integration*. A summary of the findings were provided as well as a discussion of strengths and limitations of this study.

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CHAPTER ONE: MY OWN TRANSFORMATIONAL JOURNEY AS A RESEARCHER

The Implicated Researcher

My own journey into no-self and non-dual consciousness began to take hold long before I was actually aware of being on such a journey. Prior to any knowledge of no-self experiences I had experienced the terror of emptiness and nothingness and the ever pressing question of *Who am I?* Fortunately, I was introduced five years ago to transpersonal psychology where I gained further awareness and understanding to guide me through the journey of no-self and the embracement of non-dual consciousness.

Looking back, there were many experiences of feeling lost, empty and full of sadness. At the time it was a continuous battle within me “striving” to be “someone” while at the same time also experiencing my self as “no one”. I fought against the feelings of nothingness and emptiness and tried desperately to be “someone”. In order to do this, I tried with immense desperation to define my ‘self’ by those around me. I tried to become who “they” identified “me” to be. For periods of time this was seemingly successful, but to no avail those feelings of emptiness and nothingness persisted.

There was a time when I can remember looking in the mirror and seeing nothing as a reflection and feeling terrified and out of control. I was subject to many “world collapses” where all sense of meaning and security fell away and I relied on friends

and family to verify my existence as a “somebody”. My experience took the form of the common symptoms of depression, particularly in forms of sadness, hopelessness, and emptiness. When these symptoms were experienced it became a natural response for me to dive into them and paradoxically, they became something of a comfort. Discomfort and disconnectedness were common experiences for me with both friends and family. I just felt different in a way that I could not explain with words. That sense of difference was fuelled by a sense of not being good enough. I made numerous attempts throughout my life to alleviate my perceived fundamental flaws that left me feeling not good enough and continuously returning to this self-limiting, self-created truth.

I began to pursue psychology academically and then five years ago I was introduced to the field of transpersonal psychology. After a great deal of reading and personal work, I began to understand my experiences in a way that finally made sense for me. It has not been an easy road by any means, nor has it been a quick fix, but my journey has transformed me and given me the awareness of the importance of transcending the ego and ego bound modes of being. I realized that I had trapped myself in my ego and bought into all of my stories and judgments that kept me in my own suffering and misery. One of the greatest challenges for me was the recognition, and acceptance that I am the creator of my own suffering. The symptoms of depression that I was grasping at were my way of staying in that place of misery. Through personal awareness, and guidance I am continually challenging myself to fully embrace the journey of no-self. It was also a significant realization that despite my ‘valiant’ efforts to continually embrace my journey that I continued to get caught

up in my old familiar patterns that were routinely becoming more and more uncomfortable each time I re-encountered them. I was finding that working through my experiences once was not good enough; hence I continued to return that same truth.

The awareness that I was back in my familiar patterns was emotionally excruciatingly painful, it was like having a huge wound that I was regularly pouring salt on. It was in these moments that I could witness the darkness in my eyes that was a reflection of my perceptions of everything around me, and it was in one of these moments that I fully experienced the hugeness of this belief of not feeling good enough.

It was a routine morning where I was reading a book entitled *Surprised by Grace* and as I was sitting there I was a witness to my experiences *without* this core belief, and what happened was I was experiencing past experiences and realizing how this truth limited my connection to myself as well as my ability to connect with others. The significant experience that stands out was one of my last conversations with my grandmother. She was telling me how much she loved me and how she saw a beautiful young woman who was capable of anything and everything. What I saw was my response in that moment that was “yeah, except for..”, at that moment I was not allowing that in because I couldn’t let myself see her truth as it was a direct contradiction of my own. In my moment of witnessing this I was filled with such a great sadness that I could not accept my grandmother’s words, but I was also experiencing an acceptance and a deepening sense of love and acceptance of myself simultaneously. It was that moment, that memory that challenged the hugeness of my

wounded truth and a moment that opened me up with immense love and an awakened clarity. Following that experience I noticed that nothing around me was changing, but there was a huge shift within me. It was like I was seeing for the first time. Through my own journey and experience of depression, insight facilitated the realization that at the heart of depression *is* the self.

As a counsellor, I have been able to put theory into practice and utilize my own experiences to aid in understanding the experiences of others. In the past couple of years working as a counselor, I frequently saw clients with depression, particularly women. Through talking and counselling, it became very clear to me that for some of these women depression itself was more comfortable than feeling anything else. Depression for some of these women had become the pinnacle of their identity, and anything but the feelings associated with depression was very foreign and uncomfortable. Depression was a means of feeling something and a source of identification. Most of these women had spent many years undergoing cognitive behavioral therapy in conjunction with anti-depressants only to find they were still entrenched in their depression.

Through the counselling process, as the counselor, I used concepts from transpersonal psychology to help them gain insights and awareness to facilitate experiencing their depression free of attachments and judgments. Without the acknowledgement of *I am depressed*, one woman in particular felt grave terror at the prospect of life without depression. She began to experience some moments of depression free of attachment and judgments. In those moments, she often spoke of feeling lost and terribly uncomfortable. Through this insight, she began to see that

depression gave her a huge payoff, and that she could experience peace rather than misery.

My own personal experiences with non-dual consciousness have created an enormous turning point in my life and my experiences. As well, the opportunity of working as a counselor with women utilizing a non-dual approach to depression provided me with the awareness and insight of not only the benefits of this approach, but also the relevance of such an approach. This approach can offer an alternative for women to experience both themselves and their experiences with depression, but may not be a journey they want to embark on. It is with hope that for those wanting to explore their alternatives in working through their depression that this thesis may open that door for them.

Purpose of this Research

Based upon my own experiences as a woman and as a counselor working with women I have become intrigued with the possibility that the experience of depression can be transformational. Also, given my own experiences with non-dual consciousness I am moved as a researcher to understand how the experience of depression can open one up to experiences of non-dual consciousness. As a result, I have become compelled to undertake a research project to answer the question, “What is the lived experience of the resolution of women’s experience of depression through the transpersonal, non-dual journey to wholeness?”

Over the course of the last 25 years, there have been a growing number of women who have embraced a non-dual journey including Roberts (1991), Gangaji

(1995, 1999), Segal (1998), Veltheim (2000, 2001), and Katie (2002). These women have given a voice to their experience, and in doing so have become leaders in the area of non-dual consciousness where previously the voices of women's experience may not have been heard. Women may have been embracing non-dual consciousness for thousands of years but have gone unrecognized, as the focus has been primarily on the teachings brought forth by their male counterparts.

The purpose of this research is to explore women's experience of depression as a transformational experience through non-dual consciousness. In order to explore this area, the research question is: "What is the lived experience of the resolution of women's experience of depression through the transpersonal, non-dual journey to wholeness?" It is hoped that the remainder of this thesis provides an exploration of and response to this question.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter one of this thesis explores my introduction to the topic of research as an implicated researcher. Chapter two provides a literature review of the topic of women's transformation of depression by examining conventional psychology, transpersonal psychology, non-dual consciousness, and implications for women. Chapter three provides a description of research methodology by presenting the research philosophy and the procedural steps utilized to conduct the research for this thesis. Chapter four presents an analysis of the understanding of the lived experience of women's transformation of depression in the form of a thematic analysis. Chapter five discusses the implications of the research findings.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE TOPIC

Depression and Non-dual Consciousness: An Overview

Almaas (1996) accounts for the non-dual presence as a process whereby the self needs to become aware, understand and “be released from the various misunderstandings, tendencies, and attachments of the self that orient it away from its inherent endowments and cause it to stand in its own way” (p.437). Maslow (1971) asserts that all human beings seek authenticity and opportunities to be real and embrace the totality of our being. It has also been suggested by Almaas (1996) that the difficulty in achieving this either, consciously or unconsciously, is related to cases of mistaken identity. The mistaken identity arises out of an identification with ideas and concepts of who we believe ourselves to be that “greatly limit our experience of ourselves and the world” (Almaas, p.7). Thus, Almaas asserts that “only an exploration of the actual nature of the self, beyond the details of its content, can bring us to realms of experience which approach more deeply fulfilling, fundamental levels of philosophical or spiritual truth” (p.7).

The exploration of the self beyond its contents potentially provides a pathway to non-dual consciousness; a non-dual path characterized by truth, freedom, transcendence and love. It is about embracing the truth and beauty that is the surrendered self, a self that is free of self imposed bondages and limitations that are the ideals and concepts of who one “should be”, what a “good” person is and what a “bad” person is, which serve to create a false sense of self. It is this “false self”

which desires anything other than what is and sets the stage for suffering. The non-dual path of transformation is about embracing and fully experiencing humanness in all its light as well as all its darkness and, for many, this darkness is labeled as depression.

Depression is an experience of suffering, where one's core self is challenged in the midst of emptiness and negativity. Greenspan (2004) suggests that the dark emotions, characteristic of depression, offer a significant healing power when the mind and body are reconnected allowing for experiencing depression fully without judgments. Similarly, Catherine Ingram (2003) indicates that depression itself offers a silver lining as "it sometimes opens us to fresh perspective" (p.xiii). Contemporary psychology has offered a great deal in terms of our understanding of depression and effective treatments to alleviate symptoms associated with depression. Despite significant contributions from psychology today, and with the growing numbers of women who are experiencing depression, one cannot help but wonder about alternative treatments for depression. The topic of this thesis explores the experience and transformation of depression for women.

The first part of this chapter will explore what has been coined as the 'three forces' of psychology and corresponding contributions to understanding and treating depression (De Carvalho, 1990; Matson, 1971). Each force offers insight into the development of a healthy self, primarily focusing on a process of individuation. Each force also proposes a different developmental path for the self, and thus divergent approaches to understanding and treating depression.

Following an introduction to the “three forces” in psychology, a discussion of contemporary psychology will outline what depression is and what are the ‘best practices’ for addressing this common mood disorder in women. The latter part of this chapter will focus on the ‘fourth force’ in psychology, which is the focus of this research, which is an exploration into understanding depression as a potential transformational experience in women. This will be followed by a discussion emphasizing women’s experience of depression as transformational that embraces the female perspectives regarding non-dual consciousness.

The Three Forces of Psychology

The following discussion explores the contributions of first, second, and third force psychology in understanding and treating depression.

The “First Force”

The first force in psychology began to take hold in the 20th century as a reaction to the 19th century preoccupation with consciousness and introspection, supported by William James (1961) who believed there to be many levels of consciousness, not necessarily limited to the normal rational consciousness. This reaction spawned a disregard for understanding consciousness and ‘the mind’ as such through subjectivity, and rather focused on understanding that which could be objectively observed thereby focusing more so on overt observable behavior. Hence, the first force of psychology, known as behaviorism, was founded by John B. Watson

(1958) who attempted to make psychology a natural science whereby phenomenon could be measured and described objectively by observers.

Since Watson's initial introduction to classical behaviorism, others have built on these basic premises to include reinforcement and learning theory (Murphy & Kovach, 1972). Further building on behaviorism was B.F. Skinner (1948) whose contributions included the introduction of operant conditioning thereby allowing for consideration of past history, which had previously been dismissed in classical behaviorism. Despite modifications made to behaviorism and its contributions to psychology, the focus remained primarily on repairing behavior. However, as indicated by Keen (1991) depression and other emotional experiences are not necessarily resolved through a focus on behavior, such as taking action in exercise, time management, and thinking positively. Critics of behaviorism (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1998) reflect concerns similar to Keen (1991) in that behaviorism fuels a dualism, which serves to disconnect individuals from their lived experience. To address such concerns, the proponents of behaviorism eased the rigidity of an exclusive focus on behavior to delve into the "black box" of human kind known as the inner cognitive world (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988).

Initially there were three distinct cognitive therapies including Kelly's (1955) personal construct approach, Ellis's (1962) rational emotive therapy, and Beck's (1970) cognitive therapy. Despite attempts brought forth by these cognitive therapies to merge the inner and outer worlds a significant criticism can be aimed at these approaches. The process of cognitive therapies reinforce to the individual that what they are feeling is not okay and with necessary modifications they can transform their

irrational thoughts to rational thoughts. Thus, the focus is on understanding “negative” cognitions and emotions with an aim to control and eventually eliminate these. This suggests the need to reject aspects of one’s self, which in and of itself can contribute to the depressive experience.

Cognitive behavioral approaches for the most part do merge the outer world of the individual with elements of the inner world through an emphasis on connecting body, affect, and cognition. For some individuals seeking treatment of emotional disturbances such as depression, this approach has been found to be beneficial, however for other individuals who are seeking something more, such as integration of deeper explorations of self that encompass the importance of spirit and soul, they may find the emphasis in the first force of psychology to be limiting.

The “Second Force”

In the midst of the emergence of behaviorism in the 19th century, the second force of psychology was also simultaneously evolving. This second force was not a reaction to behaviorism as it were; rather it was growing out of frustration from psychiatrists at that time to identify an organic basis for neurosis (Capra, 1982).

The contributions of Sigmund Freud (1949, 1955, 1962, 1967) in his development of psychoanalysis are immense, particularly for his contributions to understanding the dynamics of the unconscious (Capra, 1982). Freud’s psychoanalytic views proposed that human nature is largely deterministic and that human behavior is determined by unconscious desires and drives (Corey, 2001).

Through techniques such as hypnosis, free association, and dream analysis, psychoanalysis was able to ‘tap’ into the depths of the unconscious.

Freud’s (1949, 1955, 1962, 1967) conceptualizations of the unconscious lead to understanding psychological disorders through emphasizing the importance of childhood experiences. With an emphasis on unconscious drives, Freud identified “libido” or sexual drives as a key principal from which he derived stages of psychosexual development (Corey, 2001). As Freud continued to develop psychoanalysis, he developed a new understanding of personality and the unconscious dynamics rooted in the interaction of three intrapsychic structures known as the id, ego, and superego.

Jung (1956, 1963) has also made monumental contributions for facilitating a deeper understanding of the unconscious. Central to Jung’s contributions are the collective unconscious and his work involving archetypes, dream work, and religious mythology, all which informed his belief that the psyche is oriented to move towards wholeness and fulfillment.

Psychoanalysis has continually evolved in the evolution of Self-psychology and object relations theory. Central to these ‘new’ theories is the notion that early experience of the self shifts over time as awareness expands from self to others (Corey, 2001). St. Clair (2000) indicates that these newer theories in psychoanalysis allowed for an increased insight into how an individual’s internal world can lead to experiencing difficulties with the external world and his or her relationships with others. Central to contemporary object relations theory is the work of Margaret Mahler (1968), who contends that key to the development of a healthy self is the

relationship of the individual with the maternal figure and a process of separation and individuation, which has been outlined in four stages of healthy development. Other key contributors to contemporary psychoanalysis include the works of Kernberg (1975, 1976); Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984); and Masterson (1976), all whom propose essential factors involved in the development of a “healthy” sense of self.

The “Third Force”

The third force of psychology grew out of frustration with the deterministic views brought forth from the previous two forces and came to be known as humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology has its roots in existentialism, historically linked to philosophy, psychology, and art (Barrett, 1962; Kaufmann, 1975), which emphasized the self-determinism of the individual (De Carvalho, 1990).

Philosophers such as Kierkegaard (1962), Nietzsche (1969), Heidegger (1962), and Sartre (1956) initiated the existential movement that brought forth consideration of the importance of inner subjective experience and negated the idea of human existence being understood in objectified terms, and rather focused on characterizing humans as “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1962), where being and world are one.

Yalom (1980), and Zimberoff and Hartman (2004) describe existential issues as unresolved circumstances, consequences of being human, which serves to challenge an individual’s personal effectiveness. Existential issues are those issues at the crux of the human condition that are:

..so deeply embedded and so fundamentally threatening that they motivate avoidance at any cost through neurotic defenses. They include such topics as

death (one's mortality and limitations), aloneness, meaninglessness, freedom and responsibility (actively exerting one's will; taking more active responsibility for one's choices between growth or stagnation, between the challenge of the unknown or safety of the familiar; being clear about and true to one's own needs), awareness of uncertainty (inevitability of change and the sense of freedom that flows from a recognition that one is unable to control the outcome of events), surrender (of the ego to the greater Self, to the Divine) (Zimberoff & Hartman, 2004, p.3).

These core existential issues are related to the ultimate fear of non-being, where an individual perceives his/her very existence to be at stake (Bugental, 1965).

Existential anxiety arises not just in relation to physical mortality, but also, and perhaps more so, to the threat of ego dissolution, the realization that the 'I' is not solid and permanent.

Striving for identity is a concept most if not all human beings can relate to. Each of us at some point experiences striving to 'find ourselves': exerting energy defining ourselves in terms of others rather than turning the search inward (Corey, 2001). As a result of grounding our being or sense of self in other's expectations, we sell ourselves out and become strangers to ourselves and conflicted by the great fear of nothingness and being no one (Corey, 2001).

Each of us enters existence alone and each of us will leave alone (Yalom, 1980). In order to live fully, we must learn to experience existential isolation (our aloneness) and relate to people from that space to avoid experiencing relationships based on the fear of ultimate aloneness (Yalom, 1980). Human beings can

compromise their beingness to avoid the reality that there is no grounding that keeps them afloat by grasping onto the concepts with which they and others identify and define themselves. These concepts, which create a sense of identity are constructs of the ego and when they are threatened or challenged with a felt sense of annihilation, the big question of “who am I?” arises and feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, and nothingness (common symptoms associated with depression) are experienced.

Humanistic psychology emerged out of the existential philosophy and existential psychology movement where the humanistic focus maintained that each individual has within them the natural potential for self-actualization and growing to their full potential. Contributors to the humanistic approach include Maslow (1954, 1968, 1971); Bugental (1964, 1967); and Rogers (1951, 1961, 1980). Of particular relevance to the topic of this thesis is the contributions made by Maslow (1968, 1971) and his establishment of the need for individuals to transcend the self in the process of self-actualization. Maslow (1971) deemed this to be intrinsic to human nature and through his research indicated that individuals who had spontaneous mystical and/or peak experiences, beyond the sense of self, most often reaped great benefits from them.

The ‘three forces’ have each contributed greatly to the field of psychology and our understanding of the human experience. Each force contributes to our current understanding of individual experiences of depression. Much of our current understanding and approaches to depression reflect the ideas brought forth in the first three forces of psychology, which will be explored after the following discussion on depression.

The Nature and Etiology of Depression

Understanding the nature and etiology of depression is important before an informed consideration of treatment approaches can be explored.

The 'Nature' of Depression

Research pertaining to depression in contemporary psychology is in abundance and indicates that “depression” is used to refer to a set of symptoms and references to mood, as well as a clinical syndrome (Coyne, 1986). Diagnostic criteria for depression reflect the significance of the mood or feelings experienced which include those related to sadness, emptiness, and hopelessness, numbness or inability to feel, meaninglessness, and distortions in thinking and judgments (Coyne, 1986; O’Connell, 1998). The diagnostic criteria for Major Depressive Episode in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2000) include:

- A. Five (or more) of the following symptoms have been present during the same 2-week period and represent a change from previous functioning; at least one of the symptoms is either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.
(1)depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., Feels sad or empty) or observation made by others (e.g., appears tearful). Note: In children and adolescents, can be irritable mood.

(2)markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by either subjective account or observation made by others).

(3)significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g., a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day. Note: In children, consider failure to make expected weight gains.

(4)Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day.

(5)Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).

(6)Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.

(7)Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or guilt about being sick).

(8)Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others).

(9)Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

B.The symptoms do not meet criteria for a mixed episode.

C.The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

D.The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (eg. a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., hypothyroidism).

E. The symptoms are not better accounted for by Bereavement (i.e., after the loss of a loved one); the symptoms persist for longer than 2 months or are characterized by marked functional impairment, morbid preoccupation with worthlessness, suicidal ideation, psychotic symptoms, or psychomotor retardation.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th Ed.) serves as a guide for clinicians as well as identifies distinguishing characteristics to sub-categories of depression, which invariably relate back to the diagnostic criteria of Major Depressive Episode (APA, 2000). Depression then, is synonymous with loss and suffering by the very nature of the symptoms themselves.

Depression has been characterized as one of the most common mental illnesses, frequently referred to as the “common cold” of mental illness. Despite its reference as being all too common, it is regarded nonetheless as a serious concern in mental health (Coyne, 1986). It has been estimated that depression affects one in ten individuals in the course of their lifetime, and that depression is twice as common in women (Weisman & Klerman, 1979; Kaplan, 1991; O’Connell, 1998; APA, 2000) than men. As such, many of us have either had, or will have experiences of depression in our lifetime, however the degrees to which the symptoms are experienced vary in their severity and duration (APA, 2000). While more than 80% of people with depression could be substantially helped by available medications and therapies, the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that two-thirds of depressed people do not seek treatment and, therefore, suffer depressive symptoms unnecessarily to the detriment of self, family, and society.

Etiology of Depression as Proposed in Contemporary Psychology

Contemporary psychology reflects a bio-psycho-social approach to understanding causes and effective treatments of depression. While the exact causes of depression are unknown and somewhat dependant on the individual, the conceptualization of the etiology of depression has favored the bio-psycho-social approach. Understanding the etiology of depression is significant for our understanding of favored treatments drawn from the three forces of psychology brought forth previously in this chapter.

Biological theories, which reflect second force psychology, propose that depression results from organic dysfunctions which, to date have been substantiated in the literature based on advances in research pertaining to genetics and biochemistry, as well as neurophysiology. Genetic studies have postulated that an individual's genetic makeup is influential, or increases the vulnerability to the development and experience of depression. Key to this assertion is the research involving twin studies. Evidence contributed by McGuffin, Katz, and Rutherford (1991) revealed higher rates of concordance in monozygotic twins at 53%, than the rates of 28% found in dizygotic twins. Despite the fact that increased vulnerability due to genetic factors is revealed in twin studies, there has not been a 'depression gene' found to date. This suggests that genetics does not necessarily determine one's fate in experiencing depression, however genetic predispositions may affect brain development, resulting in an increased vulnerability for the development of depression.

Significant research has also been conducted involving neurotransmitters and the biochemistry of the brain. Based on research in the area, it has been proposed that

neurochemical disturbances have been implicated in mood and mood changes. The neurotransmitters primarily implicated in depression are norepinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine. Neurochemical research pertaining to depression suggests that there are lower rates of neural firing in selected areas of the brain, which is due to an absence or reduction in neurotransmitters (Marshall & Firestone, 1999). Out of this understanding anti-depressants have been found helpful to 're-balance' such chemicals in individuals experiencing depression. It is important to note that anti-depressants are not effective in all individuals experiencing depression and have also been implicated in increasing the experience of depression and risk of suicide (O'Connell, 1998).

