

**WOMEN'S JOURNEYS OF TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SELF-OTHER
RELATIONSHIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-HERMENEUTICS
INVESTIGATION**

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Abstract

In contemporary transpersonal theory, women's experiences of transformation have largely been overlooked. This study seeks to answer the question, what are women's lived experiences of the path of transformation through self-other relationships? In setting the stage for the study, the researcher identifies two transpersonal theorists, Wilber and Almaas, and describes their models of consciousness development. She then outlines the feminist critique of existing psychological literature and the need for exclusively female research. Following is an inclusion of themes that have been extracted from the existing literature, themes which represent the biases of the researcher in what she expected to encounter in the current research. Further is a description of existentialism and the role it plays in inviting women to embark on a journey of transformation. The methods employed by the researcher were qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutics. Seven females participated in a three-stage interview process, whereby information was gathered via interviews, then further transcribed and interpreted. This information was then synthesized and presented in a thematic analysis where women's experiences were categorized into four separate stages. Finally, the sub-themes of each stage were compared to the stages of development as illustrated by Wilber and Almaas. Ultimately it is concluded that women's experiences are highlighted by the relational nature of self-development, and the cyclical process of the journey itself.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Emerging Psychological Theory

For thousands of years, spiritualists have talked about a process of transforming the self, a journey, or ‘quest’ towards wholeness (Nixon, 2005). Eastern philosophers have attempted to describe this phenomenon in terms of a mystical ontology, by mapping the evolution and anatomy of the human spirit (Welwood, 2000). In the West, however, the focus has been on more cognitive models of self-development, and the role of the self-concept in psychological maturation (Almaas, 1996). What many contemporary theorists are suggesting, however, is that the explanations offered by either psychology or spirituality alone are incomplete and insufficient when it comes to understanding the evolution of consciousness (Nixon, 2005; Strohl, 1998; Wilber, 1977, 1996). Subsequently, some authors are proposing integrative models of spiritual psychology that aim to provide a more inclusive understanding of human awareness.

One such model is that of the transpersonal psychologists, who propose a more comprehensive and integrative map of human consciousness than is offered by either solely eastern or solely western philosophers/psychologists (Nixon, 2005; Strohl, 1998; Wilber, 1977, 1996). This map can be used to chart the profound experiences of transformation that occur as one transcends the dimensions of first body, then mind, then soul, and finally spirit, on the journey towards wholeness (Huxley, 1945; Wilber, 1983).

Integral to this process of transcendence are a number of existential encounters with Nothingness: “situations which bring us face to face with the reality of existence; bring up questions, such as ‘Who am I? Why am I here? What is existence? Is there a purpose to my life here on this earth? Is there anything permanent I can hold onto to give

me meaning?’” (Rich, 2004, p. 19). These questions arise as one begins to reflect on, and subsequently dissolve, representations of the self. As each construct falls away, an individual becomes closer and closer to their true self as a manifestation of pure consciousness (Almaas, 1996; Nixon, 1992; Trungpa, 1976; Welwood, 2000).

Inherent in this process is a confrontation with one’s ‘existential isolation’ – an ultimate aloneness in the world – and the effect that such isolation has on one’s self-other relationships (May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). It might be tempting for a person to hold onto those self-other relationships that she sees as self-defining, and/or validating; by engaging in such relationships, she is reinforcing her own existence and postponing the encounter with Nothingness (i.e. ‘I must exist, because this person is experiencing me’) (Almaas, 1996; Rich, 2004; Yalom, 1980). However, participation in such relationships is seen as fundamentally narcissistic, and therefore counterproductive to the transformational process (Almaas, 1996). As individuals disengage from such relationships, or at least deconstruct their need for mirroring, they release themselves from the self-representations determined by others, and free themselves to continue down the path towards wholeness. Once a person has transcended their self-representation, they are free to participate in a dance of authentic relationships, characterized by need-free love (Almaas, 1996; Buber, 1965; Maslow, 1968; Yalom, 1980).

This transition, from neediness to needlessness in relationships, has been well-established as a characteristic of the journey towards wholeness (Yalom, 1980); however, it is questionable as to how well the map of this journey represents women’s experiences of transformations (Wright, 1995). Because of the relational nature of their self-representations (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1977, 1991a, 1991b; Surrey

1991), women may be more prone to the anxiety-producing effects of confronting their existential isolation, and less likely to disengage from relationships that they see as defining their selves (Rich, 2004). Hence, the exact nature of women's experiences may not be reflected in the models of consciousness development proposed by leading transpersonal psychologists.

This is the very argument that many feminists make in their critiques of male-oriented theories; not only have men been marginalizing women's experiences by not including them in their studies on human development, but they have generalized their findings to the female population at large (Donovan, 1985; Kaschak, 1992; Lather, 1992; Ussher, 1995; Wright, 1995). Subsequently, females who do not fit within accepted models of development are seen as 'pathological' or 'deviant', instead of representing their own unique reality (Donovan, 1985; Miller, 1977). Interestingly, while feminists continue to critique the existing models of transformation, few studies have been found that explore women's experiences of the transformational process. Because of this gap in the existing literature, and because of the researcher's own intimate and evolving experience with women's journeys towards wholeness, the following study seeks to answer the question: what are women's lived experiences of transformation through self-other relationships?