Despite biological influences in the experience of depression, those influences in and of themselves do not necessarily adequately predict the occurrence of depression. The psychology of the individual as well as environmental factors has also been implicated in the etiology of depression.

For some individuals, depression is the response to environmental stressors. Such stressors include divorce, death, aging, loss of relationships, loss of job, poverty, and homelessness to name but a few. Monroe and Simons (1991) found strong correlations with the experience of depression and experiencing recent losses such as termination from employment, marital discord and separation, and poor performances at school. Responses and reactions to stress vary from individual to individual, as such depression is not the response to stress for everyone. To account for this, let us now explore the differences in individual psychology that have been identified as increasing vulnerability for depression.

The psychology of individual differences is reflective of the concepts embedded in the third force of psychological theories. Individual differences in personality traits or characteristics have been linked to increasing ones susceptibility to experiencing depression. These traits include but are not limited to considerable negativity or pessimism, increased worrying, low self-esteem, perfectionism, dependency on others, and sensitivity to stress (Marshall & Firestone, 1999). Additionally, five dimensions of personality have been identified as characteristic of depression including; (Marshall & Firestone, 1999)

- 1) Introversion/extroversion
 - someone who is more introverted will more likely experience depression due to their lack of ‘talking’ and expressing what is going on for them and through reaching out to social connections
 - introverts are more likely to stuff what they are feeling and turn it inwards as opposed to outwards
- 2) Emotional stability/neuroticism
 - those lacking in emotional stability are more likely to think negatively, feel more guilt and anxiety, and not cope with emotions effectively if at all
- 3) Openness/closed minded
 - those that are open are more vulnerable to be affected by ‘out there’, as opposed to someone that is closed minded who is less vulnerable due to their closed stance, but in turn may be subject to experience world collapses, where one’s sense of meaning and identity crumble.
- 4) Conscientiousness/non conscientiousness
 - conscientiousness reflects perfectionism and can be a factor increasing vulnerability for depression. This line of thinking suggests that perfectionists do not typically account for ‘life’ and do not take things as easily as they come rather they rely heavily on external structure to provide a sense of meaning and security.
- 5) Agreeableness/cynicism
 - those lacking in agreeableness are generally more cynical, inconsiderate, limiting, and manipulative.

Segal, Shaw, Vella, and Katz (1992) conducted a study where comparisons between two personality types were explored regarding the development of depression. One type of personality was the dependant personality, where individuals

characteristically rely heavily on others for their sense of worth and self-esteem. The second type of personality explored was the self-critical personality, that way of being in which the individual embraces perfectionistic like qualities. What this particular study found was that individuals deemed dependant were more likely to experience a relapse in depression in relation to a loss of a significant relationship. Thus, the focus on individual differences suggests non-biological factors related to the genesis of depression.

As mentioned previously, the exact cause of depression is not known and based on the bio-psycho-social approach, thus all factors must be taken into account. Research by Plomin and Neiderhiser (1992) suggest strong links on the interaction of genetics and environment in the determination of human behavior. Similarly brain functions have been shown to both influence and be influenced by both psychological and social processes (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1992).

Based on the above mentioned theories pertaining to the etiology of depression, the treatment modalities currently favored in the treatment of depression include interpersonal based therapies, and cognitive therapy, as stand alone interventions or preferably, in conjunction with anti-depressants. Let us now explore these favored modalities in more detail followed by an exploration of their limitations.

Preferred Treatment Modalities in Contemporary Psychology

Contemporary approaches to the treatment of depression favor an emphasis on both interpersonal and cognitive based therapies.

Interpersonal Therapy

Drawing from the third force in psychology, interpersonal therapies (Klerman, Weissman, & Rounsavill, 1984) emphasize depression as a response to a disruption in an individual's ability to adjust to situations and circumstances. This approach places great emphasis on the role of family, friends, and responses to stress, as well as coping abilities for life transitions such as becoming a parent or leaving home for the first time. Interpersonal therapy focuses on an individual's ability to cope primarily focusing on relationships.

Interpersonal Therapy consists of three distinct phases of treatment. The first phase consists of enabling the individual to deal with depression through education and validating their experience of 'being sick'.

The second phase of treatment explores interpersonal issues, primarily focusing on relationships and exploring alternative courses of action and evaluating the costs and benefits of the newly identified courses of action. Social skills training may also be integrated in the second phase of treatment.

The third and final phase of treatment (also known as the 'termination' phase) prepares individuals to effectively work to change without long term reliance on the therapist (Klerman et al., 1984).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) reflects concepts embedded in first force psychology. Unlike Interpersonal Therapy, CBT is characterized by focusing on

changing the underlying depression producing thoughts and behavior (Corey, 2001). CBT challenges individuals to recognize their negative thought patterns and beliefs (irrational) and reframe them to more productive and positive thought patterns and beliefs (rational). CBT employs a variety of strategies to reframe cognitions including behavior modification that focus on doing something often involving homework and exercise.

While these preferred treatment modalities have proven to be effective for alleviating the symptoms of depression in some individuals, it may not be effective for all individuals experiencing depression. Thus, the premise for the research explored in this thesis is to focus on alternatives for understanding depression, beyond first, second, and third force psychology, and explore with women the possibility of transformational experiences of depression into non-dual consciousness.

A Turn to Transpersonal Psychology

The emphasis on non-dual consciousness is a reflection of the ideas brought forth in the “fourth force” in psychology, known as transpersonal psychology, offering a more holistic approach capturing the full range of human experiences including the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Transpersonal psychology brings forth the ideas of ego transcendence and the development of consciousness beyond the personal self. The fourth force of psychology brings the forces of psychology full circle in the sense that the first force emerged as a reaction

to William James' (1961) notion of deeper levels of consciousness. While the ideas of western psychology focus on the development of a healthy self concept, transpersonal psychology focuses on transcending ideas and concepts that make up the sense of self (the false sense of self) to embrace the true nature of the self, free of the limitations of such ideas and concepts. Wellwood (2002) suggests that focusing on getting rid of depression through traditional psychological theory, as explained above, prevents the recognition of depression as a potential teacher that can convey an important message as to our relationship with our self, the world, or life as a whole. Wellwood (2002) states that if we are to heal depression rather than suppress it, "we need to approach it not just as an affliction but as an opportunity to free ourselves from certain obstacles that prevent us from living more fully" (p.172).

Transpersonal psychology addresses depression in a holistic manner that utilizes traditional psychological theory and counseling approaches as well as eastern wisdom. Thus, transpersonal psychology offers a model that serves to deepen our understanding of the many layers of consciousness involved in depression and corresponding alternative treatments.

Ken Wilber (1977), an influential contributor to consciousness research introduced a groundbreaking work mapping out the development of consciousness entitled 'The Spectrum of Consciousness' which serves as an integration of Eastern and Western schools of psychology and contemplative development. Wilber (1999) has identified his works as a "full spectrum model of human growth and development, a model that includes the psychodynamic, object-relational, and cognitive lines studied by conventional psychology and psychiatry" as well as

integrating the development of higher levels of consciousness (p.49) in a developmental, structural, holarchical, systems oriented format. Within the spectrum of consciousness, Wilber (1999, 2000) has also identified potential pathologies that can occur at each level of development as well as identifying possible interventions that are applicable to each developmental level. An illustration of the ten structures are as follows:

Prepersonal

1. Sensoriophysical: The realms of matter, sensation, and perception.
2. Phantasmic-emotional: The birth of the emotional self.
3. Rep-mind: The birth of the conceptual self.

Personal

4. Rule/Role mind: The development of rules and roles to belong.
5. Formal-reflexive: The development of the mature ego.
6. Vision-logic: The existential level.

Transpersonal

7. Psychic: Opening of the 'third eye'.
8. Subtle: Direct apprehension of deity-energy form
9. Causal: Witnessing the abyss

Non-dual: Integration of form and formlessness and previous levels (Wilber, 1999).

Wilber's model sets the stage for understanding the development of the self as it navigates through the holarchy where it integrates each level of development and transcends to the next. As this serves as a developmental model, it begs the question

as to whether or not there are developmental differences between males and females in the construction of the self that may have an impact on the self's navigation? In order to fully understand women's transformational experience of depression into non-dual consciousness, it is important to first understand developmental differences in females that have implications in their navigation through development of self, experiences of depression, and ego transcendence (transcendence of the personal self).

Before we discuss in detail the developmental stages of Wilber's model, we need to turn to women's psychology for further understanding of the developmental process of women.

Contributions From Women's Psychology

Chesler (1972) reflected on women's experiences of depression as a response to a felt sense of loss (including one's sense of "self"), " 'depression' rather than 'aggression' is the female response to disappointment or loss" (p.82). Chesler (1972) goes on to add that women are in a "constant state of mourning", a mourning for that which they never had, or perhaps had only briefly including a "strong socially approved 'ideal'" self (p.18). Women's ego development according to Chesler (1972) is conducive to depression as female psychological development, or ego development, is geared towards limitations that encompass traditional femininity. Ego development is "deeply rooted in a concern for limited and 'specific others'" (Chesler, 1972, p.321) and as such, calls for a shift in the basic ego development of

women to encompass a passion for self-empowerment, connecting with all aspect of one's self, and not forgoing their own growth for others.

Gilligan (1982) points to a distinctive difference in the development of males and females in that women's perceptions of themselves are "deeply embedded in relationships with others". Women, according to Gilligan (1982), are oriented towards "connectedness" and their perception of self is in relation to others, while men are oriented generally more so towards autonomy and separation (Kohlberg, 1981). The self-in-relation model of development has evolved with the works of women scholars from the Stone Center Group to aid in further understanding of women's developmental experiences as relational beings. Surrey (1991) describes women's self-in-relation as an "evolutionary process of development through relationships"(p.59) and the basic elements of a woman's core self can be characterized as follows;

(1) an interest in and attention to the other person(s), which form the base for the emotional connection and the ability to empathize with the other(s); (2) the expectation of a mutual empathic process where the sharing of experience leads to a heightened development of self and other; and (3) the expectation of interaction and relationship as a process of mutual sensitivity and mutual responsibility that provides the stimulus for growth of empowerment and self-knowledge. Thus the self develops in the context of relationships, rather than as an isolated or separated autonomous individual (p. 58-59).

Kaplan (1991) posits, "connection with others, then, is a key component of action and growth, not a detraction from or means to one's self-enhancement"

(p.208). Kaplan (1991) relates women's experiences of depression as a reflection of women's inability to fully develop their relational capacities, and being unable to fully express themselves that set the stage for experiencing depression. Inability to fully express a total self is marked by an understanding of developmental processes that have traditionally been discussed in terms of the male experience that serve to limit our understanding of women's developmental process. Kaplan (1991) suggests that depression is not only an individual experience, rather a condition of women in general, whereby women have been traditionally conditioned to repress or deny aspects of themselves to maintain and foster relationships in an attempt to validate their sense of self. This has significant implications for women embracing a quest for wholeness and fully embracing the totality of their relational being.

Understanding women's development in terms of self-in-relation is significant for our understanding of not only the development of self, but also to our understanding of depression and implications for women's journeys into non-dual consciousness. Christ (1995) indicates that women need literature that can speak to their pains as they experience them that can provide them with an opportunity for insight. Male mystics have greatly contributed to literature pertaining to mysticism and the non-dual and as indicated by Christ (1995), there are differences to be considered for men and women embarking on a non-dual journey as,

women never have to give up what male mystics must strive to give up. Mystic insight may therefore be easier for women to achieve than men. Women may need only to strip away the ideology of patriarchy that tells them they are fulfilled as wives and mothers in order to come face to face with the nothingness they

know as lack of self, lack of power, and lack of value for women in a male centered world (p.18).

When exploring women's experiences with depression as transformational on the non-dual journey, Christ (1995) posits that women have great opportunities to learn from other women and that through the act of transmitting experiences, "their act creates new possibilities of being and living for themselves and for all women" (p.23).

Wright (1995) contends that much of the transpersonal work to date has focused on androcentric psychological and spiritual models of development where the value and understanding of the feminine is lacking. Wright (1995) in particular has addressed these concerns with the works of Wilber and his developmental model,

Left out of or minimized in his schema have been values, qualities, and perspectives that are often connected with women's psychological and spiritual development. These include the effect of women's more permeable ego boundaries on their patterns of personal and spiritual development; an emphasis on developing personal "wholeness" over attaining a specific level or type of consciousness; preferences for circular and web-like models of development and reality that emphasize mutual interconnectedness; and the importance of the body, nature, and/or Goddess-oriented experiences of spirituality (p. 210).

As such, it is imperative to integrate the 'feminine' voice into transpersonal psychology. Let us now turn to an in-depth exploration of Wilber's model of adult development where the feminine will be integrated at each level of development.

Integrating The Feminine into Wilber's Model of Transpersonal Development

The initial stages or levels of development in the spectrum (Wilber, 1999) correspond with the developmental models of Piaget (1977), Mahler et al (1975), and Erikson (1950). Through each of the initial stages (levels of the pre-personal), the individual has to learn to distinguish the self from the environment, others, as well as additional psychic structures (Wilber, 1999). If differentiation fails at these levels and subsequent levels, individuals may become stuck or fixed in a level thereby increasing the potential for corresponding pathologies (Wilber, 2000). If the central or core self is to ascend the holarchy or levels, one must negate exclusive identification with that level in order to “ascend to the greater unity, differentiation, and integration of the next higher basic level” (Wilber, 1999, p.94). As one moves up or transcends the holarchy each level is integrated to the next, each level or basic structure remains valuable and is necessary in the ladder of consciousness (Wilber, 1999).

Level 1: Sensoriophysical

In the first levels of the spectrum Wilber (1999) refers to the works of Mahler et al. (1975) on the process of separation-individuation to illustrate the development of the self. At the sensoriophysical level, Wilber (1999) refers to it as the “hatching phase” where the “self-system must negotiate the emergence of the physical and sensoriperceptual basic structures of existence” (p.102). The ‘self’ at this level is unable to recognize its individual presence as being separate from others and the environment. With successful development of this level the individual differentiates

itself from the physical world, or with what Mahler et al. (1975) calls the hatching phase; there is the emergence of the body-ego signifying the recognition of personal body movements (Wilber, 1999). Disturbances at this stage result in the self as being unable to differentiate where the body ends and the environment begins and advancement does not happen as “consciousness fails to seat in the physical body” (Wilber, 1999, p.163). It is this inability to differentiate between self and others, that the “inside and outside are fused and confused” leaving most adults to experience schizophrenia and depressive psychosis (Wilber, 1999, p.112). Treatment at this very basic, primal level is very difficult and it is recommended by Wilber (1999) that the use of medications would prove fruitful over therapy initially. In the instance of depression at this level, the use of anti-depressants such as Zoloft would be beneficial.

Level 2: Phantasmic-emotional

At this point after successful differentiating within the first level, the self enters the second level of differentiating within the self between internalized self-images and internalized object-images (Wilber, 1999). During this phase (phantasmic-emotional), the self must differentiate its emotions from the emotions of others and attempt to establish individual emotional boundaries resulting in the emergence of a strong and stable emotional self (Wilber, 1999). Until the self can establish emotional boundaries, the self remains narcissistic (lacking sufficient awareness of others) and unable to see or experience the world as separate from the self and may feel overwhelmed or ‘flooded’ by the outside world (Wilber, 1996, 1999). Failure to

transcend this level results in an individual having weak emotional boundaries and “the world tends to ‘flood’ the self, causing anxiety, depression, and severe thought disturbances”, narcissism, and borderline pathologies (Wilber, 1999, p.113).

Interventions, aimed at the self oriented at level two, center around structure building techniques that facilitate continued development through the separation-individuation process thereby allowing the differentiation of self and other to occur (Wilber, 1999). A therapist at this level would gently reward the steps taken toward separation-individuation and benignly confront or explain all steps not taken towards differentiating and those taken towards splitting off (Wilber, 1999b). A common feature of structure building techniques is aiding the individual to recognize that they can engage and activate themselves towards separation and individuation, and it will not be destructive for them or their loved ones (Wilber, 1999b). If the self succeeds in healthy development, the bodily self integrated with the emotional self transcend to the next level of the conceptual self (Wilber, 1999).

Depression at level two is the result of the inability to fuse the emotional self and the physical self and the feelings of being flooded by the outside world (Wilber, 1999). The inability to fuse this level with the previous results in a split where the individual struggles with emotional boundaries, and depression is one of many potential experiences where the self feels overwhelmed and ‘flooded’. Flooding can contribute to an individual experiencing trauma, which can hinder an individuals growth, as they can remain fixated in their trauma.

Trauma, as indicated by Carnes (1997) is the result of an individual’s inability to cope with situations or events that have happened perhaps once, and even many

times. Trauma may be experienced in relation to experiencing an extreme event such as a rape, accidents, or assaults to name but a few. Carnes (1997) holds that while some traumas are the result of an extreme event, traumas can also occur for an individual on a daily basis. In and of themselves, each of these experiences may appear insignificant at the time however, the hurt continues to accumulate with each experience and can then leave the individual feeling as though the rug has been pulled out from under them.

Level 3: Rep-mind

With the self integrating its experience at levels one and two, the birth of the conceptual self gradually emerges which is considerably aided by the acquisition of language (Wilber, 1999). The emergence of the conceptual self, similar to Piaget's (1977) preoperational thinking, is a time when the self learns not just to feel, but also to think and "verbalize, talk, and mentally control its behaviors" and "in a sense, the mental self (and its thoughts) learns to repress the previous emotional self (and its feelings)" (Wilber, 1999, p.113). The self developmentally can now function within the concept of time with the ability to conceptualize events in terms of past and present, envision things in cognitive awareness, and intensify bodily functions that were previously not achievable (Wilber, 1999). If the self learns at this level to repress certain aspects of the self, which are experienced as unacceptable by others, potential disturbances may include anxiety, compulsions, phobias, and obsessions (Wilber, 1999).

Wilber (1999) suggests interventions to facilitate integration of the self's experiences at level three. These interventions include utilizing uncovering techniques such as classical psychoanalysis, strategies within Jungian (integrating the shadow) and Gestalt therapy, and ego psychology to uncover the repressed emotions and feelings (aspects of the shadow self) and integrate them back into cognitive awareness.

Depression at this level occurs when the individual is split off through the process of feeling as though they have to repress certain aspects of themselves or if they feel as though they have to repress most aspects of themselves (Wilber, 1999). Critical judgments, and an over functioning super-ego are also contributing factors in experiencing potential depression at this level. In terms of critical judgments, the individual is at risk for negatively judging aspects of themselves and giving way to the over functioning superego, which inflicts the individual with enormous guilt about those aspects of themselves deemed unacceptable. A split occurs within the psyche when the shadow self emerges and the individual cannot handle letting those aspects of self into their perceptions of the self.

In accordance with self-in-relation theory (Surrey, 1991), it can be suggested that women at this level may experience difficulties particularly if they are receiving validation and acceptance from their significant relationships for repressing certain aspects of themselves. These repressed aspects may include their sexuality and aspects that contradict traditional notions of femininity.

Level three is the final level of the pre-personal stages of the development of consciousness and the self with the integration of these levels and transcends from the

pre-personal to the personal levels of consciousness development. With the development of a healthy self-structure, the self moves to further expand its consciousness from the pre-personal levels to the personal levels to develop the maturing ego which Wilber (1999) associates with a range of cognitive, identity, and existential concerns (Wilber, 1999). The personal levels reflect on the works of Loevinger's (1976) conformist sense of self, Maslow's (1954) self's need for belongingness, and Kohlberg's (1981) conventional moral sense (Wilber, 1999).

Level 4: Rule/Role mind

The self at this level is increasingly “evolving from bodily to mental levels of the spectrum” (Wilber, 1999, p.138). As the mental self transcends the rep mind, it begins to identify with the rule/role mind where the self can not only imitate a role, but can actually begin to assume or take on the role of others signifying that the self has grown to recognize itself in others (Wilber, 1999). The ability to assume the role of others signifies a desire for acceptance and a sense of belonging, to understand their role among others, and to understand the rules of society for the purposes of deterring the fear of losing face, losing role, and breaking the common rules of society (Wilber, 1999). If the self is not fully integrated at this level, rule and role pathologies emerge where the individual's overt communication is not congruent with covert implications (Wilber, 1999). The seemingly hidden agendas of the covert messages are the key pathogenic structures at this level of the self (Wilber, 1999). These incongruencies often result in splitting within the psyche, which can cause

great conflict internally for the self, leading to false beliefs and maladaptive cognitive scripts (Wilber, 1999).

The conflicts characteristic of the self at level four are more cognitive oriented reflecting the first level where cognitive script concerns fully emerge and develop as the self attempts to differentiate from the previous levels that were more psychodynamic in nature (Wilber, 1999). Interventions for individuals conflicted at this level tend to focus on cognitive therapy to challenge the self's distorted beliefs with the hope that the self can develop and integrate a healthier concept of the self (Wilber, 1999).

Depression at this level can occur when the self is experiencing an internal split, or when the process of de-selfing occurs. Lerner (1989) describes the process of de-selfing as occurring "when one participates in relationship patterns that block one's own growth or when too much of the self (one's beliefs, values, wants, priorities, ambitions) becomes negotiable under relationship pressures" (p. 201). False beliefs and maladaptive cognitive scripts may bombard the individual. This happens when the self's ideal is not congruent with one's actual experiences. For example, there may be vast differences in the individual's social self versus their family self. In this case, the individual may experience depression as they start to impose critical judgments on their social self in relation to their family self and experience guilt as a result of their over functioning super-ego.

When exploring social roles, it has been suggested that conflicted roles and resulting exhaustion potentially lead to depression (Brandis, 1998). This may be particularly true for women. Women experience a constant state of re-creating

themselves through projects and roles, which may include striving to meet cultural expectations, relationships, family, and work to name but a few. The multitude of roles required in women's lives also creates stress as some women are in a constant state of juggling demands and often neglect adequate and necessary care of themselves. Wetzel (1994) claims that women today are still reinforced with notions to "concentrate primarily on marriage, the home and children (despite their work outside the home), [as well as] to view their own development as selfishness" (p.94). Similarly, Maynard (1993) reflects that women are socialized to be 'other focused' without the opportunity to adequately develop 'self-focus'. This over focusing in women's role to please others versus self may be a significant factor that contributes to women's depression for women at level four.