The Implicated Researcher

Before entering a discussion about the pertinent information regarding this topic, it is important that I first identify my own involvement as a researcher. This is necessary to elucidate my own presuppositions and how they have influenced, and will further influence the very nature of this research. Gadamer (1975) warned that the researcher

needs to present his biases at the beginning of the research – that he should expose himself, rather than claim objectivity and thus a non-influential position within his work. Rich (2004) described this as a need “to understand what is behind a question by making ourselves aware of our own hidden presuppositions, and as far as possible, to lay bare the motivating roots from which our interest springs” (Rich, 2004, p. 9). By exposing these roots, we as researchers free ourselves from the influence (perhaps even unconscious) of our own concealed biases, and ultimately leave responsibility up to the audience; you, as the subjective reader, are responsible for interpreting those aspects of this research that are appropriate for you and your epistemological framework (Sass, 1988).

This study, in particular, demands my participation in the research. As a woman on my own transformational path towards wholeness, it is exceedingly difficult (some would argue even impossible) to retain any objectivity in the extraction of this phenomenon from other women – that I could remove myself from the investigation and report only the experiences of others. Even the questions that I seek to answer, the meanings that I am trying to find, are closely tied to my own personal experiences with the phenomenon in question. The study is motivated by my own curiosity about this experience. As Gadamer (1981) claimed, “[it is] only when I have first understood the motivating meaning of the question that I can even begin to look for an answer” (p. 107). In this case, the motivating meaning of the question is to illuminate those elements of women’s experiences that helped facilitate their transformations. For Jardine, (1990), entering into a dialogue with a specific topic is to “risk transformation oneself” – which, in this case, might even be considered the goal. Therefore, the following study will not claim objectivity, but rather a uniquely personal investigation of women’s experiences as

they undergo transformations of their self-other relationships. It seems appropriate, then, to disclose those aspects of my own journey that are relevant to the development of my research question.

My Own Journey

I suppose the most pertinent information about myself, as it relates to the proposed study, is, what I perceive to be, a lack of traditional gender-socializing in my childhood. My mother – a strong proponent of a parenting style that can only be described as ‘laissez-faire’ – refused to impose any gender-stereotyping on her children. One can anticipate the impact, or lack thereof, that this style would have on a female, born third to two older, and very masculine, brothers. As a child, I was very tomboyish, preferred G.I.Joe to Barbie, and liked to wear my hair short. It is safe to say that I was mistaken for a ‘young man’ on more than one occasion.

It was not until high school, and the pressures of adolescent ‘dating’ that I remember my tomboyish-ness bothering me, and my father’s suggested solution of putting on some makeup and some feminine clothes. It was at that time that I recall my first encounters with the battle of defining my ‘self’ – finding a concept that fit with my own experience, and that would facilitate relationships with others in my life, particularly men.

Thus began a period of frustrated experimentation, as I battled with myself over how much to sacrifice and how much to give, in order to keep the others happy. It is of no small significance that much of my own ‘self-acceptance’ was based on the status of my relationships with my brothers, father, and the young men that I considered to be potential ‘boyfriends’. I recall feeling that if others found me attractive/loveable/worthy,

then I must indeed *be* all of those things; in the context of my self-other relationships, I was using the *other* as a mirror to reflect back some sense of self-identity, and, in the process, a sense of validation. Thus began a preoccupation with the world's perception of my self.

While my teenage years, like those of many others, involved working through a variety of personal issues, I was not confronted with this narcissism until late in my undergraduate degree. One evening, while I was driving a friend home, he confronted me on my desire to pursue a career in the medical profession. Specifically, he asked why someone who possessed the qualities, pursued the interests, and valued the things that I did would want to work in such a contradictory vocation. He further expressed his suspicion that my goals were less driven by my own desires, and more driven by those of my father, whose validation I desperately sought. His question, or my inability to provide a sufficient answer, quite literally took my breath away, and left me in a state of what can only be described as 'intoxication'. I recall feeling all my thoughts dissolve, and sensing the world around me with absolute precision. Sights, sounds, smells: everything in the universe suddenly made sense – more precisely, I made sense.

The realization that I had based such an important life decision on the introjected goals of someone else, has since led me to a re-evaluation of myself. Subsequently, I have made numerous attempts to extract the others from my conception of myself, and have further tried to crystallize my identity (Almaas, 1996). In doing so, I have discovered a voice that I was previously unaware of – an ability to assert myself and discover aspects of the world under the influence of my interpretations rather than others'. Along with my own voice, I have recognized the voices of many others, some of

whom are women, calling for a unification of spirit in a way that does not undermine individual uniqueness.