Level 5: Formal-reflexive

As the self transcends the rule/role level and has integrated healthy rules and roles, the self is no longer bound by "social roles and conventional morality; for the first time it can depend on its own individual principles of reason and conscience" (Wilber, 1999, p.124). For the first time, the self can conceive of future possibilities, new goals, desires, as well as fears (Wilber, 1999). The self becomes "a philosopher, a dreamer in the highest sense; an internally reflexive mirror, awestruck by its own existence" (Wilber, 1999, p.125). "Identity neurosis" is at the heart of pathologies at this level where the self is attempting to stand on its own principles of conscience, and think for itself (Wilber, 1999). The self at this level can be overcome with anxiety or depression at the thought of standing on its own and applying its newfound

philosophies (Wilber, 1999). Interventions for the self conflicted at this level consist of utilizing socratic dialogue to engage the self's "reflexive-introspective mind and its correlative self-sense" (p.141) to facilitate the self's gravitation to and accepting its own philosophies (Wilber, 1999).

Depression can occur here when the self either cannot identify with its philosophy and or becomes fixed in the fear of standing on its own consciousness and thinking for itself (Wilber, 1999). This experience of fear can create a split within the individual psyche particularly if the self does not like or want to accept its identity. The discomfort with its identity may stem around not feeling as though it is good enough and lacks the confidence to fully embrace standing on its own without the security of others to validate it and its philosophy.

A woman at this level of development may experience difficulty embracing her philosophy as an individual because this involves the "struggle to disentangle her voice from the voice of others and to find a language that represents her experience of relationships and her sense of self" (Gilligan, 1982, p.51). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldgerg, and Tarule (1986) posit and elaborate that women have unique ways of understanding themselves and how they relate to others. In this regard, women's experience of depression at this level may reflect a significant betrayal of self in that they have given up or surrendered their sense of self and voice for their relationships with others. The betrayal may reflect women's inability to trust and believe in themselves enough, in some cases, to know their own beliefs, thoughts, and feelings outside of others, thus the ultimate betrayal is a disconnection from their own self. Related to this, Brown and Gilligan (1992) found that adolescent girls when faced

with “a wall of shoulds” (p.92) in fact “come to a place where they feel they cannot say or feel or know what they have experienced” (p.4) which can be the continued experience in adulthood. Clinchy (1996) also indicates that the wall may still be in place for women leading to an inability to connect with “their own uniqueness and humanness” (p.228). Connected knowing for women is not an easy task and for most women it can be easier to understand the beliefs, values and desires of others than it can be to understand their own. This can be further illustrated by the following response from an interviewee cited by Clinchy (1996); “it’s easy for me to see a whole lot of different points of view on things and to understand why people think those things. The hard thing is sitting down and saying ‘Okay, what do I think and why do I think it?’” (p. 228). Transcending the conflicts embedded within the self at level five would involve women finding their own voice and empowering their sense of self through a process of reconnecting to themselves.

Level 6: Vision-logic

As the egoic self matures and accepts its own personal position in the world, it encounters the existential level, which serves to integrate both the body and the mind (Wilber, 1999). Level six of self development represents the integration of mind, body, and emotions “into a higher-order unity, a “deeper totality”” (Wilber, 1979, 2001). Here the self is attempting to integrate autonomy, authenticity, and self-actualization to grapple such concerns as meaninglessness, fear of death (being and non-being), loneliness and ultimate aloneness, anxiety, and freedom (Wilber, 1999).

Common existential syndromes, experienced by the self at level six, as outlined by Wilber (1999) include:

1. Existential Depression
2. Inauthenticity
3. Existential Isolation
4. Aborted Self-Actualization
5. Existential Anxiety

These syndromes typically surface for the self when egoic meaning in life is no longer satisfying (Wilber, 1979, 2001). The existential level is the level where the self attempts to find meaning beyond the ego which requires less of doing and more of being. Meaning is then found in “the inner radiant currents of your own being, and in the release and relationship of these currents to the world, to friends, to humanity at large, and to infinity itself” (Wilber, 1979, 2001). When this task is unsuccessful, then what emerges is similar to what Maslow (as cited in Wilber, 2001) speaks of regarding self-actualizing and the process of failing to engage it in the following:

We have, all of us, an impulse toward self-actualization, or full humanness or human fulfillment. [This is] a push toward the establishment of the fully evolved and authentic self..., an increased stress on the role of integration (or unity, wholeness). Resolving a dichotomy into a higher, more inclusive unity amounts to healing a split in the person and making him feel more unified. [This is also an impulse] to be the best you are capable of becoming. If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life (p. 107).

Another aspect of level six is the self's realization and acceptance of death. Life and death are interchangeable in that you cannot have life without death and vice versa. The self at this level must integrate this awareness within themselves. May and Yalom (1995) contend that if one is unaccepting of death, then by the same token one is also unaccepting of life.

Depression can occur when the individual struggles with syndromes characteristic of level six and strives to experience meaning in their existence that is beyond egoic meaning. A split occurs when the self is faced with the reality of their inauthenticity, lack of death awareness, fear of being, fear of ultimate aloneness, inability to find meaning, neglects engaging in their full potential and constantly 'sells out' and existential crisis may be experienced (Wilber, 1999).

Rich (2005) in her doctoral dissertation, exploring women's experience of nothingness has indicated that women's experience at the existential level, specifically the existential crises is different than the experience for men. Rich (2005) posits that this difference is characterized by a gendered difference in that how it is experienced and worked through differs, in part, on gender. The primary difference according to Rich is related to the relational orientation of women, and that as their identity is developed, it is an identity that is "characterized by split-off and suppressed aspects of being". Part of the challenge for women experiencing nothingness and existential crisis is reclaiming those split off aspects specifically related to their gendered existence and that in the process of reclaiming and revaluing the feminine is the potential for the process of spiritual growth marked by Wilber's final levels of the transpersonal.

Interventions for the self conflicted at level six revolve around integrating the body, mind, and emotions of the self. Typically this involves working with the individual to establish autonomy, authenticity, and self-actualization (Wilber, 1999).

The existential level is the final level that conventional Western psychology typically recognizes regarding self development and marks where Wilber's spectrum of consciousness moves beyond to integrate Eastern approaches, which outline further expansion of consciousness in the transpersonal levels of development. Western psychology has been slow to embrace the importance of consciousness beyond the personal. For example, Grof and Grof (1989) indicate that despite many individual exceptions, "mainstream psychiatry and psychology in general make no distinction between mysticism and mental illnesses" (p. 2). Individuals and professionals alike can interpret the experiences, or possible pathologies of the transpersonal levels as 'psychotic' and question the sanity of the individual with whom the experiences are happening (Wilber, 1999; Grof & Grof, 1989). However, as Grof and Grof (1989) assure us

if properly understood and treated as difficult stages in a natural developmental process, spiritual emergencies can result in spontaneous healing of various emotional and psychosomatic disorders, favorable personality changes, solutions to important problems in life, and evolution toward what some call "higher consciousness" (p.7).

Perry (2005) suggested some individuals experience a psychosis as a natural path by which they can reconnect with themselves in a deeper manner hereby expanding consciousness,

Any interpretations given during the psychotic activity may be on the level of pointing out the general meanings of general symbols, such as death and rebirth as an expression of change, or messianism as an expression of a new cultural program, etc. Otherwise on more rare occasions, there is a chance to point out what one recognizes of the place of an image in the personal emotional life context; when this occurs, there is apt to be an inrush of the affect heretofore lost from the view of psychosis, creating a situation I like to call “moments of realization (Perry, 2005, p.27).

What Perry establishes, based on his work with individuals experiencing psychotic episodes, is that perhaps for some of these individuals their experience of psychosis is “nature’s way of setting things right” and that “even though this compensatory process may become a massive turmoil, the turbulence is a step on the way toward living a more fulfilled emotional life” (Perry, 2005, p.27).

The seventh level in Wilber’s model is where contemporary psychology leaves off. The subsequent levels of self development reflect the ideas brought forth from transpersonal psychology and mark the onset of spiritual practices. Let us now turn to the final levels in Wilber’s spectrum of development.

Level 7: Psychic

This level is the first of the transpersonal realms, and marks the onset of spiritual or contemplative practice often conceptualized by the opening of the ‘third eye’ (Wilber, 1999). At the onset of the transpersonal levels, the individual’s conscious identity shifts from a worldcentric identity to a more universal view with continuous

self-transcendence towards unification and dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy or dualism (Wilber, 1999). The individual at this level has an awareness that is no longer confined exclusively to the ego, but begins to experience moments of duality dissolution where cognitions are more refined and universal moving beyond existence of the previous levels (Wilber, 1996, 1999, 2000).

Wilber (1999) identifies several potential pathologies that an individual may experience at the beginning of their contemplative development. These include; Structural imbalance due to faulty practices of the spiritual technique, Dark night of the soul, Split life goals, Psychic inflation, Pranic disorders, and Yogic illness.

Structural imbalance due to faulty practices of the spiritual technique typically results in mild forms of anxiety, headaches, and intestinal discomforts (Wilber, 1999). Similarly, Pranic disorders and Yogic illness may also present difficulties primarily experienced by the physical body. Pranic disorders may be experienced when there is a misdirection of Kundalini energy typically resulting in uncontrollable muscle spasms, breathing difficulties, and moderate to severe headaches (Wilber, 1999). Yogic illness is typically characterized by a strain on the physical-emotional body as higher levels of consciousness are developed (Wilber, 1999). The remaining pathologies including the dark night of the soul, split-life goals, and psychic inflation lend to the experience of depression at this level.

The dark night of the soul marks the experience when an individual has a temporary taste or experience of non-dual consciousness only to find that it is not permanent and the experience of wholeness fades away (Wilber, 1999). As the experience of wholeness fades away, an individual may suffer from a deep, profound

abandonment depression as they attempt to grasp onto the experience only to find that it is intangible (Wilber, 1999).

Split-life goals are characterized by the individual experiencing an internal split as they face the choice of remaining in the world, or opting to live a life in a “reclusive meditative existence” (Wilber, 1999, pp.128-130). The internal split is a result of the individual’s inability to balance the needs of the lower self and the needs of the higher self (Wilber, 1999).

Psychic inflation can also occur at level seven and is marked by the ego’s over identification with the newly developed and experienced transpersonal energy (Wilber, 1999). The result of the over identification is re-defined separate self-fixations, which serves to combat a unified, whole self.

Interventions that lend to counseling practice related to level seven are supported by Bolen’s (1985) work. The work of Bolen’s (1985) archetypal goddesses can be helpful to further understand this level and work with women to transcend this level in the holarchy. According to Bolen (1985) there are goddesses in every woman and as such, understanding which particular goddesses are active in a woman can facilitate a deeper understanding of the ‘self’.

The goddesses identified by Bolen (1985) include: Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon, personifies the independent, achievement-oriented feminine spirit; Athena, goddess of wisdom and craft, represents the logical, self-assured woman who is ruled by her head rather than her heart; Hestia, goddess of the hearth, embodies the patient and steady woman who finds comfort in solitude and exudes a sense of intactness and wholeness; Hera, goddess of marriage, stands for the woman

who considers her roles as student, professional, or mother secondary to her essential goal of finding a husband and being married; Demeter, goddess of grain and the maternal archetype, represents a woman's drive to provide physical and spiritual sustenance for her children; Persephone, maiden and queen of the underworld, expresses a woman's tendency toward compliancy, passivity, and a need to please and be wanted by others; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, the 'alchemical' goddess governing a woman's enjoyment of love and beauty, sexuality, and sensuality, impels a woman to fulfill both creative and procreative functions.

Additional interventions aimed at the level seven self come from the use of non traditional stories. Pinkola Estes (1992) suggests that stories, fairy tales and myths can facilitate a deeper sense of knowing and understanding that can lead a woman to the path of reconnecting with herself. Her contributions include a deeper understanding of the 'wild woman' archetype that she describes as follows;

The archetype of the wild woman and all that stands behind her is patroness to all painters, writers, sculptors, dancers, thinkers, prayermakers, seekers, finders—for they are all busy with the work of invention, and that is the instinctive nature's main occupation. As in all art, she resides in the guts, not in the head. She can track and run and summon and repel. She can sense, camouflage, and love deeply. She is intuitive, typical, and normative. She is utterly essential to women's mental and soul health (p.11).

Christine Downing suggests that the goddesses and archetypal understanding are much needed in terms of women's spirituality as "we are starved for images that recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing

power of female energy” (in Plaskow & Christ, 1989, p.120). Through the images of archetypes like the goddesses and the wild woman, women are offered inspiration and strength. Within the inspiration and strength women are also offered the opportunity to re-member their past ‘me’s’ as well as use the insights to reconstruct future ‘me’s’ (Downing, in Plaskow & Christ, 1989, p.121).

Level 8: Subtle

Consciousness at the eighth level of self development is mediated through archetypal forms consisting of subtle sounds, audible illuminations, and profound clarity (Wilber, 1980, 1999). In a rapid descent, consciousness is differentiating itself entirely from the ordinary mind and self (Wilber, 1980). The subtle level sees the origin of the deity mysticism and is noted by Wilber (1999) as a witnessing of something beyond previous levels, nature mysticism, and rationality. Wilber (1980) refers to this as ‘over-mind’ where “the over-mind simply embodies a transcendence of all mental forms, and discloses, at its summit, the intuition of That which is above and prior to mind, self, world, and body—something which, Aquinas would have said, all men and women would call God” (p.68). The God referred to is not seen as an ontological other set apart from humans or creation at large; rather it is an archetype of one’s own consciousness (Wilber, 1980). It is a recognition of one’s own essence as the self becomes one with the archetype. It is a recognition that this archetype is grown from within, and that the “prior nature of the ego is revealed to be that form, so that consciousness reverts to-- or remembers—its own prior or higher identity” (Wilber, 1980, p.70). Failure to transcend level eight and integrate with all

previous levels may result in such pathologies including: integration-identification failure, pseudo-nirvana, and pseudo-realization.

Integration-identification failure represents a split that occurs between the self and the archetype, which is characterized by a struggle for the mental self to dissolve and give birth to the archetypal presence and identity (Wilber, 1999). The dualism or split is created when the individual fails to recognize that the archetype comes from within the individual and is not separate from their identity (Wilber, 1999). The split or dualism can occur if the individual perceives either components of the archetype as separate from the self or the total archetypes as separate (Wilber, 1999). The self may experience pseudo-nirvana if they perceive the experience of archetypal forms as complete wholeness, and accept this identification as the final death of the separate self.

Pseudo-realization reflects the individual's inability to recognize the normalcy of experiencing the content of consciousness as frightening, which can produce both physical and mental discomfort (Wilber, 1999). Grof and Grof (1989) indicate that the road to enlightenment is anything but easy, and that if "spiritual crises" are not properly understood an individual may call into question their individual sanity.

Depression can be experienced when the individual judges their experiences negatively hindering the acceptance of the normalcy of their experiences. If the self is unable to transcend this phenomenon, they will remain fixated in their own misery and suffering (Wilber, 1999).

Level 9: Causal

Attachments to archetypal forms are transcended in the causal level, which is characterized by the witnessing of manifest and unmanifested forms as they arise and are defined in consciousness as a formless self (Wilber, 1999). The self is dissolved into formlessness, where both subject and object are forgotten (Wilber, 1980).

You are an opening, a clearing, an emptiness, a vast spaciousness, in which all these objects come and go...sensations come and go, thoughts come and go—and you are none of them; you are the vast sense of freedom, that vast emptiness, that vast opening, through which manifestation arises, stays a bit, and goes (Wilber, 1999, p.222).

Roberts (1991) describes this state as the unitive state that is always changing. She describes a pinnacle moment in her own journey marking difficulties that may be experienced at this level, where “I could no longer see the words on the page; suddenly they became characters without meaning. It was several days before I could read again, and then it was totally without meaning” (p.27). For Roberts, she experienced a “special light” that left her unable to access meaning without it for years later. She further identified plunging into the darkness “wherin the only knowing was by this special light” (p.27). Attachment to this light facilitated the awareness for Roberts, as noted previously by Wilber,

no insight or enlightenment lasts forever; rather, it comes and goes, shedding light on our present state, ever assuaging the human need to know. In this way, what strikes us as inspiring at one time will, at another, leave us quite empty—which

tells us we must cling to nothing, because all is a passing gift, and not the end of the light (p.28).

The surrendering of attachments marks the final transcendence in the holarchy as outlined by Wilber.

Level 10: Non-dual Consciousness

This is the final level to be covered and is the focus of the research of this thesis exploring a non-dual approach to resolving depression. This level is commonly referred to as the Absolute, Atman, and Nirvana in various traditions of wisdom. It is at this level that consciousness is no longer identified with the witness and is now integrating it in all experiencing (Wilber, 1999). The conscious self encounters the state of non-dual consciousness to realize that this is the natural state and has been present all along only to be covered by a false sense of self (Wilber, 1999). This level represents total dissolution of the separate self and an embracement of complete and total wholeness marking a complete embracement of all levels of the spectrum of consciousness (Wilber, 1999). It is a state that re-emerges, that has been there all along through dropping or letting go of the illusion of the separate self to a place of returning to the Divine reality.

Eastern mystic Balsekar (1992) describes the non-dual as “sudden understanding”, and where the ‘me’ is “totally annihilated, where there is an intuitive insight in which there is no individual comprehender” (p.187). It is not a state to be sought after for in seeking there is still duality. Rather, it is a mystery representing the unknown yet it is the state that has always been there. Balsekar (1989) shares,

You are neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor space. You are the witness of those five elements as Consciousness. Understanding this is liberation...If you detach yourself from the identification from the body and remain relaxed in as Consciousness, you will, this very moment, be happy, at peace, free from bondage (p.16).

The non-dual experience is experiencing a self without attachments or bondage associated with the identification of 'me'. It is a letting go of the self that identifies and relies on dualities, thus it is a letting go of the ego and mind that relies on such concepts denying the freedom of consciousness (Balsekar, 1989). Non-dual presence cannot be achieved when the self is striving for it, it is in this striving that we judge and reject experiences through self-manipulation, and such efforts will only serve to "disconnect us from ourselves" (Almaas, 1996, p.437). Full experiencing, free of judgments and rejection is the embracement of non-dual consciousness.

We've just explored Wilber's transpersonal model of self development moving from prepersonal to personal to transpersonal modes of consciousness. We will now move to an exploration of contemplative pathways which can facilitate the self's progress as suggested by Wilber.

Pathways to Non-Dual Consciousness

The experience of non-dual consciousness offers the experience of a self without boundaries, and especially in the realm of gender differences, as polarities are dissolved into oneness. In the quest for wholeness or oneness, individuals have a wide array of similar yet different paths to guide them to the non-dual including Zen

and Sufism. Zen has been described as the path of meditation whereas Sufism is the path of love (Rajneesh, 1981). Both paths meet and become one at the “peak”, but the process of attaining the “peak” differs by way of which pathway individuals feel a sense of connection to. Goleman (1988) highlights this notion further indicating that the path one believes in will impact the interpretation of the experience though all paths ‘end’ with the same experience.

When a Sufi enters a state in which he/she is no longer aware of his or her senses, and the only thought is that of Allah, s/he knows this to be fana; when a yogi is no longer aware of his or her senses, and his or her mind is totally focused on his or her deity, then s/he will say s/he has entered samadhi. Many different names are used to describe one and the same experience: jhana, samyana or samadhi, fana, Daat, turiya, the great fixation, and transcendental consciousness. All seem to refer to a single state with identical characteristics (Goleman, 1988, p. 107-108). Similar to Goleman (1988) and Rajneesh (1981), Almaas (1996) states that:

most traditional methods of self-realization are based on moving beyond representations and the associated psychic structures. They focus on establishing nonconceptual consciousness or awareness, either by transcending the content and the activity of the mind in general, or by activating spiritual phenomena—like presence—which are already nonconceptual. For example, a Zen Buddhist might be attempting to “go beyond the mind”, the Christian mystic to “surrender to God”, the Sufi to achieve “annihilation in the Divine” (p. 183-184)

Rajneesh, (1981) identifies two pathways in particular Zen and Sufism as the foremost pathways in attaining the non-dual based on ‘psychological men’ and

'psychological women'. Rajneesh (1981) identifies the path of Zen as more conducive to 'psychological men' and the path of Sufism as more conducive to 'psychological women'. When distinguishing between men and women psychologically, Rajneesh (1981) holds that "there are men who are more capable of love than any woman, but they are few. There are a few women who are more capable of meditation than any man, but they are few. The majority of women will have to follow Sufism, and the majority of men will have to follow Zen" (p.32). When exploring the area of this research, one is compelled to explore these differing pathways to further understand the transformational journey to non-dual consciousness in women's experiences of depression. Let us now briefly explore the pathways of both Sufism and Zen.

The Path of Zen

Zen is identified as the path of meditation and the teachings of Zen, referred to as discourses are brought to life through anecdotal stories (Rajneesh, 1979, p. ix). It is through these anecdotes that individuals can experience the suddenness of the non-dual energy,

Zen anecdotes are not something to read. As far as reading is concerned, they are worthless. They are something to be lived; that is the only way to understand them...you have to listen not with your ears but with your heart; not with your mind but with your silent being (Rajneesh, 1979, p. ix).

The mind according to Zen is the root of suffering through an individuals attachment to thoughts and concepts. Thoughts are the means by which individuals

are divided within themselves as well as with the whole of existence. Through the practice of meditation and silencing the mind, one becomes more open to experiencing the fullness of their being,

In meditation, you have to become hollow, just like a bamboo, so that the whole, the existence itself, can sing its song through you. You become simply a part, dancing, because the wind of the whole is passing through you (Rajneesh, 1979, p.16).

Zen according to Rajneesh has no particular path, rather it is through the experience of meditation and stilling the mind that one is open to experience the sudden awakening of non-dual energy. Rajneesh (1979) refers to this as the diamond thunderbolt. He stated, “the diamond is the hardest thing in the world, and to call a thunderbolt ‘the diamond thunderbolt’ is to say that it comes to you suddenly like a spear, it passes through you, taking away all garbage and leaving behind pure space” (p. 17).

However, the experience of transcending “all garbage” through meditation eventually too has to be let go of. By this, it means that an individual too needs to transcend the limitations of experiencing pure being to times of meditating. For example, an individual may have a set time to meditate and in transcending these limitations “meditation becomes your being” (Rajneesh, 1979, p.35) and is thus happening on a moment to moment basis.

The Path of Sufism

Rajneesh (1981) describes Sufism as the path of love marked by “a heart-wakefulness: becoming loving and aware in your heart” (p.31). The heart is described as the contact point between the universe and an individual, “it is through the heart that you are plugged in with the universe” and to connect with your heart, one has to be open to knowing oneself and entering into one’s heart (Rajneesh, 1980, p.23-24).

In Sufism, living in the mind perpetuates living a fragmented and disintegrated life (Rajneesh, 1980). When one is able to go into their heart, it is there that they can remain centered and integrated “all that is needed is to drop your chains that you have forged around yourself: your defenses, your armor, your protection” (Rajneesh, 1980, p.31).

Non-dual consciousness knows no boundaries, including gender. The non-dual is about oneness and connection to all, however, much of the literature pertaining to the embracement of the non-dual has greatly been with the contribution of male mystics who have chosen to share their experiences. However, there is now a growing body of literature from women describing non-dual consciousness. We will now explore these female contributions in greater detail through both teachings as well as experiences.

Female Contributions Toward a Non-Dual Understanding of Depression

Significant contributions by Katie (2002), Veltheim (2000, 2001), Gangaji (1995, 1999), Segal (1998), and Roberts (1991) provide a record of women’s experience of

self development into non-dual consciousness. These women, who have embraced a non-dual path, reveal experiences and teachings that have great relevance for offering a non-dual approach for women experiencing depression. We will now explore the specific contributions of each of these women.

Byron Katie's "Work"

Byron Katie (2002) experienced what she referred to as a 10 year "downward spiral" where she plunged into a two year depression that debilitated her completely, leaving her unable to function as a professional, a wife, a mother, as a person. Katie describes that time as being consumed in darkness, and out of desperation she checked herself into a halfway house where 'the work' emerged leaving her awakened to who she is. In that moment of initial awakening she found a freedom in which she was free of concepts of who or what she is. In describing the moment where there was "no me" Katie reflects,

All my rage, all the thoughts that had been troubling me, my whole world, the whole world was gone. At the same time, laughter welled up from the depths and just poured out. Everything was unrecognizable. It was as if something else had woken up. *It* opened its eyes. *It* was looking through Katie's eyes. And it was so delighted! It was intoxicated with joy. There was nothing separate, nothing unacceptable to it; everything was its very own self (p.p. xi-xii).

From that experience, 'the work' arose to challenge the perception of truth for others to experience their own transformation. Her work centers around four questions that facilitate a deeper understanding of the self through challenging ideas,

beliefs, concepts, and ideas that keep humans from reality. Katie's four questions are as follows;

- 1) Is it true?
- 2) Can you absolutely know that it's true?
- 3) How do you react when you think that thought?
- 4) Who would you be without the thought?

The last question is to be followed by the "turnaround", where the individual is invited to take the opposite perspective. These four questions and the turn around are designed to challenge the core beliefs or stories individuals have that contribute to their suffering. The work is an invitation for individuals to uncover truth and experience a transformation in their experience of themselves and others. The process allows for individuals to experience their true nature free from the entanglements of stories and drama.

Esther Veltheim's "Broken Mind"

Veltheim (2000, 2001), through her own experiences of depression opted for alternative methods that focused on ego-transcendence and working on psycho-spiritual issues which correspond with Wilber's 9th and 10th level in the spectrum of consciousness. Through her own journey and her experiences with the teachings of Ramesh Balsekar, she offers an alternative for understanding depression in terms of a split or 'broken mind' (Veltheim, 2000, 2001). This split is a reflection of the state of mind of an individual who is identified with a multifaceted false personality and the body object (Veltheim, 2000,2001). The split occurs when we live and focus on

extremes and polarities. For example, the use of judgments that pose assumptions of good and bad. In a bout of depression, there is a split that persists and the bad feelings are pushed away or depressed, and the good feelings are grasped at and tried to be maintained. There is a desire to not feel the bad and an even stronger desire to hang onto the good feelings.

Another way of saying this is that by trying to escape certain feelings and emotions, you are ultimately trying to control your emotions. When there is a feeling of being out of control it is almost painful (though there are times when it can be quite liberating), control ironically is associated both with personal control and something that we have no power over (Veltheim, 2000, 2001). The split mind lives on polarities such as good and bad, and subsequently control could not exist without its polarity lack of or no control. There is a desire associated with control that consists of not wanting to lose it. We are looking to avoid and control change through hoping for specific outcomes that give the illusion of control and as such life is more enjoyable. When the opposite happens life is less enjoyable and “what is, is never sufficiently fulfilling, and what is not always seems to be a better alternative” (Veltheim, 2000, p.119).

Depression signifies a time when one’s orientation to the world is challenged and out of control. The unknown is having to be faced full on. Facing the unknown results in fear, guilt, and the desire that our ego or sense of me is trying to control, hang onto hope and experience only pleasure. What happens with depression though, is that there is no longer the strength to maintain the ‘me’ or cling to hope, and the ever pressing question of who am I arises (Veltheim, 2000). Without the ‘me’, one’s

orientation to the world is thrown off leaving one with feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, sadness as well as other symptoms of depression. When the 'me' falls away, it feels awkward and unnatural and the assumption is made that the familiar 'me' is the real me (Veltheim, 2000, 2001). This process ensures a quest to become other than you are, not only present in depression but also in our day to day lives (Veltheim, 2000, 2001).

We, as human beings are constantly in pursuit of something better, driven by our goals and notions of success, fear and desire. Enlightenment or self-realization is about the recognition that the 'me' is only a faulty perception, and the falling away of the 'me' signifies the falling away of that which is familiar (Veltheim, 2000, 2001). "In the initial stages of 'enlightenment', the falling away process of the 'me' is invariably experienced as depression. Often the words 'dark night of the soul' are used instead, but this doesn't make matters feel any better. Depression is still the experience" (Veltheim, 2000, p.121). When the 'me' that identifies with desire and control, and judgements fall away, one can fully experience all feeling. Whatever the experience, without the 'me', it is experienced as peace and the struggle of the split mind has subsided (Veltheim, 2000).

When we are consumed in the 'me', we are constructs or concepts of our egos that feel pride, ownership, desire for what is not, and desire to maintain our false self. Our false self is striving to maintain our false perceptions signifying our own specialness, which is a reflection of our own narcissism. Depression is about emptiness and the struggle is about filling this emptiness with the ego constructs and perhaps even with the depression itself, feeling something is better than feeling

nothing (Almaas, 1996). We defend against the feelings associated with depression because we do not want to lose our sense of self (Veltheim, 2000). When we ‘burn through’ our own narcissism, we open our awareness’s and lose judgments and desires. As the ‘me’ falls away, we dissolve the polarities that foster the duelling within and we are able to fully experience our feelings and emotions, to open ourselves to the wound in the perception of the self and sit with it rather than fight it. When we cease to fight, we can simply experience depression and realize that depression is present, but the ‘I’ is not depressed (Veltheim, 2000, 2001).

Gangagi’s “Dissolution of the Me”

What Gangagi (1995, 1999) speaks of is the dissolution of the ‘me’ that is bound by egoic concepts that keep us in the confines of the mind. Boundless consciousness can have an initial sense of annihilation of self and intense fear, however by accepting the invitation to boundless consciousness, it is discovered that ‘you’ are beyond annihilation, only the ideas of who you are can be annihilated. That which you yearn for, that which you hunger for, is That which is always present. That is who you truly are...you can receive the direct transmission from your own self. That transmission is satsang. Satsang confirms your true identity as pure consciousness, free of all perceived constraints...What does end is the preoccupation with imagining yourself to be some particular entity separate from boundless consciousness (1995, p.1).

The experience of depression often reflects the felt sense of self-annihilation. In a bout of depression, an individual is often left with the desire for the end of

suffering and a sense of knowing how that suffering should end, that it will be ended if certain things turn out a certain way (Gangaji, 1995). This results in feeding the mind, which in essence leaves one stuck if not further entrenched in their suffering (Gangaji, 1995). When suffering is met without rejection, it is experienced for what it is. "True joy includes both happiness and unhappiness...true joy embraces all polarities, all action, and all inaction" (Gangaji, 1995, p.11). To have nothing, be nothing, and be no one is one of the greatest fears to be faced and when the fear associated is met, in that experience is truth and boundless consciousness (Gangaji, 1995).

Suffering is the general condition of being entangled in the mind and 'my' story. When entanglement ceases, peace is experienced. "By being willing to directly experience what you feel as your evil nature, by not moving to repress it and by not moving to act it out, negativity cannot survive" (Gangaji, 1995, p.48). Through the process of repressing thoughts, feelings, and experiences one is closing off elements of consciousness and creating suffering within, when everything is felt and experienced, suffering is no longer the experience because there is no personal attachment to suffering (Gangaji, 1995). The mind is the house of personal reality. The result is a mind created reality, that can either be experienced as positive or negative and when the mind ceases, concepts of good/bad, like/dislike rest and dissolve into stillness.

Suzanne Segal's "Collision with the Infinite"

Segal (1998) provided a detailed account of her struggles throughout her journey into the non-dual in her book 'Collision with the Infinite'. Segal speaks to the process of her own experiences and going through the 'stages' of enlightenment. As her awareness was heightened and the experience of no-self was underway, she initially experienced fear and eventually as fear subsided there was clarity in simply experiencing what is. With this came a sense of no-"I" or no self being present but only the witnessing of experience.

Segal reported that the experience of witnessing was baffling, though not nearly as baffling as the dissolution of the witness, which occurred later. "One might have imagined that a great weight would have been lifted when the witness disappeared, but the opposite was true. The disappearance of the witness meant the disappearance of the last vestiges of the experience of personal identity" (p.54). With the dissolution of the witness, there was no longer a sense or experience of a 'me' and the feeling of a 'somebody' was instead felt as emptiness. In the emptiness, the mind, body, and emotions no longer had anyone to refer to, "no one who thought, no one who felt, no one who perceived"(p.54), yet within the emptiness thinking, feeling, speaking, and perceiving continue to function with smoothness. The result was impending questions around the notion of "who am I?", and there was no answer that came from the mind. When initially describing the loss of 'me', Segal shares the following account:

It's the most horrible thing that has ever happened. When I look in the mirror, I'm shocked to see a reflection. When I walk down the street and people look at

me, I wonder who they're looking at. When I talk, I hear a voice speaking, but there's no one behind the voice...Maybe I've gone completely insane (p.57).

Segal, continued "the loss of the 'me' resulted in a depression and a quest for the mind to bring the experience of the 'me' back. Emptiness was felt everywhere, and the mind was desperately trying to hold onto that which was previously perceived as 'me'. In an attempt to avoid the emptiness and sense of loss, Segal (1998) made an attempt to reconnect with her personal sense of self in a reunion with her mother. During that attempt, Segal (1998) experienced her heart sink as "the sight of her did nothing, changed nothing in the emptiness...In that moment a deep despair settled over the mind as it realized that I would never again experience having a personal self—even though the mind could never grasp how that was possible" (p.59).

Later, with the birth of her own daughter, Segal (1998) described that she gradually arrived at a place of greater, though not complete acceptance of the loss of a personal self. She related, "the relationship between my daughter, Arielle, and her mother who is no one developed so beautifully that the mind was inevitably foiled in its attempts to pathologize the emptiness of the personal self or interpret it as insanity" (p.68). Terror at her loss continued to persist as she continued to fully experience her feelings but having no "I" as a reference point to personalize the feelings (Segal, 1998).

A decade later Segal (1998) began to experience non-dual consciousness, and the emptiness was recognized as vastness. Segal began reading books by eastern mystics which served to normalize her experiences, and writing to them for feedback. One such response came from Gangaji and she shared, "This realization of the inherent

emptiness—which is pure consciousness—of all phenomena is true fulfillment. In the face of conditioned existence, much fear can be initially felt. Ultimately, the fear is also revealed to be only that same consciousness” (p.122).

Segal explained when speaking of her personal experience of vastness, “I had encountered the very insight that did the work of exposing the fear and releasing its hold. I realized that the mind had been clinging tenaciously to the erroneous notion that the presence of fear meant something about the validity of the experience of no-self. Fear had tricked the mind...Fear was present, yes, but that was it!” (p.131). In this process, it was realized that the emptiness was seen as nothing, but paradoxically it was the very substance of everything. With the acceptance of no-self, full experiencing was embraced in everything and everywhere. When struggles of the split mind subside, experiencing is experiencing, and in the vastness there is freedom and peace.

Bernadette Roberts and the “No-Self” Experience

Roberts (1991) describes the process of the falling away of the sense of self as a time of experiencing the unknown knowing no fear and having no sense of a personal self. When the self is no longer experienced there is no subject and no object, and that emptiness of self is experienced as joy. As the self falls away, there is vast stillness, emptiness, and nothingness. The mind comes across “the hideous void of life, the insidious nothingness of death and decay strangling life from every object of sight. Only self can escape such a vision because only self knows fear, and only fear can generate the weapons of defense. Without a self, the only escape is no escape;

the void must be faced” (Roberts, 1991, p.202). Initially one is left feeling the terror and attaching negative connotations to these experiences.

Roberts (1991) relayed that as time passes, the experience of nothingness and the unknown becomes first endurable, then ordinary, and finally natural. “When nothing moves in to take its place, nothingness becomes all that is; and this had, finally, to be accepted as the most obvious of ultimate truths. Here it could be clearly seen that all the searching, speculating and experiencing of a lifetime had been a gigantic waste” (p.203), where the end is in actuality the beginning and the realization that everything in the middle of the journey was based on deception, the deception of the self.

As described above by Roberts (1991), non-dual consciousness reflects an understanding of not understanding. The search is over and there is no more seeking and retaining because there is no need to understand that which it can never know. The journey to no self provides insight into the ‘new life’, for the journey never ends, it is endlessly moving into the depths of the unknown with the gap between the subject and the object being irrevocably closed (Roberts, 1991).

Roberts (1991) outlines specific phases, referred to as the phases of the unitive life, that serve as a map of the path to no-self based on her experiences within her own journey. Roberts marks the definitive entrance as the ‘Dark Night of the Spirit’ characterized by

the deep, deterministic reins of self-control have been taken away and the will power that glued together this fragile unity has dissolved. From here on, the reins of our destiny are in the hands of a greater power, a higher Will, and though we may unconsciously kick against the goad in painful rebellion, it is to no avail.

The only way out is to be submissive, to accept our helplessness and to recognize that peace of soul—the day it can be found—is our greatest ally. With no place else to go, nowhere else to turn, we have no choice but to go down into the depths of our nothingness where, at rock bottom, God eventually reveals Himself and discloses to us the rootedness of our existence in Him (p.9).

The second phase, as indicated by Roberts (1991), reflects the transformation of pain to peace. Roberts suggests that once passivity is embraced, one can experience the silence and stillness, which to her was the Christian God himself. Roberts suggests that it is in this stillness that one can center and rest in continually, and that it is in this resting place that shattered and pieces of the fragmented self come together in a unified way. Following this integration, “all parts will function as a unit, all acts will derive from the center” and sets the stage for movement to the third phase of the unitive life (1991, p.10).

Phase three, as indicated by Roberts (1991), signifies a time where one experiences a “peak” reflecting a loss of self that is impermanent whereby from the depths of one’s core, one experiences immense strength, power and energy. Love is experienced in vastness that cannot be contained internally. This experience can leave one questioning what else is there? Thus, as indicated by Roberts, each peak has a valley and the decent into the valley is a reflection of “a more complete going-out of self” and a movement towards the fourth phase (p.11).

Phase four marks the beginning of the final death of the separate self. This process reflects continuous trials, tribulations, and immense suffering. The process evokes an awareness that rests at the core that living the life of a false self , a self that

is always seeking and self-serving is in fact keeping one out of experiencing the unitive love.

The fifth phase reflects the 'active phase' where there is a blossoming in growth that occurs with the recognition of one's betrayal of the self. "The day comes when we realize great limitations have been created and imposed on us by our personal frames of reference, mental constructs, judgments, and patterned ways of thinking, all of which have virtually closed us in upon ourselves" (Roberts, 1991, p.13). Roberts reflects that to give up the judgments and patterns noted is not an easy task by any means as it requires relinquishing all crutches and a stepping out of comfort zones. Letting go of judgments appears to be the final key as indicated by Roberts in that our judgments "shroud the reality of the here and now with wishful thinking" (p.13). When one lets go of their judgment, there is an opening and movement to the final phase of the unitive life.

The final phase is the eternal silence whereby there is the loss of self-awareness. "It seems that perfect interior silence, with the final cessation of self awareness, is the necessary vehicle to span the gap between self and no-self, after which a new life opens up, a life that remains inconceivable until it is lived" (Roberts, 1991, p.14).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the experience and resolution of women's depression from the perspective of the first three forces of psychology and then through the alternate perspectives of transpersonal psychology including integrating a feminist perspective and an understanding of non-dual consciousness. This exploration

provides the theoretical contexts in which the research topic for this thesis is situated.

The next chapter will provide a discussion and explanation of the research methodology used to explore the research topic.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction: Human Sciences vs. Natural Sciences

Based on the work of philosopher and literary historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Palmer (1969) made a distinction between the objectives of the human and natural sciences. He proposed that the objective of the human sciences was to construct understanding based on the intrinsic categories derived from life as opposed to the extrinsic categories associated with the natural sciences. Thus, within human sciences, “life must be understood from the experience of life itself” (Palmer, 1969, p.102). Natural science, as indicated by Palmer, centers around *explaining* nature whereas human science focuses on understanding the “expressions of life”, thus the objective of human science is *understanding* versus *explaining*. In this regard Palmer (1969), contends based on his understanding of Dilthey’s work, that human sciences must “attempt to formulate a methodology of understanding that will transcend that reductionist objectivity of sciences and return to the fullness of “life”” (p.105).

Researching the topic of depression in women, as a transformational experience, might best be approached by the way of the human sciences where the objective would not be to *explain* women’s experience of depression but rather to *understand* their embracement of non-dual consciousness through the experience of depression as transformational. In this regard, chapter three provides an explanation of the research methodology used to study women and depression from a human sciences perspective. The research methodology utilized is comprised of both a philosophical

framework, which oriented myself as a researcher towards the topic, as well as the procedural steps taken throughout the research.

From a philosophical perspective, for exploring depression as a transformational experience in women, a phenomenological hermeneutics approach was used. This particular approach was chosen because it serves to ground the research in the lived experiences of human beings. It also helps to fully encapsulate the essence of the experiences of research participants as well as to honor the ambiguous and hidden aspects embedded in the topic. The hope is that this approach puts the focus on women's accounts of their experiences while at the same time potentially offering alternate possibilities for understanding depression (Stoppard, 1999).

To explore the research philosophy chosen, its roots, which are embedded in phenomenology, are first discussed. Next the hermeneutics refinement to phenomenology is explained in detail and provides a fuller picture of the philosophy from which I proceeded. Given the nature of the topic, it was also important to consider the narrative aspects as they relate to hermeneutic inquiry. Following a discussion of the philosophical framework, the fecundity of the individual case will also be considered to provide a background against which to honor the fact that isolated experiences within the topic can be rich with meaning. Following this, the actual research procedure, including the selection of co-researchers, interview procedures, data analysis, as well as compliance with ethical standards will be considered.

Prior to exploring the research philosophy and procedures I would like to reiterate,

as discussed in chapter one, that it was out of my own experiences of depression and non-dual consciousness that I chose to pursue the topic of a non-dual approach to depression in women and as such, I too am implicated in this research. This means that I proceeded as one who is informed by the topic and not separated from it.

Philosophical Framework

Phenomenological hermeneutics was chosen as the philosophical framework for guiding the research for this thesis. The following discussion provides a detailed explanation of this philosophy by examining the roots in phenomenology and the importance of hermeneutic refinement as well as narrative aspects of human experience.

Phenomenology

Central to phenomenology is the notion of intentionality brought forth by the works of Edmund Husserl (1962) recognized as the founder of phenomenology. Husserl (1962) considered consciousness to be the window of the world and that in order to understand humans, one needed to understand consciousness. From this framework the notion of intentionality was introduced to explore the depths of consciousness. Husserl's (1962) notion of intentionality is a reflection of the idea that consciousness always has an object, and that even when one thinks that they are not conscious of anything, one is in fact conscious of not being conscious (Osborne, 1990). Husserl's notion of intentionality "is in fact synonymous with the existential-phenomenological view that we are of the world rather than in it" thus eliminating the

subject-object dualism (Osborne, 1990, p.80). According to May (1980) one cannot isolate psychological reactions (the individuals experiences) in and of themselves, rather one needs to understand “the psychological being of the living man who is doing the experiencing” (p.15). This framework serves to unite science and ontology to gain a deeper understanding of human as being and human as being in the world. Phenomenology wishes to see what exactly our lived experience is. According to Jardine (1990) phenomenology points out how we are already in the middle of things.

Osborne (1990) describes the aim of phenomenological research as striving to understand a phenomenon through the data as it is, by the researcher putting their preconceived notions of the phenomenon to the way side as best one can. In this sense, Osborne (1990) indicates that “if there is a structure to the phenomenon it will transcend particular interpretations” (p.81). Phenomenology is an exploration of a lived experience, and what the essence of that experience is.

Van Manen (1984) describes phenomenological research as a process of studying lived experiences where the essence of the experience is described and captured through language, reflecting the lived meaning in a deeper context. According to Van Manen (1984), phenomenological research is characterized by:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us
2. investigating experiences as we live them as opposed to how we conceptualize it
3. reflecting on the common essential themes of the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through writing and re-writing (p.46)

The phenomenological emphasis of Husserl's (1962) notion of intentionality is important to the research for this thesis as it allows for a means to explore commonalities in experiences without the subject-object dualism and maintain the focus on the topic of a non-dual approach to depression (Nixon, 1992).