This has brought me face-to-face with a series of questions related to my newfound ‘quest’ for wholeness: How does one remain on a path of self-actualization without introjecting the voices of others – others that they potentially identify with? How does one interact from a place of needlessness, while still honouring her connections with other individuals? Is it possible to transform unhealthy self-other relationships into fulfilling and rewarding dances of interconnection? And, if so, how?

Rich (2004) described what she called a ‘hermeneutic break’, a moment in our lives where we are confronted with some piece of reality that causes a shift in our perception of the world. It is a shift that requires meaning and interpretation, so that we might proceed with existence in a heightened state of awareness. In my case, this ‘hermeneutic break’, the realization of my need for external validation, is the driving force behind the current research. Barrett (1979) claimed that “we take up a question when we have some sense of malaise or incompleteness in things as they confront us, and the inquiry is terminated satisfactorily when the original frustration ceases” (p. 176). This is true of the following study. The methods are designed to investigate the experience I have described in great depth, providing thick and meaningful descriptions of the transformations of women’s self-other relationships. Prior to that, however, I must turn to the literature to elucidate the topic in question.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

In order to accurately set the stage for the following study, an understanding must be gained regarding a number of key concepts related to the ‘quest for wholeness’. Subsequently, a literature review has been arranged to penetrate and discuss the relevant writing on each theme that was anticipated to arise during the course of this research. The following chapter can be understood as a presentation of the biases that the researcher herself brought forward into the research (Van Manen, 1990).

Central to the topic of the proposed study is the notion of the ‘path of transformation’. In order to clarify this concept, and in order to gain an understanding of the model through which the participants’ experiences will be construed, the section titled ‘The Path of Transformation’ will outline the main stages of the transformational journey. First, a contemporary transpersonal theorist will be presented who has developed an integral model of consciousness development that incorporates multiple psychological, spiritual, and religious concepts. Ken Wilber’s theory takes some of the more traditional models of cognitive development (such as Kohlberg’s, Loevinger’s, and Piaget’s), and extends them beyond what is considered to be the highest levels of maturity. These new levels of development are what Wilber calls ‘Transpersonal’ stages.

Also in this section will be a description of the ‘Diamond Approach’, which is another model of the transformational journey as described by author A.H. Almaas. Like Wilber, Almaas believes that consciousness development extends beyond what is currently described in mainstream psychological theory. He posits that there is a distinct difference between the human being and his/her soul, and suggests that psycho-spiritual

maturity takes place when a person transcends his/her self-structures. According to Almaas, the journey of transformation leads to discovering one's essence, or inner self. These ideas will be elaborated in the section below.

The next section of the paper, 'The Inclusion of Women's Perspectives', discusses topics that are relevant to conducting a study on women's lived experiences of transformation. Once the relevant models of consciousness development have been covered, the researcher will go into a feminist critique of modern psychological theory as well as transpersonal theory. Presented will be several criticisms of what appears to be an androcentric approach to reviewing, researching, and writing about psycho-spiritual development. It is this critique that defends the need for an exclusively female examination of the path of transformation.

In reviewing the literature for the present study, the researcher discovered that several psychological studies have been conducted exclusively by women on women (Belenky et al., 1997; Kaplan, Klein & Gleason, 1991; Miller, 1991a; Rich, 2004; Stiver, 1991). What these studies suggest is that females' lived experiences vary drastically from those of males, particularly in how they experience their inner selves. Since transformational and transpersonal psychology center around the concept of the 'self', it is necessary to explore these differences in order to understand whether contemporary models of transformation are appropriate for explaining females' lived experiences of the journey. The researcher has therefore explored the accounts of several prominent female authors who recognize themselves as being on a 'journey of transformation'. From these accounts, she extracted themes which she perceived to be relevant to the journey, and which she believed would likely arise during the present research study. These themes,

along with a discussion of her own biases and how they coloured the research, will be discussed below.

Finally, because existentialism can play such a key role in an individual's world collapse and their subsequent embarkation on the quest for wholeness (Nixon, 1992, 2005; Rich, 2004; Welwood, 1982; Wilber, 1977, 1996), a description of existentialism will be provided, as well as how it relates to women's journeys of transformation. This section is titled, 'Existentialism as a Catalyst of Transformation'. We will see how encounters with existential issues can actually serve as an invitation to the journey itself, and how facing one's ultimate reality can facilitate psycho-spiritual development. Inherent in existential theory is the concept of 'existential isolation', a person's intrinsic sense of aloneness in the world, and how that isolation perpetuates dependent self-other relationships (Stiver, 1991). In the last section of this chapter, the researcher will elucidate the differences between dependent relationships and those based on needlessness, the assumption being that as one undergoes a process of transformation, so too will the nature of her relationships.

The Path of Transformation

According to many transpersonal theorists, the 'self' is a concept that exists in the mind. It is an image that evolves from infancy, when people first acquire language and begin to recognize themselves as a unique and separate entity (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Piaget, 1977). From this point onwards, people grasp at words and labels in an effort to define themselves, and what emerges is an evolving conception of 'self', or identity. Transpersonal theorists, however, would argue that this self is actually a false representation. It is the concept that we grasp onto and then project outwards in the hope

that other people will recognize and validate our sense of who we are (Almaas, 2000a; 2000b, 2002; 2004; Wilber, 1996). It is not real. The true self is what exists within us prior to language and identification. It is there regardless of whether we are conscious, unconscious, thinking, dreaming, eating, laughing, dancing, or doing anything at all. It is the consciousness, the awareness that underlies existence itself.

Transformation then is the process whereby one transcends previous representations of his/her 'self' in an effort to recognize the ultimate transience and impermanence of such conceptions (Almaas, 1996; Helminiak, 2001; Nixon, 2005; Strohl, 1998; Wilber, 1977, 1996; Wright, 1995). In place of these representations evolves the recognition of one's true self or essence, one's 'being' free from their structured interpretation of it (Almaas, 1996; Trungpa, 1976; Welwood, 2000). This is where the term 'transpersonal' has arisen from; it stems from the idea that consciousness can actually evolve over time; the way a person understands him/herself can develop in such a way that they come to recognize the truth of who and what they truly are. Transpersonal literally means beyond the persona, and therefore refers to that branch of psychology which "is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness" (Lajoie and Shapiro, 1992, p. 91).

Because transpersonal psychology is an integration of philosophies from the East and West, it is not surprising that this model of consciousness development incorporates aspects that are both highly material and highly spiritual in nature (a dichotomy that often distinguishes one's value system as being either Eastern or Western in origin). This integration has resulted in the notion that reality is actually composed of a number of

different dimensions (Huxley, 1945; James, 1902; Wilber, 1983). Commonly, these dimensions are seen as representative of the tripartite nature of human beings: body (matter), mind, and spirit. Some theorists have further divided reality to include the dimension of the soul, so that all of reality exists on a continuum: from body, to mind, to soul, and finally, to spirit (Wilber, 1983).

In order to appropriately frame the experience of transformation, the researcher will presently describe two models of consciousness development as posited by leading transpersonal theorists, Ken Wilber and A.H. Almaas. There are multiple reasons for why the researcher has selected these two models to the exclusion of others. First, while undergoing her own process of transformation, the researcher poured over a vast body of literature, seeking to give meaning to her own experiences. She encountered the writings of these two authors, and found that their models of consciousness development afforded her meaning and insight into her own experiences. Subsequently, she thought they might ultimately provide a framework for understanding the experiences of others as well. Further, each of these models is integrative, meaning that it incorporates relevant points from other theories, philosophies, and religions. The researcher found that, within the context of these theories, all aspects of experience could be described and explained. Finally, the researcher attempted to find integrative theories of psycho-spiritual development written by women, but failed to find one that she thought suitably comprehensive for the purpose of this study. There was however, a significant amount of literature written pertaining to women's experiences of transformation, accounts that will be incorporated into a later section of this chapter.

Wilber

The dimensions of reality listed above (body, mind, soul, and spirit), are all included in the more comprehensive models of consciousness development; Wilber (1977), for instance, offers what he calls the ‘Spectrum of Consciousness’ as a map of consciousness development. He breaks consciousness into three levels that parallel the dimensions of reality listed above; these are the pre-personal (body), the personal (mind), and the transpersonal (soul and spirit) (Wilber, 1977, 1996). Embedded within each level are several stages, or what Wilber calls ‘fulcrums’.

The pre-personal level of development consists of three fulcrums: F-1, sensoriphysical, F-2, phantasmic-emotional, and F-3, representative-mind (Wilber, 1977; 1990). The first, sensoriphysical, has to do with basic functions of matter, sensation, and perception. As a person’s consciousness develops at this stage, he/she is preoccupied with reality as it exists in its basic physiological sense. Once a person moves onto stage two, phantasmic-emotional, he/she begins constructing emotional boundaries between the external world and the internal self. A conscious process of differentiation begins to occur as he/she starts construing an identity. In stage three, representative-mind, the differentiation process continues as he/she identifies with the internal representational self. Rather than being focused on interpersonal issues, as in the two previous stages, a person transitions to intra-personal issues, such as the development of the id, ego, and superego. Failure to integrate this stage of development can result in experiences of guilt, shame, depression, and anxiety.