Hermeneutics Refinement

In order to fully encapsulate the transformational experiences of women with depression a hermeneutics refinement to the phenomenological approach is called for. While phenomenology helps us to discern the essence of experience, the emphasis in hermeneutics is on interpretation and understanding (Van Hesteren, 1986). Jardine (1990) warned of attempting to only follow Husserl's (1962) notion of looking to extract fixed essences in a topic of research. As Heidegger (1962) indicated, it is impossible to step outside of the world as a transparent witness since we are already always "being-in-the-world".

Phenomenological hermeneutics is a process of interpreting the lived experience through the use of speech and writing to uncover and reconstruct the held meaning (Van Hesteren, 1986; Chessick, 1990) of a research topic. As such, Jardine (1992a) sees hermeneutical inquiry as an embracement of the ambiguous nature of life,

It's manner of speaking is therefore not 'informative', standing outside of the ambiguity of life as a voyeur demanding a good show, demanding presentability. It is, rather provocative, a 'calling forth', a voice crying out from within the midst of things (p.119).

Thus, this hermeneutical refinement in the research approach, allows for the aspects of women's transformation of depression into non-dual consciousness that are calling out to get our attention.

Heidegger (1962) felt that hermeneutics was at the core of being itself, "the phenomenology of being (Dasein) is a hermeneutic in the primordial significance of the word, where it designates the business of interpreting" (p.65). Interpretation occurs through the use of language, which is a shared aspect for understanding. Heidegger considered language and understanding to be inseparable aspects of being and being-in- the-world; language serves as the basis of the framework for which we understand. It was Heidegger that assumed the stance that all human knowledge is interpretation because it is based on our historical-cultural context. Our experiences are based on our previous understandings, and as such our meanings that we associate with these experiences are continually a reflection of such biases and prejudices.

Central to hermeneutics is conversation. Ongoing conversation or dialogue in hermeneutics means that our understanding becomes more refined by the work of interpretation which lends to an increase in understanding and a more complete interpretive account (Packer, 1985; Nixon, 1992). Smith (1991) stated that an important aspect of Gadamer's work in hermeneutic philosophy was to show the historico-temporal qualities of human experience. This is indicative of the way we engage the future. Humans understand in terms of past prejudices and judgments and because this is our place of understanding, we need not shun this. In this manner we can understand that the experiences of research participants emerge within their

historical-cultural context and as such can also play a role in determining how the individual will face transformation in the future.

In order for the conversation to be shared and generate new insights and shared realities, Jardine (1992, p.120) indicates that, “in the midst of such potentially deadened talk, new life interrupts, causing a rupture right in the middle of things”. Through this, we can arrive at new understandings and interpretations of experiences that possibly challenge our previous judgments and assumptions.

Language is the basis for both communicating and understanding the meaning of experiences. Language is a means by which our cultural traditions are embedded, understood, interpreted, and shared. As such, our experiences are also rooted in a cultural context. Due to the nature of communicating and understanding the meaning of experiences, we are as such “always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretations of the world” (Gadamer, 1976, p.64). As such, we are engaged in narratives that identify our understanding of our being, and our understanding of our being-in-the-world through the use of language and stories. To further elaborate, let us now turn to a discussion of the narrative aspects within phenomenological hermeneutics to enhance understanding of the role of conversations and the interpretation of language in uncovering the meaning attached to experiences, particularly as they relate to a non-dual approach to women and depression.

Narrative Within Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Due to the nature of this research it is paramount to consider the narrative

aspects of lived experience as it is the descriptive stories of the experiences that the research participants were asked to share that are central to this research. According to Cochrane (1985, 1986) stories seem to be a fundamental aspect of lived experiences. Part of this is that we are always creating an ongoing narrative that is a reflection of our past, present, and future and as such our experiences are grounded in our stories. Corey (2001) states that in order to capture the unique experiences of people we must engage in a dialogue so that these experiences can be shared, understood, and interpreted using language. The use of language serves as a means for an individual to communicate their story as experienced by them. “Human beings ‘make meaning’ expressed in language and narratives” and as such these stories provide guidance in understanding and interpreting the individual human essence and truth (Corey, 2001, p.436). It is within these narratives that individuals create meaning, and according to White (1992) individuals construct the meaning through interpretive stories that are treated as truths. Emphasizing narratives within a phenomenological hermeneutics framework allows for an exploration of the topic of a non-dual approach to depression through the stories of research participants in all their interconnectedness, theories, and ambiguities.

The Fecundity of the Individual Case

When conducting research into the lived experience of women, it is not only pertinent to extrapolate common themes across each story, but it is also important to extrapolate the story of the individual that is beyond the phenomenology of described common themes because at times an isolated experience can bear the fruit of a deeper

understanding of the topic in ways that shared experiences do not. To illustrate the importance of the fecundity of the individual case, let us turn to Gadamer (1975) for further clarification:

The individual case on which judgment works is never simply a case; it is not exhausted by being a particular example of a universal law or concept. Rather, it is always an “individual case”, and it is significant that we call it a special case, because the rule does not comprehend it. Every judgment about something that is intended to be understood in its concrete individuality...is—strictly speaking—a judgment about a special case. This means simply that the evaluation of the case does not merely apply the measure of the universal principle according to which it is judged, but itself co-determines it, supplements, and corrects it (p.37).

In moments of engagement and sharing of experiences, there may be incidents and opportunity for ‘real understanding’, where attention can be grabbed and call us to attention in each independent story. Nixon (1992) indicates that the way in which we are impacted or ‘grabbed’ call for an understanding of that experience in and of itself. The relevance of the fecundity of the individual is apparent in the cases of the lived experience of individuals including, Gangaji, Esther Veltheim, Byron Katie, Suzanne Segal, and Bernadette Roberts, as discussed in chapter two. Thus, when exploring the themes that have arisen out of the exploration of depression as a transformational journey through the embracement of non-dual consciousness, it is important to not only understand the common themes, but it is equally important to understand the unique experiences as well.

“Three Eyes” To Understanding

In addition to the above discussions explaining the research approach, Wilber’s (1996) exploration of “three eyes to understanding” is significant for the chosen research topic. Wilber identifies three basic strands of knowledge that will be helpful in exploring depression as a transformational experience in women. Wilber posits that there are three eyes by which we observe and extract knowledge of the personal and transpersonal in relation to the world. The three eyes include; the eye of flesh, whereby the external world of time, space, and objects are perceived; the eye of reason, whereby knowledge of philosophy, logic, and the mind itself is attained; as well as the eye of contemplation whereby “we rise to a knowledge of transcendent realities” (Wilber, 2001, p.3). According to Wilber (2001), each eye is associated with a separate strand of knowledge as characterized by the major schools of psychology, philosophy, and religion. The three eyes also coordinate with the three major realms included in the perennial philosophy (Huxley, 1944). Each eye will be explored in detail as it pertains to further understanding this research.

Eye of Flesh

The eye of flesh, also referred to as the “gross realm”, is the realm of time, space, and objects that is shared by all and is the source of basic sensorimotor intelligence (Wilber, 2001). The eye of flesh exudes capabilities of detecting the five senses and allows for the distinction of objects as either one or the other. For example, the eye of flesh allows for the knowledge that one tree is in fact a tree, and that if there is more than one tree, each tree is uniquely different.

Eye of Reason

The eye of reason, also referred to as the “eye of mind” or “subtle realm”, participates in the “world of ideas, images, logic, and concepts” (Wilber, 2001, p.4). The eye of reason gains much of its knowledge from the eye of flesh, but is not limited to the information of the eye of flesh. The eye of reason transcends the limitation of knowledge reflected in the eye of flesh and allows for imagination and mental representation of images and ideas not directly seen by the naked eye (Wilber, 2001).

Eye of Contemplation

As the eye of reason transcends the eye of flesh, so too does the eye of contemplation transcend both the eye of flesh and the eye of reason. The eye of contemplation cannot be reduced to nor explained simply using the previously noted eyes. The eye of contemplation, also referred to as the “causal realm, or “lumen superius”, is “transrational, translogical, and transmenta” (Wilber, 2001, p.6). Understanding the eye of contemplation is crucial to this research as understanding depression as a transformational journey embracing non-dual consciousness can be marked by experiences that transcend traditional scientific logic and reason to include experiences of deeper levels of consciousness beyond ego. The eye of contemplation reflects the ‘supernaturally natural’ function that allows for the “contemplation of the Self which is reality, Consciousness, and Bliss” (Wilber, 2001, p.6). There is no definitive role for sensory experiences nor philosophical reasoning, rather it allows

for the conceptualization of higher levels or transpersonal levels of consciousness.

Each eye according to Wilber (2001) has the capacity to draw knowledge from each of their respective realms, indicative of integral knowing. Wilber describes each eye as representative of knowledge as a type of illumination,

There is exterior and inferior illumination (*lumen exterius* and *lumen inferius*), which lights the eye of flesh and gives us knowledge of sense objects. There is *lumen interius*, which lights the eye of reason and gives us knowledge of philosophical truths. And there is *lumen superius*, the light of transcendent Being, which illuminates the eye of contemplation and reveals salutary truth, “truth which is unto liberation” (Wilber, 2001, p.3).

Conclusion

All of the discussions to this point have expounded the research philosophy, which has oriented me, as a researcher, to the topic of concern. The next section outlines the details of the procedural steps undertaken to research women’s depression as a transformational experience.

Research Procedure

The research philosophy discussed above provided a guiding framework for the following research procedure. This section explaining the research procedure used will provide a discussion of selection of research participants, interview format, and data analysis.

Selection of Research Participants

The selection of researcher participants involved a telephone screening process ensuring that they met the research criteria to participate in this study. As suggested by Osbourne (1990), the terminology ‘subjects’ was not used to refer to the research participants because the latter terminology implies a more mutual engagement with the researcher and serves to remove the we/they dichotomy. The emphasis on the criteria focused on welcoming female participants who have embraced non-dual consciousness in their experiences of depression and who were able to identify and articulate their experiences. Thus, each of the participants chosen have experienced non-dual consciousness and used that experience as a transformational opportunity to alter their experience of depression.

An advertisement was published in Synchronicity Magazine (Appendix I) outlining the research criteria from which five participants were recruited to participate in an in-depth interview. Upon selection of the co-researchers, a consent form (Appendix II) was provided at the time of the interview and subsequently signed with an understanding of the research format and interview requirements. All research participants indicated that they had a clear understanding of the requirements of the research and were in agreement for each interview to be taped and transcribed. Participants were also made aware and agreed that the data collected through the interview process was to be used in this thesis by the researcher, and that there is potential for said research to be published in academic journals, and presented at conferences and in university classrooms.

Each participant was provided with a pseudonym to establish, maintain, and respect their anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were also informed that the data taped and transcribed would only be seen by this researcher, a transcriber, and the thesis supervisor. Transcriptions of the interviews were made available for each co-researcher upon completion of the data analysis. Contact information was collected for the distribution of completed transcripts, but also for the potential of collecting further clarification of the data.

Interview Format

An interview procedure was adopted from Cochran's (1985, 1986; Nixon, 1992) dramaturgical method for eliciting the stories and experiences of the researcher participants. In this regard, the interviews consisted of three phases in the form of a story with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning of the interview emphasized when the participants each began to experience depression, the middle of the interview provided an account for their experiences and turning points, and the end provided an understanding for what is happening for them at the present time embracing non-dual consciousness.

To facilitate the interview process and acquiring the dramaturgical account of their stories, the researcher employed Rogerian (1961) person centered counseling skills. The qualities and skills outlined by Rogers (1961) call forth a relationship that is based on equality, respect, and growth. Techniques derived from this approach such as paraphrasing, summarizing, empathic reflecting of both feelings and meanings,

posing questions, and linking themes through verbal tracking (Corey, 2001) were all beneficial in extracting the stories of participants. By utilizing a person centered, empathic and non-judgmental approach the researcher facilitated the participants feeling comfortable and put them at ease to share their stories and experiences. Using this type of an approach in research interviewing is similar to engaging in a counseling relationship that is based on equality, connectedness, and respect and emphasizes the narrative approach to understanding human experiences. Using these skills as the researcher also enabled me to develop a close and open relationship with each of the research participants, which is recommended by Collin and Young (1988) for hermeneutic inquiry.

Questions asked throughout the interview consisted of, but were not limited to: highlighting the onset of the participants quest, highlighting non-dual experiences with depression, identifying barriers and struggles in their journey, and the ongoing experiences of their non-dual path in current day life. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis aspect of the research conducted for this thesis was carried out using the following steps:

- 1) Each interview was transcribed, and all identifying information about participants was omitted. In honoring anonymity, transcripts as well as the final report used the selected pseudonym of each researcher participant. At the onset of obtaining consent, it was clarified to the participants that each tape-recorded interview was to be

destroyed once the analysis of the data is completed.

2) Each researcher participant was then provided with a copy of the transcript for the purpose of deleting any further revealing information and also to provide an opportunity to correct or expand any areas that they felt were relevant to their story.

Participants were invited to contact me with their revisions and an agreement was made to hold a second interview should this occur. Giving this opportunity was to provide the researcher with a clearer and more accurate description of the participants stories and experiences.

3) None of the participants chose the option given to hold a second interview.

4) Using the transcripts of the five interviews, I started the analysis of this data by simply reading each transcript to get a general feel for the patterns of the women's stories and to create an empathic connection to the text.

5) A second reading of the five transcripts was then undertaken. This time I underlined significant patterns and experiences that stood out in the text.

6) I then undertook a third reading of the text, this time writing notes on the significant patterns and experiences that stood out from the previous readings to create a visual map for the researcher for each of the five transcripts.

7) I then took each participants individual map and compared all five maps to draw out similar patterns and experiences to form preliminary themes about the topic.

8) With the preliminary themes in hand, I did a fourth read of each transcript to make additional notes to thicken the themes, also making note of possible quotes.

9) I then re-read the selected quotes to identify which quotes would be used to explore each theme.

10) The researcher then utilized all notes in conjunction with identified themes, identified quotes, as well as the text of the transcripts to begin writing a thematic analysis of the topic and present a fuller and richer description of women's transformation of depression. The exploration of these themes is provided in Chapter Four.

11) Once the analysis of the transcript was completed, each tape-recorded interview was destroyed.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to any information gathering, participants were asked to review and sign a consent form. Prior to signing the consent form, any questions or concerns that co-researchers had were answered and addressed at that time. The consent form indicated the aims and methods to be used, the responsibilities of both myself and the participants, time commitment required to adequately participate in the study, and reassurances that there will be no risks to the research participants. Each research participant was advised that they have the right to, at any time, withdraw from this research, and that it was also the right of the researcher to terminate the involvement of participants at any time.

As previously mentioned, the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed using a pseudonym chosen by the co-researcher. Confidentiality and further guarantees of anonymity were provided with the opportunities of research participants to change or delete any information on the transcripts that they felt identified them in any way. Confidentiality and anonymity were further guaranteed as once the transcriptions

were completed, all interview tapes were erased and appropriately disposed of.

Conclusion

Chapter three has focused on providing a discussion of the research philosophy and procedures used to study the lived experience of women's transformational experience of depression. We will now turn to chapter four which will provide a presentation of the information, gathered through the research process, in the form of a thematical analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

For the purposes of this research, five women participated in in-depth interviews exploring their experiences of depression as transformational journeys. Each woman was asked to share her journey in a story like format with a beginning indicating her first recollection of her experience with depression, a middle reflecting how her journey progressed and how she worked through her experiences, and an ‘end’ that in actuality marks a continuation of her journey embracing non-dual consciousness at present.

The interviews and subsequent themes that emerged from their ‘stories’ are the focus of this chapter. It is important to reiterate at this point that the intent of this research is not to ‘prove’ anything per say, but it is with hope that the themes that have emerged from these interviews offer both men and women the opportunity to understand the experience of depression in a different, more holistic manner.

Introduction to the Participants

Morgan spent her youth abroad where she grew up with a father who was an alcoholic and a mother with whom she identifies as both physically and emotionally abusive. With the death of her grandmother and her older sister moving out, Morgan was left on her own in the home feeling abandoned, unloved, and depressed. Due to a turbulent home life, Morgan was kicked out of her home at the age of 16 and forced to fend for herself. As a means of survival, she quickly discovered the “power” of her sexuality and was on a quest to find and experience love and wholeness.

Throughout her quest, Morgan entered many relationships, each with patterns of co-dependency. On a trip to Canada, she “fell in love” and ended up getting pregnant. She married the father of her son, though shortly thereafter they divorced. In pursuit of “happiness”, she returned to her native country only to find that that too was not the end result she was looking for. Throughout her journey she was faced with many hardships including extradition and being diagnosed with cervical cancer, none of which had quite the same impact on her as losing significant relationships. The experience of depression, loss of significant relationships and a search for wholeness served as an opening for Morgan to see, feel, and experience life differently. Morgan is at present a professional, a wife, and a mother.

Mary had a colorful childhood growing up traveling and living in a variety of cultures and countries. Her father was a diplomat, an educator, theologian, and a historian who taught religion in different languages. Her mother was described as emotionally abusive and they had a relationship where Mary wanted to be seen and heard, but did not experience this in the way that she wanted. Mary was a victim of sexual abuse, which had a significant impact on her experience of depression and her own mind/body connection. Mary was hospitalized in her youth fuelling a desire to freely come from a place of her own truth. Throughout the course of her journey, Mary married and had two children all the while eventually finding Yoga and settling into life teaching it in her community. Health concerns and a search for “truth” facilitated her search for something more. In her search, she discovered the work of Byron Katie and Adyashanti facilitating an opening within her to the power of her own truth. Mary has since stopped teaching yoga and has set forth in sharing her truth in

giving *Satsang* in her community. Mary is at present a wife, a mother, as well as a teacher of *Satsang*.

Karen described having a very close relationship with her immediate family, yet despite this she never really “let her hair down” with her family or others in her life. Karen described herself as depressed and fearful outside of her family of origin though had managed at times to overcome her fears, which eventually opened the door to marriage and children. Her marriage was very challenging, particularly with the presence of her husband’s addiction and her own patterns of co-dependency. Karen experienced significant stress within this relationship and spoke of a persistent desire to die. She sought solace through counseling and anti-depressants, which facilitated a shift for her to eventually divorce sparking an interest in spirituality and quest for wholeness. She began to explore her self through different books and teachings where she discovered Buddhism, meditation, and Reiki. Karen at present is a practitioner of Reiki.

Brenda was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at the age of 21 shortly after her first marriage. Brenda defied the odds and overcame her illness proceeding to “have it all”. Despite this, she fell into periods of depression where she faced the unfavorable odds of wanting children. Again she beat the odds and had two children. After 16 years of marriage and many struggles and hardships, she was left with the sense that something was missing. In the process, she divorced and embraced the fear of “going it alone”, facilitating her search for a deeper meaning in her life and sought spirituality as part of her journey. Throughout her journey, Brenda described herself as never being good enough, flawed, and in danger of becoming her biggest

fear, “a bag lady often overwhelmed by depression”. Eventually she remarried and is presently working as a family therapist.

Laura was the second youngest in a family of eight. Laura’s parents divorced when she was young and was subsequently raised predominantly by her mother. As a young girl Laura felt different and often experienced intense fear and would often isolate herself. Depression soon persisted and was looming in the background throughout her journey. In her teens and early adulthood, Laura described herself as self-loathing, unlovable and flawed, undermining both her connection with her self as well as others. As a means of protecting herself from the world and her own vulnerability, patterns of co-dependency and isolation became evident. In a quest for wholeness, Laura began exploring Zen and participating in a transpersonal group. Laura is presently a transpersonal therapist facilitating similar journeys towards wholeness.

Part A: The Descent

Early On Already Isolated and Withdrawn

Through the interview process, all of the co-researchers spoke of dealing with significant experiences of feeling isolated and withdrawn early on in their lives. The co-researchers spoke of experiencing feelings relating to not being good enough, not feeling loveable, and feeling as though something was not quite right within them. These feelings were identified by each of them as a significant part of their experience of depression. Each of these co-researchers identified these feelings in

their childhood carrying through to affect their lives and marked the beginning of their stories.

Karen identified herself as a “fear based”, withdrawn introvert who always felt different somehow:

There was something about me that was different, it was odd, um, and I wasn't good enough, ever. I think I could only ever really let my hair down with my immediate family, and even then I probably never really let them know who I was. Even as a little kid I was withdrawn. I never felt good enough, never had friends and it's not like I didn't have opportunity, but I don't think I ever let anybody get close to me.

Looking back at her childhood, Karen speculated that for her, the experience of depression was ever present at a very young age.

For Morgan she first recognized depression at the age of 12 with the death of her grandmother. Morgan describes her relationship with her grandmother as a source of love for her that was perceived to be unavailable for her outside of her grandmother and her sister. Morgan reflected on her grandmother's death as:

It felt like the death of my grandmother was a death in me, but I was still living which was kind of strange because I felt like I had died and yet life was still going on around me and people were still eating and driving cars. So, eventually being 12 you don't really intellectualize that, you just continue on and I became very withdrawn. I had no love source at all; there was no love in my family. I think that the only love I got then was from my sister. I felt extremely physically

unattractive, I felt really ugly, I felt like I was actually the ugliest person that probably existed on the face of the earth.

With the death of one of her major sources of love, Morgan in her withdrawn state of feeling unattractive and unattractive went on living and relied more so now on her sister for the love that she desperately wanted and needed.

Laura recalls as well feeling as though something was not quite right with herself in childhood and much like Karen, identified feelings of fear and isolation:

I remember at the age of 9 that I was a very isolated child, I would always play by myself and stuff like that and I don't know, I just always felt different... With my own family I never really felt like I belonged because my sisters were all, they all abandoned me. All of a sudden there was all these, there was this huge family of six and you know two parents, and then all of a sudden I was left in a house with just my mom and I, and I remember feeling really lonely and wondering why do people do that, why do people just enter your life and go?

Isolating and withdrawing were experiences for Laura that when she reflected on them were symptoms of not feeling a sense of belonging, lonely, and abandoned. Laura indicated that these feelings intensified when her parents divorced and her siblings moved out on their own.

Mary described having a "very interesting and mixed childhood" growing up in a variety of different cultures and countries. Mary described her mother as "emotionally abusive without really knowing that's what she was doing" and wanting a connection with her that, in hindsight she was able to recognize that her mother was not capable of giving.