As the ego begins to mature, one sees a transition into the second level of development, the personal. This level consists of three more fulcrums – namely, F-4, rule/role, F-5, formal-reflexive, and F-6, vision-logic (Wilber, 1977; 1990). The rule/role

stage is characterized by the development of social rules/roles and an increasing desire for the sense of belonging. A person's consciousness shifts from narcissistic identification with the outside world, to a more socio-centric preoccupation with reality. The next stage, formal-reflexive, involves further development of the ego. A person's identity develops from internal contemplation and reflections on the self. The mature ego is one that can self-reflect, and then integrate those findings into its own awareness. Vision-logic, the third personal stage and sixth overall, is what Wilber considers to be the existential stage. This is where an individual has integrated the awareness gathered in the previous five fulcrums, and now goes on to confront the reality of existence. He/she encounters issues related to death, meaninglessness, fear, anxiety, and absurdity.

Up until nearly the end of Wilber's personal level, the vision-logic stage, Wilber's model very closely resembles more traditional models of psychological development. Kohlberg (1981), Loevinger (1976), and Piaget (1977), for instance, suggested that upon an individual's entrance into the world he/she must subsequently undergo a process of ego separation and individuation. He/she must come to recognize him/herself as a separate entity from the environment. As this individual progresses through the stages of development, he/she subsequently conquers progressively more individuated cognitive tasks – he/she learns to be autonomous, to evaluate the surroundings, to think first concretely and then abstractly, etc. – until he/she reaches the foremost stages of human cognition, what Piaget termed the 'formal operation' stage (1977). At this level, Piaget believed human beings have reached the peak of their cognitive development.

Wilber (1977, 1983, 1996), on the other hand, contends that this is not, in fact, the peak of cognitive experience, but rather the doorway to much deeper levels of human

consciousness. He believed that it was not until fulcrum six, or the vision-logic stage, that people even began to evaluate the givens of their existential reality, a precursor to transpersonal awareness. It is at these elevated levels, the states of transpersonal consciousness, that Wilber and others (Almaas, 1996; Helminiak, 2001; Nixon, 1992, 2005; Strohl, 1998; Wright, 1995) suggest one begins to evolve in a process of self-realization where their concepts of 'self' begin to deconstruct. The transpersonal stage of consciousness development consists of four stages beyond those considered standard in the Western world: F-7, psychic, F-8, subtle, F-9, causal, and F-10, nondual.

During the psychic stage, a person's awareness shifts from the realm of the individual to the realm of the universal. Rather than being egocentric or socio-centric, he/she starts to become world-centric, focusing more on reality as it applies to everything (Wilber, 1977; 1990). The "third eye", or psychic mind, begins to open as one attains an intuitive and perceptual acuity. This is considered to be the stage of the "yogis". The next stage, or subtle stage, refers to "the realm of illumination, rapture and transcendental insight" (Nixon, 2001, p. 86). In other words, consciousness develops beyond the ego and a person is able to directly experience or apprehend the Divine, which is why this stage is associated with the "saints". In certain traditions, some might relay experiences of direct contact with personal deities, or speak of Nirvana. A key component of this stage is working through conceptions of the separate-self. The causal stage, the third transpersonal stage and ninth fulcrum overall, involves recognizing the true nature of being. The level of the "sages" is one where an individual transcends the illusion of subjects and objects, and rests in the understanding that every form is a manifestation of the very same source – that which some call "the abyss, the void, and the formless"

(Nixon, 2001, p. 86). By surrendering the separate-self sense and letting go of attachment to the manifest world, one finds herself in the final stage of nondual existence.

According to Wilber's 'Great-Chain-of-Being' (1983), the phases of development, while continuous, do not represent a linear progression; the levels of human consciousness are not mutually exclusive, but rather integrative and embedded within one another. So, although one does move through these levels in a stage-like progression, he/she does not advance through each level in a way that precludes the one before it. Wilber (1996) used the terms 'transcendence' and 'inclusion' to illustrate that, in actuality, as an individual's awareness transcends each level, it incorporates the characteristics of the one before it.

Almaas

Hameed Ali, writing under the pen name of A.H. Almaas, has become one of the most recognized and influential spiritual teachers of our time. He has presented an approach to psycho-spiritual development that he calls, "The Diamond Approach", which is essentially a method of self-inquiry designed to facilitate a process of "self-realization". Like Wilber, Almaas (2000a; 2000b; 2002; 2004) includes an outline of the process in many of his books. He too believes that the path of transformation and transcendence follows a certain trajectory. This trajectory, along with several key concepts, will be summarized in the following paragraphs.

In his book, *The Inner Journey Home*, Almaas (2004) refers to the "Inner Journey of the Soul". Almaas' description of the journey depicts a process whereby one's soul undergoes a transformation to essential identity. According to him, there are four stages in this journey: 1) "the Journey to Presence", 2) "the Journey with Presence", 3) "the

Journey in Presence”, and “the Journey of Descent”. Prior to elaborating on these four stages, the researcher will clarify some important concepts in Almaas’ work.

The first term that needs clarifying is what Almaas calls “soul”. At various points in his books, he alludes to ancient Greek and Hellenic civilizations where the soul was considered to be all parts of a human being that constituted their psyche, parts which we now call mind, heart, spirit, consciousness and so on (2002; 2004). In contemporary thought, the term soul is often used to describe religious aspects of a human being, i.e. depth, presence, or another spiritual dimension (2004). In the Diamond Approach, Almaas clarifies that his definition of soul encapsulates all these ideas. He suggests that the soul is that which a person actually is:

From the perspective of self-realization, then, the soul is simply our consciousness, free from the occlusive veil of past experience. She can experience herself directly, without any intermediary. She is thus dispensing not only with the veil of past experience, but also with the self-reflective act. She experiences herself by simply being. She knows herself to be a presence, a self-aware medium in which the awareness is simply of presence itself. She is. She is presence, pure and simple. She is aware that she is presence because presence is indistinguishable from awareness. (Almaas, 2000, p. 23)

In other words, soul is the animating force that inhabits a living being. This is different from what Almaas calls “essence”, which is ultimately the ground of presence which makes up a soul.

The concept of essence is also integral to the Diamond Approach. Almaas talks about essence as the field of presence which makes up the soul. He believes that in its pure state, the soul exists as essence. He elaborates:

If we investigate what the final essence of the soul is, the essence beyond particular manifestations, we find it to be the presence of pure consciousness. Therefore, we refer to this presence as essence, meaning the essence of the soul. So essence is the ultimate ground of the soul, her final nature, her absolute purity... When we view the ultimate and simplest ground of the soul from the perspective of its most basic constituency we refer to it as essence, just as the essence of water is H₂O molecules. (Almaas, 2004, p. 132)

Only when we are able to penetrate our beliefs and prejudices about soul are we able to encounter it in its true nature. In another passage, Almaas compares his use of the term essence with other major religious traditions:

Different spiritual traditions have given it different names: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam called it Spirit; Buddhism calls it Buddha nature; Taoism calls it the Tao; Hinduism calls it Atman or Brahman. The various traditions differ in how they conceptualize Essence and how much they emphasize it in their teaching, but essence is always considered to be the most authentic, innate, and fundamental nature of who we are. And the experience and realization of Essence is the central task of spiritual work and development in all traditions. (Almaas, 2002, p. 8)

One can see then, how in each and every human being, soul is the manifestation of essence. Underneath all our conceptions about the soul, it exists in its purest form,

essence. Now that an understanding has been gained of the differences between soul and essence, we can turn to Almaas' description of the inner journey of the soul.

The first journey that Almaas describes is "the Journey to Presence", which he considers entry into the path. At this stage, an individual undergoes the initial preparation and groundwork required to begin transformation. People must first acquire the proper orientation and inner capacities necessary for learning. Ultimately, one must develop an ability to be present and to inquire into their experiences (Almaas, 2004). This journey culminates "in the discovery of the presence of Essence, and in learning to recognize it in its various qualities" (p. 221).

The transition from the first journey to the second, "the Journey with Presence", is not marked by any particular experience, but instead by a gradual discovery and recognition of presence. At first, a person comes to witness the medium of the soul, presence, mixed up with self-structures and impressions. Yet he/she still starts to identify that presence as the core of the human being, "what makes a human being both human and Being" (p. 221). By recognizing the soul, a person identifies the vessel that undergoes the process of transformation, a process that Almaas calls "clarification" and "purification".

In the second journey, a person has come to identify essence as presence. From this stage, essence continues to unfold in its various manifestations, and the soul learns how to integrate essence as it is arising. Part of the work that Almaas describes is metabolizing and transcending the soul's ego-structures, the aspects which give the ego a felt sense of separateness and uniqueness. The end of the second journey is marked by

the soul's dis-identification with the egoic-self, and the important recognition of itself as essential presence. In other words, the soul begins to understand its very own nature.

The third part of the journey, "the Journey in Presence", is the final stage of ascension to what Almaas calls the "absolute truth". In the second stage, although the soul has realized its personal essence, it has yet to recognize this essence as its "essential identity". There is still a dualistic distinction between the soul and essence, as the soul is witnessing itself as something doing the experiencing. In the third journey, however, the soul completely mixes with essence, so that it is not only transparent to itself, but "this transparency becomes so complete that the two become one" (Almaas, 2004, p. 224). This is what Almaas calls the "nondual soul" because its medium has become totally "essentialized". Soul is now characterized by dynamic and living presence, "morphing itself into the various forms and patterns of experience" (p. 224).

The fourth and final stage is what Almaas refers to as the "Journey of Descent". Although he states that "self-realization of the absolute is the end of the search" (2004, p. 413), it is not the completion of the inner journey. As the process continues, the soul learns to rest in presence as presence, and its "crystalline emptiness" becomes the field of all experience. While this period may last a long time, Almaas asserts that it cannot last forever. Eventually the soul's unfolding nature takes it on another journey, the journey of descent. The demands of earthly existence arise, creating issues and limitations that "do not make sense for her station of absolute realization" (p. 413). Often the soul experiences a great sense of sadness or grief, for it perceives the descent as a loss of intimacy with the absolute. Almaas states, however, that this stage of the journey is not

about separation from essence, but instead about learning how to integrate self-realization into daily living:

In this process she discovers that while it is true that she is on a journey of descent from the heights of transcendence, this journey is not a separation from the absolute. The descent is a descent into limitation, but it is the descent not of her individual sense of herself, but the descent of the ipseity itself. In other words, she descends into the limitations of the world not as a soul entity, but as the absolute mystery itself. (Almaas, 2004, p. 414)

The soul does not in fact lose its essential identity during the descent, but instead learns how to integrate this identity into the limitations of everyday existence.