Brenda was the exception to experiencing feelings of not being good enough in childhood. For Brenda, these feelings came about when her life changed significantly at age 21 when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. This diagnosis challenged Brenda in that she was now faced with her own fears and insecurities without the luxury of avoidance:

I had just been married for about a year, we had just bought our first house and we were in it for about three weeks when I woke up one morning and my side was all numb and tingling. As everything progressed I ended up in the hospital and they told me I had MS and they told me that I would be living with this for the rest of my life and I had better get down to thinking about life in a wheelchair. I mean, I think that was my biggest nightmare. Here I was, I was going to be totally disabled, I was going to be dependant. And I really felt like my sexuality had gone out the window right, and my desirability um, and that as just more than I was willing to incorporate at that point in time.

Through the tragedy of facing life in a wheelchair, we can see the similarity with the other women and the onset of huge negative judgments about the self.

So, we can see with all of the researcher participants that their journey starts with a descent characterized by early experiences of being isolated and withdrawn. Early on in their lives they identified feeling not good enough, unlovable, and as though something was not quite right within them. Already one can see their thirst for wholeness is foreshadowed. Ellis (1998), founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy affirms that human beings have tendencies toward self-actualizing and that what often thwarts movement is self-sabotaging patterns of thoughts and behavior.

Often, these thoughts are negative in nature, experienced in childhood and potentially leading to unhelpful behaviors later in life. Greenspan (2003) describes the feelings, such as those expressed by the researcher participants including feeling not good enough and unlovable, as one's "core defect story" which serves to shame an individual's core sense of self (p.83). When one's sense of self is shamed, the process of disconnection from one's self has begun.

Disconnection from Self

The experience of disconnecting from self was a predominant theme that arose out of the women's stories. Firman and Gila (1997) indicate that a disconnection from self is a disruption in the flow of being and that "in such disruptions of being we find the primal wound of nonbeing" (p.44). When entrenched in the primal wound, the self's ability to connect with themselves results in psychological dysfunction and in the case of the researcher participants, the dysfunction is depression. Essentially, the researcher participants describe a process of de-selfing whereby they have split off or disconnected from aspects of themselves.

Mary identified a significant struggle with what she labelled as "embodiment". Her struggle with embodiment centered around a disconnection from her body relating to her experience of sexual assaults:

To have a form and be embodied was something I didn't really want to do, as though I had some choice about it. So, the impact of this embodiment was pretty intense...My brother molested me as a child and so there was a history of that and also rape as a teenager and young adult. And those were big yes you are here,

you are in the body...it was just not knowing how to be in that world, not knowing how to move freely embodied in the world...I just couldn't fully relate to all of who I am in this embodied form.

Out of the experience of sexual assaults, it is easy to understand disconnecting from one's body and the difficulty that presents itself in "moving freely" when coming from a place of disconnection.

For Karen, she identified a loss of a sense of self as a significant experience leading to depression:

I don't think I had a sense of self for so long that I didn't know any better. I think I had been depressed off and on for my whole life, and so I think I probably detached from myself a long, long time ago. It was normal for me.

Looking back, Karen indicated that her lack of self was "fear based" in that who she was, she believed was never good enough so to protect the vulnerability of her self, she never let anyone in. We see the connection from her experiences in childhood outlined in the previous theme and how the pattern of these feelings has played out throughout her development.

Morgan described a process of disconnecting from herself through her reliance on other people to guide her and take care of her, to give her what she did not experience within herself. Morgan described feelings of self-loathing with no love source whereby disconnecting from herself served as a coping mechanism for survival. Describing her sister as her only love source and devastation when the sister was no longer available to take care of her:

I couldn't cope anymore because I knew that my sister wasn't living at home anymore. I was quite isolated and I had no tools to figure life out...So I ended up getting kicked out of the house and I had to go to different friends places with my little bag packed at 16 years of age and I was going from house to house because I kept getting kicked out. I kept looking at it like feeling so much guilt and shame and I'm such a bad person and I'm so ugly and nobody loves me and nobody wants me because I kept getting shuffled. And so I had to learn very quickly how to survive and so I ended up having like different sexual partners, at one time I was sleeping with three different men to have a place to stay. At some point then I was running out of friends and I was on the street, and I had so much self-loathing because people hated me and I hated myself because they hated me.

Without an external loving connection, it is apparent that the internalized story was characterized by harsh judgements of not being lovable and ugly, contributed to self-loathing and disconnection from her self. At this point, her self as it was, was not good enough. Morgan's internalized story and disconnection from her self fuelled a search to experience a loving connection outside of her self to ease the pain and suffering that she was feeling within.

Much like Morgan, Laura experienced a disconnection from her self through self-loathing and significant judgements including "I'm stupid", "I'm only good for my body", and "nobody loves me".

I had started to act out sexually right, and like I really didn't think that um my male friends, or any friends, liked me for who I was. I thought they liked me because, you know, I spread my legs. And so that's where that self-loathing

really came in, that's how I would keep myself in that loathing shame and darkness. It was like oh look, I am the poor girl, nobody loves me, I'm only good for my body, I'm stupid, that was a huge one, I'm stupid.

With Laura, we can see how her negative core beliefs “get played out” and intensified her disconnection from self in the dark depths of self-loathing and shame.

Each of the research participants suffered from a disconnection from self as their lives unfolded from childhood, but each experienced this disconnection in different ways. For one it was through the experience of sexual assault, for the others it was through feelings of not being good enough and buying into their negative core beliefs. As indicated in the previous theme by Ellis (1998) and Greenspan (2003), we can see how their negative stories initially experienced early in life have opened a gaping wound in their sense of self. In their wounds, we can see how disconnection from self can leave one feeling very vulnerable and fearful.

Imprisoned in Fear

It would be natural when one is feeling isolated and disconnected from their sense of self to be fearful and seemingly “boxed” into their negative core beliefs. The experience of fear intensifies the disconnection from self, often sending the message that one must protect or hide from their vulnerability.

Fear for Morgan was experienced most intensely with respect to relationships. Relationships for Morgan were reinforcement for her of who she was thereby depicting how she related to both herself and others. Morgan provided an example of how her experiences with fear left her transfixed in a situation rooted in her early

experiences of wanting desperately to be loved. She indicated that when she first married she felt a “knowing” that she did not want to marry this man, but ultimately did not want to be alone and a single mother. Shortly after her marriage she wanted out but fear kept her in it through revisiting her negative core beliefs, “I knew I wanted out but I was so afraid that no one would love me. Who would I find? I’ve got a kid now, I’m worn, unattractive, and undesirable”.

For Mary, fear was experienced around needing to take care of others, particularly psychiatrists who had prevented her from coming from a place of her own truth:

The craziness is what’s being spoken around me because the world is kind of nuts, you know. My God, what are people pretending at here. But, I also, in order to get out of the hospital, went underground. I quit saying, I was just telling the truth to all of these therapists and psychiatrists and, you know, and I was threatened with tons of drugs and also electric shock, which didn’t happen, fortunately. But, in the mental institution what became really, really clear and here’s another thing that I feel that really needs to be given voice to is all of those people who are in mental institutions, who have not had the support of people recognizing really who they are and what’s going on with them... that are there, that are not behaving in conventional ways. And, a lot of the people that I ran into there, when I said what it was that I needed to say, they had no questions, it was just like “yah” – not all of them but a lot of them really, you know, understood and it was like “wow, what are we all doing in here?” You know, the irony of it - this is crazy. And, so I, and the psychiatrists were like “we can’t help you unless you tell us the truth”. So, what’s the truth? So, I would tell them the

truth. “Well we can’t help you if you aren’t going to tell us the truth.” And, I’m like, “Oh, I get it, they don’t want to hear the truth – it doesn’t fit for them, they don’t want to hear the truth, they don’t know what to do with that and also the idea that I needed help, what I recognized was “wait a minute, do I need help? – Actually, no I just want to get out of here.

Tragically, Mary had to give in to her fear to get out of the hospital and “zip” her lip. In doing so she stopped sharing her truth and opted to shut down the vulnerability of her self.

For Laura, her experience of fear was all about trying to protect her deep feelings of vulnerability within her relationships and connecting with others, “I was depressed, but I was also really angry. I made sure that people were afraid of me, because if people were afraid of me then people didn’t like me and I could still stay in my self-hatred and wallowing”. Central to her fear was the belief that eventually people would leave her exposing her to hurt:

I was always like you know they’re going to leave me too, so then I’d create it, I created it so that they would leave me. So I was always going to fuck you before you fucked me, I could hurt you and you weren’t going to hurt me then....I could rely on my mom but even at times she wasn’t there for me. So it was like, you know you gotta protect yourself from the world right?

Laura was caught in an offshoot of previous co-dependency patterns, as she was not okay with her own vulnerability. Fear of her own vulnerability invariably fostered a pattern of manipulating her relationships as a means of protecting herself, particularly

through creating “truth” in her negative core beliefs associated with abandonment and “nobody loves me”.

Closely related, the imprisonment of fear for Brenda revolved around feeling flawed, not good enough, and being dependent on others. For Brenda, these fears surfaced predominantly in times of conflict leaving her feeling the need to escape from her own vulnerability:

I don't want to be here, I shouldn't be here this isn't okay. I'm not okay um, I've got to get up and do something, anything I can find that can try to make it not happen. But it's all that scary stuff about not being good enough, um lovability, self-worth and deserving this conflict, and just that sense of I'm going to be dependent.

Through the imprisonment in fear we see the previous themes re-emerging and intensifying for each woman interviewed. Each one in her own way has described for us their inability to be okay with their core sense of self through living out their negative beliefs. In doing so, it also becomes evident that they are unable to develop a sense of trust within themselves and come from a place of vulnerability. In the midst of their imprisonment, we can also note the emerging desperation to find a way out.

Desperate For A Way Out

All of the women interviewed described a point in their journeys where reality had become too much and the only way to experience relief from their experiences was through thoughts of suicide or through the act of attempting suicide. Firman &

Gila (1997) relate the desperation for a way out as a response to the primal wound. They further indicate that with the dread of nonbeing, physical death appears more appealing than living with the wounded self.

With a life changing diagnosis and having to face her deepest fears from a place of disconnection, it proved too much to incorporate at the time and Brenda contemplated taking her life as a means of coping with the reality of her life:

I was home from work and I was quite depressed. And I, I couldn't sleep, I was afraid to sleep because what had happened was I had gone to sleep and I had woke up in a different condition and I wasn't too thrilled about it. I had actually gotten better from that but I had to go back to the doctor and ask for some sleeping pills, I even asked for some depression medication. Anyway, he told me that I had actually seen a psychiatrist and I thought that I had seen a neurologist and what not and to simply just buck up. And I do remember that I actually thought about taking my life. I was just looking at these pills and thinking I don't want to be here, if this is what it's going to look like. I'm not having anything to do with it.

The desperation for a way out is evident for Brenda. Seeking external remedies of sleeping pills and anti-depressants, her inability to accept "what is" pushed her to want to end it as it were, but it was something within her that had not completely given up yet that stopped her from following through with thoughts of wanting to die.

Laura as well experienced the intensity of thoughts of wanting to end her reality as it was, but had an intuitive sense of something greater that stopped her from carrying through with it:

There were two instances when I, where I went to actually go and slice myself but I never followed through. I had the knives and everything, and the intent was to kill my self but I could never actually bring myself to do it. There was always this knowing that there was something bigger than myself. So I would stop, because that knowing there is something bigger stopped me from doing everything.

Morgan experienced a similar desperation to end her pain and suffering. Seeking external sources and “quick fixes” to alter her experiences was to no avail, describing it as “a constant state of cycling”:

So it was this constant state of cycling, it was just fucking annoying. And, I felt I couldn't switch it off and I tried everything. So I ended up sleeping with lots of people. I tried to find other relationships because it seemed that every time I found a new relationship, I fell in love and every relationship got better kind of thing. So I tried that, it didn't work. I went through fucking umpteen dozen relationships. And anyway, so then I'm in my little shell having my panic attacks and there is one person who is keeping me afloat emotionally, but barely. I felt a real loving connection with her, even though it wasn't resolving my own issues. I went to counseling once and that didn't help. I went to get medication once, I ended up overdosing on it. Nothing was helping and that's when I tried to kill myself and thought no, I've decided to make a choice, I'm going to live even though it's going to be painful.

Morgan's desperate search for external remedies was not working in the ways she wanted them to in order to experience the love that she was searching for. All of the

“old ways” of trying to make her feel good were no longer working leaving her feeling like the only way to make everything better was through death. Even though she was in psychological hell, Morgan was able to make the decision to live.

Karen too experienced a desire to alter her reality with persistent thoughts of suicide:

It was my voice in my head but I couldn't turn it off. And it would just whisper “I want to die”, you know. I could be brushing my teeth or serving a customer, or just going about my business but the little voice was in my head. It would say “I want to die” and it really scared me.

Coping with “what is” proved to be too much for Karen as well and despite the persistent voice within her, she too was stopped from carrying through with suicide suggesting that she was able to see a glimmer of hope through making a decision to live.

Mary's experience of wanting to alter her reality was similar to the other women in that she saw suicide as a means of doing so. Mary's suicide attempt was a reaction to not only her wound of embodiment, but also to her experience of not being open and authentic in coming from a place of her own 'truth':

There was this incredible deep truth that won't let you move away from what you really are. And, so this act of wanting to kill myself was really a movement of wanting to be home, of wanting to go home and how beautiful that I still remained embodied because really what I woke up to after I tried to do that, was you know, the craziness that's being talked, this is what I am.

With her suicide attempt, Mary realized that there was a calling to embrace who she really is and face the challenge and risk of accepting “what I am”.

All of the co-researchers expressed desperation to want to end their lives as they were but the feeling that there was something more prevented them from following through with it. The sense that there was something more served as an opening to the possibility of an as yet undiscovered path out of hell. Each of the women was ready for a sign of hope.

Transformational Invitation: A Path Out of Hell

The women interviewed found themselves in the midst of psychological hell. Each of them had either contemplated suicide or had carried out the act of attempting suicide, but somehow within their experience of hell they each discovered a glimmer of light to a possible path out.

The transformational invitation for Mary came about while she was teaching yoga and trying to lead a “normal” life with her husband and children:

After I had done yoga for a long time, I had encephalitis, which is an inflammation of all the linings in the brain and infection and I couldn't move. I was really sick for a while and I wanted someone I could talk to who knew about integration of being.

From that point, her friend and therapist recommended connecting to the works of both Byron Katie and Adyashanti. In order to facilitate integration of being, Mary followed through and accessed Byron Katie's work and attended a retreat with

Adyashanti as well as getting a hold of any other readings she could get her hands on.

She recalls meeting him:

So at the time that I met Adya, there were maybe twenty-five people there and we went to And when I met him, I was really checking him out because I had never looked for a teacher...but I was really checking him out to see what claims he was going to be making. I had read a lot, anything I could get my hands on that would somehow say what I knew. And so, he was obviously speaking what I knew and made no pleas on anything, “don’t believe me check it out for yourself” and I was like “right on” Now who am I? I am an enlightened, embodied being. But there was something that was really bothersome to me and I kept thinking it was Adya, and on the drive back with my family, I felt very uncomfortable and what I realized was that he was an incredible mirror and that anything I hadn’t really wanted to embrace fully was arriving. And, just in light of that was drawn to go on retreats.

In her quest for integration, Mary sought retreats and in her meeting with Adyashanti, the invitation for her transformational journey was accepted.

For Brenda the invitation came about with the dissolution of her marriage after 16 years facilitating the onset of her spiritual journey as she realized that she had no choice but to move on:

Well, I think things had probably been going down hill and I had been experiencing some dissatisfaction and like everybody, everybody thought that we were the perfect couple and you know I ended up I had a mink coat and diamond earrings for Christmas that year. I had a big house, I had all the help I needed and

we went to all the wonderful places and we had great vacations and it was so empty and lonely. And he didn't want to go for counseling and if we did it was my fault or I was somehow flawed. Umm anyway I had started going to see somebody and was sort of looking for a deeper meaning to life. And I remember one morning I woke up and I started to cry. And I knew that my life as it had been was literally over. This marriage was over I had no clue who I was going to be or how I was going to do this but if I stayed in this marriage I felt like I would die and I was scared to death to leave it because I didn't think I had the ability to survive on my own. And again I cried for about four hours solid, I was inconsolable and then I got up and I realized I had to move on. I don't have a choice, I don't know why. A part of me thought that I had lost my mind but it needed to be done.

Staying in a marriage that she was not happy in and continuing to live life as it was, felt like a death sentence for Brenda. This realization opened Brenda to the unknown and was left with no choice but to face her fears and in doing so; she endeavored forward on a quest to find a deeper meaning to life.

For Laura the invitation for the transformational journey began with an invitation to join a transpersonal group, which on one hand she desperately wanted to be a part of, though on the other hand she experienced fear of what this might mean for her:

So here I am, I'm supposed to be going to this group and well, at the time I would say that they cornered me saying okay, do you want to belong? The moment I said yes, in that moment I dropped to my knees in this professor's office and fucking shook like a baby in his office, just in the corner of his office because I was just

fucking scared shitless because now I had actually made a commitment. And I can remember not being able to eat for two days prior, I remember being very shaky and anxious, but there was also this tremor of anticipation too.

Morgan's invitation came about through one final desperate attempt to run and find change through external sources. The turning point came when she had run as far as she could abroad, which she had frequently looked at as a "safety net", and had lost significant relationships along the way:

Oh fuck it, I've lost every fucking single thing, you can't fucking take anything more away from me. Fuck it all, that's what it came down to so it was almost like a good experience. So I started seeing it like that and it was almost a relief because it was telling me that, especially when I got to ... and I got to the end point and I've lost my friend, every single friend now at this point, and I realize that I saw it, this was the first insight that I had that this was a sign to say you need to go back to ... and so on the trip back hitchhiking, I would literally envision my soul hanging out the window, like the wind would just clean all of that shit out

The journey of the researcher participants to this point has been a journey of enduring the pain and suffering known as depression. We are able to see how their early experiences have facilitated a decent by buying into their negative core beliefs in turn living their lives from a core of negativity that has perpetuated a disconnection from self, and coming from a place of not feeling okay and vulnerable. Rather, this deep primal wound had imprisoned them in fear and psychological hell. Out of desperation, death was appealing but the hope of something more opened them up to

accept an invitation for transformation. Each had accepted their individual invitations in their own way as a part of their own journey to reconnect with their self.

Part B: The Transformational Journey

Through the descent, the stage has been set for the transformational journey through the invitation that was welcomed by each of the women as they individually realized they needed to go on a psycho-spiritual journey to reclaim their sense of self.

Recognizing the Bondage of 'The Story'

The first step of any transformational journey comes paradoxically with the realization of how much a person has been imprisoned in old, worn out, unhelpful stories and core beliefs. Recognizing the bondage in their individual stories and that hanging onto these stories was an immense contribution to their suffering was a process all of the women interviewed experienced. For Brenda, it was in recognizing how the story of her fears of being flawed or not good enough were affecting her ability to experience life:

I am not going to get out and expose myself to the world because oh my God, I might be seen as flawed or not good enough or whatever and I am not going through that, no way no how... You know my God I could die, what could be the worst thing that could happen, big thing I'm going to be a bag lady. I'm going to be dependent on other people who are not going to treat me well.

In recognizing how her fears of being seen as flawed and not good enough, Brenda was faced with having to embrace her vulnerability and take the risk of “dying” and “step out” of the story to free herself from the bondage these fears had on her self.

Mary described being caught in personal stories as an attachment to a representation of “who we are”, resulting in being boxed into that. Describing the experience further she indicated that:

We have a story of who we are but when you start telling that story you realize that it seems to take a picture of you and encapsulates you in some way and you know it’s not true....to sit in meditation you begin to notice the gaps in your story so the weave gets sort of looser and looser and looser.

Letting go of the story of embodiment, particularly of not wanting to be in her body, and being seen as “crazy” and through the practice of meditation, Mary was able to recognize the “box” she had been living in.

In Laura’s experience, the recognition of the bondage of her stories came to a head after doing work in a transpersonal group. She indicated she had “worked hard” to try and manipulate the group through her sexuality and intimidation and playing out the stories of who she believed she was so that she was able to feel some control and desirability, while at the same time trying desperately hard to connect with other group members:

At the end of it all though I went home sad because I knew what I was doing. It was just an illusion and I wasn’t connecting with these people, I was keeping up the façade. And I remember one group I went home and I actually destroyed my apartment. Turned it all upside down and smashed things and then really

contemplated killing myself again at that time because you know I had created this thing and now the males were seeing me as only one identity. So although I created it and I wanted this creation and I had succeeded in creating it, there was misery and I didn't want misery anymore. But at this point, I was starting to see through that.

Laura demonstrates the sadness and misery of recognizing how the stories she had bought into about her fears of vulnerability and not being lovable were not being helpful and it was time to let the façade and the stories go.

So, as the women started to recognize the unhelpful bondage of their previously believed stories and the intense confrontation with self, as described in the next theme.

The Great Betrayal: Self to Self

“When we are genuinely interested in the truth, the whole truth, we realize with a greater sorrow that this betrayal from the outside is less terrible than another betrayal: We come to understand that we have betrayed ourselves” (Almaas, 2001, p.319).

The experience of the great betrayal comes when an individual realizes that they have created a false self as a means of alleviating isolation, abandonment, and to feel love and connection with others. Up until this point, the focus had been on the women emphasizing the deep betrayal from others for not accepting our true essence, and as indicated by Almaas (2001), “since our essence was the element they recognized or understood the least, our essence was the central element we disowned” (p. 319). A significant component of reconnecting to our essence is in the recognition of the great

betrayal, and that at some point, either consciously or unconsciously, we have sold ourselves out.

For Morgan, part of her process in her journey revolved around acknowledging and letting go of the “victim” role and the contribution of embracing the “victim” had to the experience of self-betrayal:

I relied on other people to get me through life....

Like I played the victim the whole time throughout the whole process. Giving up the victim meant that I had to accept everything that had happened to me. So I had to forgive my ex-husband before I could release the victim. I had to see my own responsibility. I had to realize that I placed myself in those situations that caused my own demise, my own depression. I started feeling good when I started taking responsibility...When I realized that my experience has evolved me into who I am and that I am a powerful woman, that power was such a great force that it made me realize that the feeling of victimization was such a negative power that it was keeping me stagnant. ‘I’ was keeping me stagnant.