Summary

The above section has taken a brief look at two models of consciousness development and transformation. While Wilber's Spectrum of Consciousness is much more prescriptive in its definitions of levels and stages, Almaas' Diamond Approach offers a broad portrayal of the soul's inner journey of transformation. These are two models that the researcher felt useful in gauging her own process of psycho-spiritual transformation, and therefore felt them capable of providing context to the lived experiences of her female participants. Subsequently, in the fifth chapter of this paper, the discussion, the researcher will refer back to these models in order to provide meaning and context to the participants' experiences.

While she recognizes the inherent flaw in utilizing theories articulated exclusively by men, the researcher was unable to find an adequately comprehensive and integrative model of transformation written by a woman. She has, however, included several

sections below which elucidate issues regarding women's research, and which summarize the experiences of women who claim to be on a journey of transformation.

Inclusion of Women's Perspectives

Though admirably integrative, transpersonal models of development have drawn on knowledge from cultures where women's voices have largely been excluded from spiritual and psychological discourse (Wright, 1995). In the West, for instance, dualistic patterns of thinking are prone to separating concepts into oppositional 'either/or' relationships – as in right or wrong, light or dark, male or female (Donovan, 1985). In the East, although this extreme dualism does not exist (and relational concepts such as male and female are seen as complementary and balancing), women are still experiencing a vast amount of spiritual and cultural oppression (Gangaji, 2002). In some cases, women are even being denied the right to participate in spiritual disciplines, regardless of the fact that many of these traditions have bestowed importance on the inclusion of goddesses and femininity (Gangaji, 2002).

The Feminist Critique

A few feminist researchers have criticized the full spectrum model, claiming that “any model... based on traditions that have marginalized women is bound to be vulnerable when examined in the context of women's scholarship and lived experiences” (Wright, 1995, p. 4). Such ‘vulnerabilities’ include “faulty generalization, circular reasoning, partial knowledge, and hierarchically invidious monism” (p. 5). These concepts will be elaborated in the paragraphs below.

Faulty generalization occurs when a specific group is not included in the data that a theory is derived from (Gilligan, 1993). For instance, research is conducted on a male

sample, while pronouncements are made about people-in-general. Circular reasoning, then, is when this excluded group is 'evaluated' within the definitions of that theory (Gilligan, 1993). Several examples of this fallacy can be seen in areas of research that serve as the foundation for current psychological standards. In studying moral development, for instance, Piaget and Kohlberg both view women's sense of justice as compromised because of their refusal to accept blind impartiality (Gilligan, 1993). In Piaget's (1932) account of the moral judgment of children, girls are only considered as an aside. He includes a brief entry about them, and fails to group them with boys at all, as "the child" is assumed to be male (Gilligan, 1993).

Similarly, in Kohlberg's research on moral development, he limits his entire study to eighty-four boys who he followed for a period of twenty years. Although he claims the results of his research can be applied universally, those groups not included in his original study rarely reach what he considered to be the higher stages of moral development (Gilligan, 1993). One group that appears to be deficient is women, whose judgments only seem to exemplify the third-stage of Kohlberg's six-stage model. At this stage, moral development is defined by interpersonal relationships, and 'goodness' is equated with helping and pleasing others (Gilligan, 1993). According to Kohlberg and Kramer (1969), this kind of moral decision-making is only functional in the home. They believe that if women were to enter into the arena of traditional male activity, they would recognize the inadequacy of this perspective and would subsequently progress towards higher stages of development, stages where relationships are inferior to rules and universal principles of justice.

Herein lies the fallacy: as will be seen momentarily, women are by nature relational beings. By applying Kohlberg's model of moral development, women will always be seen as inferior. In her groundbreaking book, *A Different Voice* (1993), Gilligan offers a different model which is sensitive to women's need for connected relationships. Like Kohlberg, Gilligan includes three major divisions: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. However the transitions between these stages are driven by changes in the conception of self rather than changes in cognitive ability (Gilligan, 1993).