Accepting responsibility was a significant aspect for Morgan to release the victim and assume responsibility for her self. In doing so, she had to let in the painful understanding that she has betrayed herself and that it was she herself who was keeping herself “stuck”. With this realization, she was able to reconnect with her own power as a woman.

Laura also identified with embracing the victim. The victim for Laura meant keeping her self in fear and suffering and creating situations that validated her victim self as well as recognizing her own betrayal of self. For Laura, embracing the victim

was about protecting herself from vulnerability:

I realized that in all of my sexual gigs, in all this depression and stuff there was a betrayal of myself. You realize that you know, these lies were lies that you thought were outside of yourself, lies that you thought were everybody else's fault. And then you realize that you've been wounding yourself and you've been betraying yourself.

Laura described her experience of realizing that she had been betraying herself as saddening for her as she could no longer blame everyone else, rather she had to accept the responsibility that she had been betraying herself in all of her stories and manipulations.

Karen too identified with the victim, particularly in relation to her marriage:

I was a big victim, especially in my marriage. You know it's easy to be a victim when someone else is gambling and you know they are making all the problems. It's not easy to face what you're doing, to add to those problems by running away or by avoiding and not setting boundaries....I think I got really good at pretending everything was okay. I didn't think I had the luxury of just falling apart.

In recognizing her own betrayal of self, the challenge for Karen was in letting go of the pretense that everything was okay and also assuming responsibility for how her experience of pretending had contributed to her pain and suffering.

Brenda also identified with having the recognition that she has contributed to her own experience of suffering:

I've also had to incorporate that I've done this suffering to me. I'm responsible for this I mean I was doing this to me and I can't keep doing that to me anytime I

want to. I mean I'm a creator in my life and for a while I didn't know how to create anything that wasn't drama and suffering.

Recognizing her own responsibility was key for Brenda to challenge her stories that were leading to drama and suffering in her life. In order to create something other than drama and suffering, Brenda had to accept the sad reality that she had been betraying herself.

Each of the women had to realize that although each had been a victim of many betrayals, they also had to experience the realization that they had sold themselves out, the greatest betrayal of all, they had betrayed themselves. With the realization that they had betrayed themselves, they could no longer hide in being the "victim". They had to learn to set themselves free.

Letting Go of the Other

At this point in their journey, each woman had to let go of fixating on and taking care of the other and begin opening herself up to her vulnerable self.

Brenda's experience of letting go of the other was related to her ability to connect with others as well as herself from an authentic place rather from a place of ego and suffering:

How was I going to relate to people? I went through well then I'm not going to be angry and then I'll be defenseless and then I'm really going to be in trouble and then how am I going to protect myself, but the other thing was how am I going to relate to other people if I can't talk about my wounds and I mean I've never been to AA but I think those sorts of things are built on the premise of woundedness

and we continue that on and stop our growth because how are we going to talk to people unless we talk woundology uh and there was a point I gave it up and thought I'm not going to do this and I went into that blanket and I thought oh great what am I going to talk about and this is really boring. It used to be that all the small talk was great but then it got into all this deep emotional wounding stuff and then it got well my god that's kind of boring you can go there anytime you want to but there are bigger ideas in the world then I got into well what if I'm solution focused instead of going over and over the problem what would that look like and it really made me have to look at how I was going to relate to the world how I was going to relate to people, problems instead of that and for a while I had nothing to hang my hat on and then it kind of developed and hanging in the abyss. And it's really I think I'll never be able to relate to people again unless I relate to them in a way I don't want to relate anymore. And I always thought well okay it isn't gone and I can go back but you know if you go back you're never happy.

For Brenda to let go of the other, she had to recognize that she could no longer connect, relate, and just be in her "old ways" without experiencing a deep betrayal of self. This raised concerns for her about how she was going to be able to relate and connect with others in a more authentic way. Beyond connecting with others, Brenda was also looking at how she was going to connect with the world in a way that was honoring her self as opposed to betraying her self. Entering into the unknown, she realized that no matter what, she could not go back to embracing her "old stories" and connecting from that place as she was able to see that this was how she kept herself in suffering and depression.

For Laura, letting go of the other meant actually letting the other in and embracing her fears around her own vulnerability:

Initially I raged against it so when people started challenging me on my sexual gigs and stuff and you know of course I tried to manipulate it because I was the world's best fucking manipulator, so I tried to manipulate it so that I was staying in it even though it was causing me so much self hatred and I would go home after the group and I hated myself and I would cry and I would get up the next morning and go and see **** the head of the group.... I'd even manipulate that situation because you know what, I could do work outside of the group where I didn't have to be responsible to the group...I was taking away from all of that and I was going to where it was safe for me...So I had to realize that in my manipulation and trying to control situations you know, there's confinement. And when there's confinement, there's a block against other people. So I was like this dark container and, where there's like this little peephole and there's radiant love and light, and connection. But that peephole is so small that it's like hurtful you know because I was bursting inside...I was so fearful to step out of that because it was going to be painful, that it would be shameful, nobody was going to like me. And so in the group process, I had to let go of the manipulator and like let go of the control and just come from my vulnerability and just, you know be okay staying with that.

Behind all of her strategies and manipulations, Laura could now see that she just had to be okay with being in her vulnerable self. To be vulnerable meant opening herself up to experiencing authentic connections with others taking the huge risk that it might

be painful, but opening herself up anyway. In letting go of the other and embracing her vulnerability, Laura was not only able to open herself up to others, but she was starting to open up to her own self as well in doing so.

Morgan's suffering had been greatly attributed to relying on other people to alleviate her emotional pain and make her feel good through their love. When she was able to let go of the desperation to feel the love she wanted to feel, she opened herself up to seeing in a "new" way when she was able to let go of her pursuit:

So it actually took things coming full circle getting back together with this person that it was about, I really got it that it was about me this time. It wasn't about external things. I felt like I had gotten out of that black room that all of a sudden someone had opened the door and there was grass out there and brightness. I felt the energy flow...my life was moving and things were coming to me. Realizing that I have fucking control, I can control myself now I don't have to look externally for things that make myself happy and I felt very centered and I feel very centered in that now.

In Morgan's experience, letting go of the other was significant as she indicated previously "I relied on other people to get me through life". In this particular relationship that took coming full circle for her to realize it wasn't about others or external things, she had to let go of her desire for the relationship and for this person to love her. When she was able to let the relationship go, she was able to open herself up to connecting with herself and the other person without the expectation that *he* would make her feel okay. She was now at a place where she could accept her own vulnerability and "light", feeling centered in that place with or without the other.

Each of the co-researchers had to let go of their external preoccupations to embrace a deeper self. In doing so, we see the focus shift inward for these women as they opened themselves up to coming from a place of vulnerability. Greenspan (2003) describes vulnerability as:

it is about openness. Not only to pain, adversity, loss, and death, but also to the things we desire and cherish: to love, intimacy, creativity, sex, birth, wonder; to being truly touched by another human being, being truly seen for who we are....Vulnerability is what we share as human beings; our openness to be affected by one another, for better or worse, is at the core of our interconnectedness (p.39).

Letting go of Ego with its Roles and Ideals

“Ego is a ghost, just an idea...your miseries, your hurts, your ambitions, your jealousies, your fears, greeds, hatreds, attachments—those are all ghosts”

(Osho, 1978, p.250)

Letting go of the other becomes a catalyst for the next phase of the transformational journey as the misery of the ego and its ideals becomes apparent. Letting go of the ego is an invitation to “surrender the apparent primacy of the ego in order to then grow towards greater wholeness” (Firman & Gila, 1997, p.40). In letting go of our ideas of who we are, we are able to see the limitations of buying into the stories that thwart growth and connection. Firman and Gila (1997) state that,

When we become unwittingly identified with a particular content such as a belief, feeling, or role, our entire experience of reality is conditioned by that particular content alone. Here we lose our sense of transcendence, and become wholly immanent, enmeshed in the particular belief, feeling, or role. It is as if we see the world only through the lens of the particular identification, and so our actions become limited and controlled by that particular world view (p.54)

To let go of the ego is like waking up from a trance and expanding one's insight and awareness. Similarly, as indicated by Prendergast (2003), when we are "freed of the role identity, we are more authentic, transparent, available, and creative in the moment" (p.7). It is also important to note that this is not necessarily an "easy" process to experience as one can feel as though they are being completely annihilated.

Laura's experience highlights this feeling of annihilation as she described the process as being "painful and depressing in its own right" and that letting go of the ego meant letting go of all the old stories, judgments, and beliefs about herself as well as others:

Well I thought it was depressing because you're stripped, you're stripped of everything of who you thought you were. And there, it is very shaky ground and you're left floating in there and judgments can come in as who are these people, what do they want...and all of these are connected to your past right. Like so the same shit kept coming up again, but when they are coming up, you see that it's just like these little fragment thoughts that don't mean anything. So in one sense, in the falling away there's these meanings that you've grabbed onto your whole life that had substance, and then in that moment there's no substance to them

anymore. They're still there and you can witness them but there's none of that substance, there's none of that that was there you know and so there's a relaxation into the falling. However, that took time right.

Laura describes the experience of being "stripped" of everything that was "known". In this, she was able to continue to experience the old familiar judgments but at the same time she was able to simply witness them without giving them life. When she was able to witness these stories and judgments without giving them substance, she was able to relax into freedom and peace.

Morgan described a similar path of deconstruction in her journey to the end of the road, which was for her an experience of death where "my belief system was shattered" and a recognition that:

I was striving for an end result and all of my ideals and ego was represented in what that end result should look like. Once I gave that up, once I sort of stopped fighting the stream of swimming up and just laid, floated down, it was so peaceful. So once you get that concept, once I got that concept, things started moving, that's when things started moving up.

Similar to Laura's experience of feeling stripped, Morgan describes the experience as shattering until she gave up fighting the stream, then she was able to experience peace of what is. When they were able to "rest" in the silenced mind, concepts dissolve and in that silence, "is an opening in which the usual evaluation about past events and speculation about future events stops. When you let all mental activity stop, you make your mind available for the unknown, for your own self, your true self, your permanent self, your eternal self" (Gangaji, 1995, p.60).

The ego represents our ideas and beliefs about how things should be and what things should look like in relation to concepts and ideas that pose as restrictions in some instances to what we know to be true. Mary describes her experiences of trying to ‘fit the part’ of assuming roles:

whenever I moved in a way where it felt like the role of a mother was what I was doing, guess what there was always some kind of struggle that I would come up with, that I would bump up against, when the role, actually any idea of what that role means was let go of and just the natural movement, what wants to happen, is very, it’s a spontaneous movement. You could call that in life action, where it’s just without the body, just a spontaneous I can say it doesn’t come from me and at the same time, it does. You know, but whenever I try to meet the images of motherhood it’s a lie – I should be doing this, I should be doing that, they need my care, they need my help now. No, it’s just this. I don’t know if instinctual is the right word but sort of that more than anything else, just this deep knowing of what is being asked for here. Beyond the words, beyond the images, when that meets what’s here, all is okay period - whether it be wife, mother or whatever.

In order to be present and truthful with her self, Mary was faced with having to let go of the “should’s” that can accompany the roles of what it means to be a wife, mother or whatever. Letting go of the ego with all its roles and ideals freed Mary to come from a place of truth, which has been a significant force in her transformational journey through depression and life.

For Brenda the challenge was in how to integrate all aspects of her self to avoid the limitations previously experienced when roles and ideals were compartmentalized.

The challenge then was for her to integrate without losing aspects of herself in the process:

I really did need to re-evaluate it and then you know what it ended up getting re-evaluated again in my 30's after I had the kids and I guess part of that was around my desirability, my sexuality, my being wanted about being wanted in that maiden phase. And that, and then I got into my mother phase and I thought yeah okay, but I hadn't quite put anything together there either I needed to get in there and work on part of that masculine I guess almost and or how I was going to be a strong assertive woman in the world. So I wasn't always going to be giving to other people I wasn't going to be defined by that role and that so all of those pieces sort of being out there and separate were starting to call and needed to be integrated. So I'm a work in progress and it's nice to know that it's not a finished product, that it's not a destination.

Brenda highlights the ongoing nature of surrendering and letting go of the ego. In letting the ego go, she has been able to open herself up to embracing all aspects of herself to be a "strong woman" on her terms.

Osho (1978) shares that as one is able to let go of the ego, "Now it can be said that you are awake...your eyes are opened; now you see the ego does not exist. And to get out of the ego is to get out of sleep. To get out of the ego is to get out of darkness. To get out of the ego is to be free" (p.146). Without the limitations of the ego, one can see past the illusions of *who* one thinks they are and begin to rest in the essence or truth of who they really are.

So much of this phase of the transformational journey was a deconstructive process for the women as they have endured recognizing the bondage of their stories, awareness of the deep betrayal of self, and letting go of external fixations as well as letting go of the ego with all its ideals and roles. With a falling away of the “old self”, we can see the call for integrating the deconstructed self into day-to-day being.

Part C: Transpersonal Integration

“You are pure, uninterrupted consciousness, already whole, already free”

(Gangaji, 1995, p.115)

Embracing the Cosmic Self

In this phase, we see the call for an integration of transpersonal aspects of self, beginning with experiencing cosmic consciousness. Karen describes the moment she first experienced the vastness of existence through meditative practice:

I was just sitting and meditating and it felt like my head opened up and expanded to fill the universe. It's the most profound thing I've ever experienced, it felt like I was connected to everyone and everything. I could feel that connection and it was a deep abiding sense of peace and love that connected me to everything. I had no sense of a physical body, but it was me, it was just me. It's given me a lot of comfort because I know it's a knowing now, it's not a wanting or needing, it's a knowing...it's given me a lot of strength. Like I say, I had no sense of a physical body, everything was just filled with a clear white light. Not a blinding light, not a bright light, just a clear white light and this deep abiding love, and peace and quiet,

and this connection to boundless consciousness.

Karen clarifies that in that particular experience it was “an absolute peace, and absolute love” that came from “a universal source”. The experience of oneness reconnected Karen with her sense of self where there was no longer the need to look outside of her self for missing pieces that she had once thought were missing.

For Brenda, the recognition of her own perfection came following an experience with a crystal healer. Brenda describes her experience as follows:

I had an incredible experience there where everything was, I was going down this tunnel and all of these symbols around Egypt and all kinds of different things coming up, and I ended up in this surrounded by dark, and I was in this cave and it was crystals and then suddenly, and I knew this place was inside of me and this light shone through me. The light of these crystal formations. And it was very beautiful and it was powerful but it was really this connection to something higher that was lighting up something inside of me and it was really a transformational experience I mean I actually had a burn on my stomach from the crystal I mean it was really powerful...I cried and I was like that is so beautiful, and it was just like oh my god that's me and it was so beautiful..... but also that this sense of it's the essence of who I am and this essence is perfect and it's beautiful and it's connected to something much higher.....and that sense of being connected and energized by something bigger within you, in the cosmos, that it's not just my personal energy system. So yeah, after that things started to shift and I realized I needed to get into the world again.

Recognizing the beauty and perfection of her own essence was a huge transformational experience for Brenda. It was the moment that she was connected to her own “light” and the energy of the cosmos, and much like Karen, Brenda experienced that she had this light within her and there was no need to look outside of her self, as perfection was already ever present within.

Similar to Karen and Brenda, Laura also experienced an expanded sense of self “falling into the oneness of existence”,

I remember the moment of surrendering where I fell into the oneness of existence. There was such expansiveness, no boundary, no thought, no feeling of right and wrong. It was as though time did not exist, “I” did not exist. But there was a oneness with everything, it was beautiful, blissful. Even as I talk about this, it’s like there are no words to describe this experience....This experience shifted something in me, like my “problems” seemed ridiculous, like not in a harsh judgmental way but like I realized they weren’t me. I am this expansiveness, I am oneness. Really this experience opened me up to drop into the essence of who I am.

Recognizing “I am” expansiveness and oneness opened Laura up to experience a shift within her self where she could see beauty and bliss, not just within her self, but without boundary in existence. Within this oneness, Laura was able to drop into her own essence and fully realize that she was not her stories and “problems”.

With the women’s experience of an expanded sense of self and consciousness, we see their intense spiritual experiences become a new reference point for them to resolve issues from the past, and also to embrace the present. From this new

reference point within them, they are able to recognize that they no longer have to come from their wounded self.

In the expansion of each woman's consciousness and sense of self, their experiences illuminate subtle, causal, and non-dual states as described in Wilber (1986) previously explained in chapter two.

Integration of Cosmic Consciousness: Resolving Old Stories

“Openness means no-mind...you are ready to look into life again and again in a new way, not with the old eyes”

(Osho, 1978, p.267)

With the expansion of the women's sense of self, they could now integrate their experiences of cosmic consciousness and in that integration, accept all aspects of self. For the research participants, this involved revisiting their old stories, negative core beliefs, and fears that had previously kept them entrenched in disconnection and depression. The participant's individual journeys up to this point have been characterized by a descent and working through the deconstructive process of recognizing the bondage of their stories, acknowledging their betrayal of self, letting go of the other, as well as letting go of the ego. Despite their increased awareness and expanded sense of self, “old” stories have the potential to re-emerge in any given moment. The challenge is revisiting these experiences and working through them from their “new” reference point that is grounded in their expanded sense of self. Gangaji (1995) highlights the importance of coming from grounded beingness,

There are experiences of sadness, experiences of happiness, experiences of ignorance, and experiences of enlightenment. These experiences are all secondary to the truth of who you are. Throughout these experiences there is underlying, abiding truth... You can be happy and you can be sad. You can be right and you can be wrong. But without beingness itself, none of these can exist. First, primary, foremost, and finally, there is beingness—before human being, before animal being, before plant being, before mineral being, before cosmic being—beingness has never gone anywhere. Recognize yourself as that consciousness which pervades everything as beingness (p.132).

A significant challenge for Mary was following her invitation to teach Satsang. In order to be fully present to share Satsang, she had to face her fears and old stories of being seen as “crazy”, as well as working through her “red flags” signifying she was in danger of “being locked up” for sharing her truth. Mary describes working through this as a process of “just embracing all of yourself-being who you are” despite the experience of fear:

And of course there was also this little red flag that went up whenever I spoke any kind of Satsang because in the old hospital days, people would think that I’m crazy. I think that there was just this physicality that went “no you can’t do this, it’s not safe, you could get imprisoned again or something”. What walks with me now is all of who I am, which is also the whole history and it’s okay. It’s that willingness really to know your self here in whatever way it presents itself. You could say that it’s a matter of being available to be on one’s deathbed every

moment of one's life, because only when you allow yourself to die here can you be available to what wants to be born and embodied here.

Mary speaks of the importance for her to fully embrace *all* of her self and come from her own place of truth and vulnerability at all times, despite the risks. Being available on "one's death bed" signifies the ongoing surrender to what is and that in the experience of surrender, everything is as it should be.

Following Brenda's experience with recognizing her perfection within her self, integrating her experience resulted in additional challenges and what others deemed as her 'nutty phase'.

Umm, my nutty phase, uh, things went shitty too. I mean basically I came home and I was all excited...and then I was just on such a high and it was just this incredible high and it wasn't grounded and it wasn't integrated yet but it was sort of like I needed to integrate it and so I was telling people about this marvelous experience that I had and of course they thought that was like a hallucination and that was like a mental illness kind of thing and um so there was this backlash...when you sort of hit another dimension inside of yourself, that's not usually something that people go around talking about and that. So it was painful in that I didn't receive a lot of acceptance around that, it almost created like a spiritual crisis you know. With this idea that you had gone through something big, it was spiritual, it was real, it did transform me, but there wasn't a body of people around that could support that and I needed to find those people. And I did luckily enough, to bring me down and tell me that was okay and give me some insight into it, and not devalue it.

Brenda recognized the importance of not devaluing her experiences as well as her sense of self. Fears of not being good enough were revisited in the lack of acceptance she felt from the people she initially exposed her vulnerability to. Coming from a “new” expanded self, she was able to see past these fears and surrender to her self and her truth despite “backlash”. Brenda’s experience also signified the need for connection with others who could understand her experience rather than devalue it.

For Laura, integration of essence involved being present in the moment and watching her old patterns as an observer, no longer giving her self to them.

I am conscious now of my stories and patterns and how they like create separation from my essential essence. I watch them as an observer because I know now that essence is always present. In each moment I have to watch how they can quickly resurface. You know, I don’t grasp at them now, there’s an awareness that “I” am not these stories, but being aware in the moment is key. It’s like, coming from the place of essence, issues dissolve.

Coming from a place of expanded consciousness Laura is able to see beyond old stories and patterns, despite their continued emergence, and maintain her interconnectedness to her own essence. She highlights the significance of maintaining ongoing, moment-to-moment awareness in her own vulnerability that *she* is not her stories and judgments and allow them to dissolve. In their dissolution she is able to experience being loved and accept herself as she is.

Karen’s described her experience of cosmic consciousness as a “connection of love” and that this love opened her up to experience not only a love for others, but a love for herself as well. In integrating cosmic consciousness, she indicated that she

had to “re-visit” her old stories and fears and in order to face these, it is important that she come from her “new” frame of reference in expanded consciousness:

I’m not afraid to live my life anymore. I’m not afraid of people and letting them see who I am. I can just be where I’m at, and I’m okay with that. I’m facing my fears and looking at them as challenges that will help me grow rather than something that you know is going to mess up my life. At times I sense a step backwards, but I’ll notice myself slipping back and it loses its intensity because I can recognize it now.

Each woman highlights the importance of coming from her expanded self and that in doing so, old stories and patterns lose their debilitating hold over them.

Living on the Edge: Resolving Depression from a Non-Dual Place

Building on the previous theme, not only could the women integrate their experience of cosmic consciousness, but also their experiences of depression, which had haunted them for so long, as it was now being seen from non-dual awareness. Each of the participants was given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of depression and the significance they feel it has to their non-dual journey.

For Laura, the experience of depression was an invitation to participate in a transformation journey. Depression opened her to experience fully her humanity free from bondages and containment:

Depression has allowed me to participate in the transformational process.

Depression is humanness; depression is a big part of being human... When I

block experiences, or manipulate experiences and depression, I'm no longer in my beingness. In opening up to depression and welcoming depression into my life, into who I am, it facilitates a change, a choicelessness it opens and expands my experience instead of containing it. It opens me up to appreciate being human... It's an experience in and of itself, it's a transformational experience, it's an opportunity to keep transforming myself in an ongoing journey. I don't go seeking it but when I feel it, I don't go running from it I just allow it to happen.

Mary spoke of depression as a lack in acceptance of what is, and that she views depression as a retreat into the safety of the familiarity of suffering. Depression, according to Mary is a reflection of the unknown where there are no boundaries, and where all the beauty life has to offer is available.

And I think most of us, happily, we retreat to the known, we retreat to the familiar, we retreat to our habitual stories about ourselves, we retreat to depression, we retreat to anything to suffering because at least then we've got a handle on knowing what's probably going to happen. And that's better than not knowing, so the mind thinks. When you look at the unknown, anything is possible, everything is possible. The unknown is such a gift – that's freedom, it's beautiful, everything is possible...And if you can actually let go, sort of like you're in an inner tube and you're going down the rapids and you're just like 'okay whatever'. You know, it's actually quite fun and what you end up realizing is that it usually goes way better than you could have ever figured. Things have a serendipity, a synchronicity-the truth has its own movement and no matter how much you argue with it, it's still going to go whatever way it wants to go. And so

with all of that holding on, that clinging to ‘it has to go my way’ is the blessing that you’ve missed—you’ve missed the beautiful freefall down the rapids.

Much like Laura and Mary, Brenda views depression as not something to be dreaded, rather as an opening to experiencing transformation, which she feels is something to be celebrated not denied.

I see depression so much differently now. I see it now as being part of a process that sometimes we have to re-organize inner levels you know and then kind of out again and into the world...you know, we put it to outside sources and if we take this pill we can just make it magically go away instead of experiencing a transformational process because I think there is a lot of human power in that. I think it’s part of an ongoing process, so now I’m not afraid of it. I don’t see it as something dark or bad um, it’s something to be celebrated.

With the integration of non-dual consciousness and resolution of depression, the journeys of these women have come full circle. Non-dual consciousness is not an end to experiencing depression, rather is opening one up to experiencing it fully from an expanded self. The perceived truth of old stories of not being good enough and not being loveable have been deconstructed and the truth that remains for each woman is the essence of who she is. Each woman began her story with perceived ego-deficiencies, where their “lacking” disconnected them from their self, to an embracement of a journey that has transformed and expanded them to experience the richness and fullness of her self and non-dual consciousness.

Conclusion

Chapter four offered a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of five women who have experience transformation through non-dual consciousness in their experience of depression. Each woman shared her journey to wholeness and, through a thematic analysis of their transcribed interviews; common themes and experiences have been the focus of this chapter. The themes that emerged from their lived experiences were characterized by twelve themes in three main categories including *Part A: The Descent, Part B: The Transformational Journey, and Part C: Transpersonal Integration.*

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study set out to explore and gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of depression as a transformational experience through non-dual consciousness that could not be found in contemporary psychological theories alone. The intent was not to prove anything per say, rather it was to stimulate conversation and understanding through the culmination of contemporary understanding and theory intertwined with feminist and transpersonal epistemologies to explore the lived experiences of five women who have experienced transformational journeys through their experience of depression. In an attempt to bring this exploration to a close, Chapter Five will offer final reflections on this topic through a summary of the findings and discussion of the limitations of this research. While this study did not deal directly with counseling, implications for counseling will be explored resulting from this research. We will also revisit the *implicated researcher* as well as suggestions for future research and my concluding remarks. Let us now turn to a summary of the research findings.

Summary of Findings

“What is women's experience of depression as transformational?”

This study set out to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of depression as a transformational experience embracing non-dual consciousness. This study provided a means of engaging and connecting with five women who identified

themselves on a transformation journey that began with the experience of depression. This study allowed for conversations to emerge out of the lived experience of the co-researchers who have been embracing non-dual consciousness for two years prior to participating in this research. In order to engage and connect with these women, I incorporated a transpersonal theoretical orientation to discuss their lived experience. In order to illuminate and interpret the themes that emerged from their narrative descriptions, I applied a phenomenological hermeneutics approach and subsequently analyzed and interpreted the findings. Analysis and interpretation of the transcripts resulted in the emergence of twelve themes. These twelve themes fell into three main categories including *Part A: The Descent*, *Part B: The Transformational Journey*, and *Part C: Transpersonal Integration*. Let us now explore the major themes that have emerged from this study.

In *Part A: The Descent*, it was suggested that early experiences of feeling *Isolated and Withdrawn* were significant experiences in the development of self as well as leading to the experience of depression. The women described themselves as full of fear, unlovable, feeling not good enough and as though something was “not quite right” within them in childhood. These early feelings and experiences seemed to not only serve as the onset of their stories, but also the experience of depression. As the stories and lives of the co-researchers unfolded, these initial early feelings were revisited and at the root of their negative core beliefs about their self thereby impacting their relationships with not only their self, but with others as well. One of the research participants differed slightly from the others in that she experienced the feelings of not being good enough, unlovable, and full of fear at a later time in her

life. Despite this later experience, her story unfolded in a similar way in that she too was undermined by these negative core beliefs about her self.

Within the negative core beliefs experienced early on, the second theme of this research emerged noted as *Disconnection from Self*. Disconnection from self highlighted the point in the researchers lives that they disowned aspects of themselves and were actively “buying into” their negative core beliefs. Disconnecting from self also affected the research participants ability to connect with others as well. When one is operating from their primal wound as indicated by Firman & Gila (1997), one is prone to experiencing psychological dysfunction, particularly the experience of depression. Disconnection was a similar experience for all of the participants, however the way in which it was experienced differed for each individual. For one it was through the experience of sexual assault, for another it was an inability to accept and share her self, there was also self-loathing and harsh judgments from the self including “I’m not loveable”, and the experience of shame and guilt. As indicated by Greenspan (2003) we can see how for each of the research participants, the negative stories initially experienced in childhood have opened a gaping wound in their sense of self and how when “functioning” from their wounded self, fear reared it’s ugly head.

The third theme, *Imprisoned in Fear*, signified the “stuck” feeling one can experience when “functioning” from a disconnected, wounded self. Fear created a “box” by which the women were bound in to protect and hide from their own vulnerability. Core negative beliefs and the fear of not being loved and alone kept one of the participants transfixed in pain and suffering. For another, fear of

vulnerability prevented her from coming from a place of her own truth to take care of others. The fear of being hurt by others was also experienced and out of the fear of her own vulnerability, it was a matter of “survival” for one of the participants to manipulate and control situations to not connect with others. Not being good enough and feeling unloveable were also experiences that kept them imprisoned in their fear and disconnected from their self and their vulnerability. Wounded and transfixed in fear left the women desperate for a way out of their hell.

In theme four we see how the research participants were *Desperate For A Way Out* of their psychological hell. For these women, death appeared more appealing than living life as it were. As a means of putting an end to her suffering, each woman experienced the intense desire to die. Despite their desire to die, the participants experienced a connection to something bigger, which stopped them from committing suicide and offered them a glimmer of hope for something more.

The glimmer of hope experienced by each participant came about as a *Transformational Invitation: A Path Out of Hell*. For one of the women, the invitation came about with a quest to find a deeper meaning in life and the recognition that there was “no choice” but to seek something different. Literature pertaining to spirituality also offered one of the women a way out as she set about going on retreats and meeting a “teacher” who was able to speak to her experiences in a way that made sense to her. Another participant fearfully accepted an invitation to be a part of a transpersonal group while yet another experienced losing it all with no where else to go but inward.

Part B: The Transformational Journey is likened to a deconstructive process

where the first step comes paradoxically with the realization of how much a person has been imprisoned in old, worn out, unhelpful stories and negative core beliefs. In the fifth theme, we see the onset of this deconstructive process in *Recognizing the Bondage of 'The Story'*. Each of the participants had up to this point embraced being a victim of many betrayals by others, yet in recognizing the bondage of their stories had to realize that they had sold themselves out and that in doing so, they had betrayed themselves, the greatest betrayal of all. With this realization, they no longer had the “victim” to hide behind and were therefore left in the sadness of accepting their responsibility for their own pain and suffering.

Letting Go of the Other was the sixth theme that emerged indicating a need for each of the research participants to let go of fixating and taking care of others to open up to their vulnerable self. In going through their experiences, letting go of the other was necessary to accept one's own vulnerability and experience the onset of a “new” reference point to come from. Letting go of the other becomes a catalyst for the next theme as the misery of the ego and its ideals becomes apparent.

The seventh theme *Letting go of Ego with its Roles and Ideals* allowed for each of the research participants to transcend the limitations imposed by the ego that thwart growth and connection. The women were faced with annihilation and falling away of the “old” stories of who they “were”. The participants describe feeling “stripped” of everything they once knew and a felt sense of freedom for no longer buying into the “should's” in life. With a falling away of the “old self”, the calling for an integration of the deconstructed and expanding self was essential, and the focus of the next part of the journey for the participants.

Part C: Transpersonal Integration is characterized by the participants finding their way to integrating their expanding sense of self into day to day being. The onset of this is the eighth theme in this research *Embracing the Cosmic Self*.

Embracing the Cosmic Self, the eighth theme explored, shared the huge experiences of the participants when they were opened to the cosmos. Opening up to the cosmos offered an expansion in their sense of self and consciousness. They were able to recognize that *this is* the essence of who they are and that they have within them a “new” frame of reference in their being. With a “new” frame of reference and expanded sense of self, the women could experience life herein from this place and that they not have to limit their experiences coming from a place of woundedness.

Integration of Cosmic Consciousness: Resolving and Integrating Old Stories was that ninth theme that emerged from the women’s stories. With the expansion of self, the women were able to integrate their experience of cosmic consciousness into their being where all aspects of self were embraced. This allowed each woman to experience and witness their old worn out stories, judgments, and fears that had held them captive for years without attachment. In order to free themselves, they came from their “new” frame of reference leaving them open and expanded in the moment. Their experience of cosmic consciousness and expansion of self also served to open the women up to their experiences of depression where they were able to experience resolution from non-dual consciousness.

The final theme that emerged from this research exploring the lives of five women took us back full circle to the research question. The experience of depression was identified as an opening to experience and participate in a journey of transformation.

The perceived “negativity” of the experience of depression was dissolved in their expanded consciousness and rather than running, was now an embraced experience by the women. They did not go “seeking” depression, but were now able to welcome the experience as an opening to ongoing transformation. From their expanded sense of self in non-dual consciousness, depression dissolves like any other experience, no longer having the “power” to keep them entrenched in pain and suffering. As stated by Laura, depression is “an experience in and of itself, it’s a transformational experience, it’s an opportunity to keep transforming myself in an ongoing journey”.

Through the exploration of women’s lived experience of depression as a transformational experience, we can see how through a descent, deconstruction, and integration the women were able to experience freedom and resolve from self-imposed limitations as well as the experience of depression itself from an expanded sense of self in non-dual consciousness.

Let us now turn to an exploration of both the strengths and limitations of this research.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

This study has highlighted women’s experience of depression as transformational through embracing non-dual consciousness and both strengths and limitations have emerged that need to be acknowledged. One of the strengths of this research is that it gives a voice to women’s transformational experiences. Christ (1995) indicates that women need literature that can speak to their pains as they experience them that can provide them with an opportunity for insight. As such, women have great

opportunities to learn from other women and that through the act of transmitting experiences, “their act creates new possibilities of being and living for themselves and for all women” (Christ, 1995, p.23). Providing a voice for women’s transformation to non-dual consciousness through the experience of depression allows the possibility for other women to resonate with this research and perhaps an opportunity for them to experience their own growth.

Another strength of this study is in the research itself exploring women’s experience of depression as transformational. As indicated in the literature review in contemporary approaches to understanding and treating depression are not effective in that they do not account for spiritual experiences and expanding consciousness. This study provides another way for women to understand and possibly experience their depression, opening themselves up to the transformational opportunity in depression itself.

While this study provides a unique account of blending contemporary understanding and theories of depression with feminist and transpersonal theory to give a deeper understanding of the topic, it is also limiting in that it highlights gendered experiences that are transpersonal in nature. By focusing solely on women’s experiences this work does not give credence to men’s experience of depression or to men’s experience of transformation. In conducting gendered research, there is opportunity to elevate women’s experience thereby erroneously promoting the idea that women’s experience is “better” or “more important” rather than acknowledging that they are simply “different” than men’s (Rich, 2004).

As this study focused on women resolving depression through transformation to

non-dual consciousness, further criticism can be aimed at the potential illusion that transformation is a normal experience for women. By focusing exclusively on depression as being transformational, this focus ignores the experience of the majority of women who have not found depression to be transformational. Related to this criticism is the idea that this work is a reflection of my own biases and judgments about depression and the transformational journey. Steps were taken to ensure that this is not the case through several measures including opening up this discussion through disclosing myself as an implicated researcher, as well as going through the emergent themes with co-researchers to ensure their connections to them. Despite taking these precautions, it is important to acknowledge that my personal biases and judgments could not be eliminated completely. Identifying with my own experiences with depression and non-dual consciousness is also a significant strength within this study as it allowed for a deep connection with each of the co-researchers in the moment, which was transformational in and of itself.

It can also be acknowledged that this study was limited to the experiences of five women who responded to an advertisement in Synchronicity Magazine. The small sample size was intentional as the writer wanted to provide an in depth and sensitive exploration of the topic, however in doing so, the limited number of co-researchers invariably means that there can be no claims to universally generalizing the themes that have emerged. Regarding the recruitment of the co-researchers, one could argue that this is also limiting as the women who responded were from one source that is rooted in spirituality thereby missing additional participants from other backgrounds and frames of reference.

The “data” or themes that emerged from this study are based on interpretive accounts of what *some* women experience. Except with how the themes resonate with the reader, the analysis cannot be validated or verified outside of the women themselves who have experienced a transformation of consciousness and self through their experience of depression. There is no statistical or “scientific” offering of findings; rather it is empathic in that it offers women who may have had similar experiences an opportunity to connect their experiences with others on a similar journey.

As mentioned previously, this study has much strength, but is also vulnerable to limitations as well. Despite the fact that this study has not dealt directly with counselling per say, there are implications to consider for the counselling process as a result of the themes that have emerged from this research. Let us now explore implications for counselling.

Implications for Counselling

The focus of this study has not dealt directly with counselling per say, nevertheless the findings that arose do have some implications for counselling and our understanding and subsequent approach to treating depression.

Firstly, there is the recognition that medical and other helping professionals continue to treat women’s experiences of depression with contemporary bio-psycho-social approaches to treatment that often include medication and forms of talk-therapy previously mentioned in Chapter Two of this study. This has serious implications for women who are wanting to explore more spiritual pathways to

integrate the totality of their being in that they are not afforded the opportunity of opening themselves up to the transformational opportunities within the experience of depression.

The second implication for counselling is informed by the idea that much of what happens within the counselling session is influenced by the counsellor's own frame of reference and approach to counselling. The implications from the thematic analysis in Chapter four suggest that guidance and more importantly *understanding* of non-dual consciousness and the seemingly deconstructive process of the journey would be beneficial to counsellors as most contemporary psychological approaches do not facilitate a deconstructive process, rather the focus tends to be on constructing a "stronger" ego thereby potentially "missing" the invitation for transformation.

In addition, it is apparent that counsellors who have not embraced their own journey may do inadvertent harm to clients. For instance, when the women interviewed experienced cosmic consciousness, they felt the hugeness of the experience and the vulnerability of being in their essence. The danger for the research participants came from other people's perceptions that they were "crazy". Without an understanding of the experience from others, there was a risk of minimizing it or shutting down that deep "new found" connection with self and experience of oneness with the cosmos. It is clear that counsellors through their own experiences and understanding can either be facilitators or "shut down" their clients who are having transformational experiences.

Thirdly, embracing vulnerability seems to be a pivotal theme. Nixon (1992) has suggested that it is important for counsellors to be embracing their own journey as

this embracement can help counsellors be present with clients and come from a place of vulnerability. This is very important, as when counsellors are comfortable in their own vulnerability, they are able to connect and sit with their clients who are learning to be okay with being vulnerable. For the most part, society as a whole fears vulnerability and tends to shy away from it, talking about it rather than experiencing it (Greenspan, 2003). However, it is within the experience of vulnerability that we open up to transformation. The research interviews offered the research participants an opportunity to reflect on the transformational experience through depression, and each indicated that staying in the presence of her own vulnerability and the acceptance of “what is” fostered a deeper connection with self and opened her up to embracing the experience rather than running from it. Counsellors need to be role models of how to sit in this vulnerability.

For counsellors to embark on such a journey as a counsellor involves a lot of work on the self and being truthful about one’s own stories and patterns to let go of ego and embrace the richness of self. The process of how one goes about facilitating one’s own journey mirrors how one helps facilitate the journey in other. Practicing self-inquiry and fostering self-awareness are helpful in opening one up to fully embracing and experience self in all its wonder. Techniques such as shadow work and the “work” by Byron Katie can be useful in that they foster acceptance as well as a deeper connection with self through embracing all of the self, the light and the dark. Other techniques may include meditation, mindfulness, and mind-body work to name but a few that can facilitate non-dual consciousness and awareness. Even the process of thesis writing has been a transformational journey, which in its own way has

replicated many of the themes of this study.

Revisiting the Implicated Researcher

The undertaking of this thesis has itself been a transformational experience for the researcher. As indicated in Chapter one, I am an implicated researcher and as such have been intricately connected to the research participants and to the text of this research. Throughout the process I have continued to be mindful of my own biases pertaining to women's transformation to non-dual consciousness through the experience of depression that emerged out of my own experiences. As I have continued to embrace my own journey of non-dual consciousness this has allowed me to continue to experience transformation throughout this journey.

Connecting with each of the research participants from a place of vulnerability and heartfelt openness, I was able to meet them in their own vulnerability, which allowed for a deep connection and a shared transformation during the interview itself. The ability to meet with the five women and gain a deep understanding of their stories and experiences has been a great pleasure for me, and truly humbling. It has reinforced the importance of ongoing awareness as each moment is in itself an opportunity for transformation.

Suggestions for Future Research

The focus of this research has been on understanding the lived experience of women's transformation of depression through non-dual consciousness. Due to the nature of this study and the implications of the thematic analysis, one cannot help but

want to explore other possible focuses for research as well.

Depression is a universal experience and is not limited to women. It would be interesting to explore depression as a transformational experience in men through non-dual consciousness as well to explore how the experiences may be “different”, not better or worse than, but different for men and women. As indicated in Chapter two of this research, non-dual consciousness knows no boundaries including gender so to understand the journeys to an expanded sense of self for both men and women would allow for further understanding of the richness of human experience.

Another area that has emerged for additional research is relating to feeling “crazy” and being perceived of as “crazy” by others throughout the journey. Is this an expected part of the transformational experience? Is it prevalent for both men and women? Does there need to be a certain embracement of some form of “madness” beyond conceptual reality as a part of the transformational journey?

It would also be interesting to further explore the importance of a counsellor’s own journey in fostering transformation through non-dual consciousness for women experiencing depression. Is it a necessity? If so, what does that mean for emerging up and coming counsellors and therapists? What does it mean for doctors and other health care professionals?

Conclusion

This thesis has been the story of five women who have experienced transformation through their experience of depression through non-dual consciousness and expansion of self. As mentioned previously, this thesis has been quite the journey as

well. Ironically, focusing on depression proved to be quite depressing for the researcher and challenging to continue to stay in my own vulnerability in the face of the mirroring of each of the participants. In the end, I am grateful to the many transformational experiences that I have experienced throughout the course of this work. Sharing the stories of the five women has been a true gift, and my hope is that in doing so I have done justice to honoring their individual journeys that presently rest in non-dual consciousness.

Depression can offer some women an alternative to connect with a deeper self and re-connect with heartfelt humanness. It is with hope that this research can offer women a deeper understanding of transformation through non-dual consciousness and give a voice for all women with similar experiences to connect to.

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Appendix I: Sample Advertisement for Synchronicity Magazine

Research Participants Required

Sharie Falk is a student in the Master of Science: Heath Sciences Program at the University of Lethbridge conducting a study of women embracing a non-dual (beyond ego, experiencing oneness and bliss) approach to dealing with experiences of depression.

Female research participants who have been on a journey embracing a non-dual approach to dealing with depression for a minimum of one year are wanted to participate in a research interview (anywhere in Alberta) that will take approximately 1-2 hours.

Participants will be provided with transcripts of their interviews. If you would like to participate in this study, please contact Sharie at (403) 320-1613 or via e-mail sharie.falk@uleth.ca.

Appendix II: Sample Letter of Consent

Dear participant,

You are being asked to participate in a study about the non-dual approach to women and depression. The focus of the study will be on women who have embraced a non-dual path to experiencing depression for at least one year. This study will involve an in-depth interview exploring your experiences with depression through the non-dual from the beginning of your journey to the present time. The purpose of the study is to illuminate the themes that emerge throughout the journey which will help us further understand the nature of depression and may lead to significant theoretical and treatment implications.

The research will require each individual participant to participate in a 1-2 hour initial interview with a follow up interview of approximately 1 hour. If necessary, additional interviews may be required. Participation is voluntary and individuals who wish to discontinue the interviews may do so at any time.

Participant responses will be kept confidential. The data collected from the interviews will be shared only with the thesis supervisor and myself. The tapes will be destroyed upon publication of the research. To maintain anonymity, each participant will be identified by self-selected pseudonyms. The results of this study outside of the thesis may be published in academic journals and/or presented at conferences and/or university classes.

If you have any questions about this study, or if you would like to obtain a copy of the research results, please contact Sharie Falk at (403) 320-1613 or via e-mail at sharie.falk@uleth.ca. Questions may also be directed towards Dr. Gary Nixon, thesis supervisor, of the Addictions Counselling program at the University of Lethbridge, (403) 329-2644. Questions of a more general nature may be addressed to the Office of Research Services, University of Lethbridge, (403) 329-2747.

Sincerely,

Sharie Falk

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I have read and understood the above information and I consent to participating in the study entitled, "A Transpersonal Non-Dual Approach to Women and Depression: A Phenomenological Hermeneutics Approach".

(print name) _____

(signature) _____