The concept of invidious monism is described by Minnich (1990) as "a system in which one category is taken to be not literally all there is, but the highest, most significant, most valuable, and critically, most real category – which sets up all others to be defined and judged solely with reference to that hegemonic category" (p. 53). This seems to be the case with linear conceptions of consciousness development that fail to incorporate the lived experiences of many women. Hierarchical models involving spiritual or psychological concepts are susceptible to being grounded in the notion of vertical liberation from mind-body conditioning. They place 'transcendence', or Transcendental Being, at the top of the hierarchy, as the most preferred state to achieve. Some, however, warn that "this spiritual single-mindedness jars the human psyche out of focus: its personal concerns become insignificant and its structures viewed as something to be transcended as quickly as possible rather than transformed" (Feuerstein, 1991, p. 150). A more spiritually open-minded perspective would need to account for women's reports of a cyclical process of transformation as opposed to a linear journey of transcendence. Similarly, it would need to incorporate those values that are important to

women, but that have been marginalized by these models, such as their “physical bodies and senses, sexuality and generativity, and the Earth and all its beings” (Wright, 1995, p. 4).

To their credit, some transpersonal theorists have realized their error and tried to integrate gendered differences into their models of transcendence. Yet others believe that a new model of human development must be conceptualized altogether. Wright (1995), for instance, calls out for “a model of human development that does not eclipse women’s experiences and values, however unintentionally” (p. 4). In her view, this does not mean that transpersonal models necessarily be discarded, but rather that their fundamental structure be reconsidered in light of what current research is suggesting about the development of female consciousness.

A growing body of research is critiquing traditional psychology for being far too androcentric – that is, for seeing and analyzing the world from a male perspective. Because of this, women find themselves looking to theories that just do not accurately represent their lived experiences of the world. Without a proper model, the sense is that they are unable to measure up to the standard, and therefore perceive themselves to be deficient in areas where they may not necessarily be. Murdock (1990) elaborates:

If women see themselves through a male lens and continuously measure themselves by standards of a male-defined culture, they will find themselves deficient or lacking the qualities that men value. Women will never be men, and many women who are trying to be ‘as good as men’ are injuring their feminine nature. Women start to define themselves in terms of deficits, in terms of what

they don't or haven't accomplished, and begin to obscure and devalue themselves as women. (pp. 13-14)

In realizing the deficiency of a proper model, many women researchers sought to redefine psychology in a way that did not injure women's feminine nature, but instead embraced and nurtured it. What they discovered was that women's systems of understanding, both their selves and their realities, totally differed from men's.

Self-in-Relation

From this research emerged a conception of the female self, free from male-imposed biases, that is relational in nature. Unlike men, women tend to view the world as a network of interpersonal relationships, comprised of empathy, mutuality, and connectedness, and their 'selves' as 'selves-in-relation' (Miller, 1991; Kaplan, Klein & Gleason, 1991; Surrey, 1991). Previously, when compared to male standards of individuation and autonomy, a 'relational self' was considered pathological and immature (Gilligan, 1982; Horney, 1939; Kaplan, Klein & Gleason, 1991; Kaschak, 1992; Miller, 1977, 1991a, 1991b; Rich, 2004; Surrey, 1991). Now, however, researchers are continually asserting the consistency of this conception for women across cultures, ages and races.

Surrey (1991) has even managed to identify and explain the basic elements of a woman's 'self':

(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 mutuality that provides the stimulus for the growth and empowerment of self-knowledge. Thus the self develops in the context of relationships, rather than as an isolated or separated autonomous individual. (p. 59)

Instead of being based on their ability to achieve autonomy and independence, “women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships” (Miller, 1976, p. 83).

Bearing the above discussion in mind, we see how important it is to emphasize relationships when studying women’s journeys of transformation. Since transpersonal theory talks about transforming the self, and women’s experiences of self are fundamentally different than men’s, it is necessary to conduct this study exclusively on women’s lived experiences. Only then will we understand whether transpersonal models are adequate for representing females’ experiences.

In the next section, the researcher has gathered various accounts from female authors who claim to be on a psycho-spiritual journey of transformation. There are two reasons for which this section was included: 1) to give voice to those women who have already shared their accounts of the journey, and 2) to lay bare the biases that the researcher herself had upon entering into the present investigation.

Women’s Experiences of Transformation

As we will see in Chapter 3, the researcher chose a phenomenological-hermeneutics approach to research, as this was the method best suited to her research question. A fundamental component of phenomenological-hermeneutics is laying bare all the biases that might have driven or influenced the current research. In the

introduction section of this paper, the researcher has already introduced herself and discussed how she developed her research question: what are women's lived experiences of the path of transformation? And how do they experience relationships as they undergo the journey? However, because the following section will contain a review of women's accounts of transformative experiences, it is necessary to illuminate those biases that influenced which accounts the researcher chose to include and which themes she extracted from those accounts. The following few paragraphs are a first person narrative from the researcher herself:

I began investigating this topic because I felt there were certain truths lurking beneath the surface. Prior to taking an upper-level psychology course in university, I had no language for what I was experiencing. I knew that I had started something, that I had begun transforming, but I didn't quite know how. We started studying the transpersonal models of psychology and something deeply resonated with me. Maslow, Wilber, Almaas – they all struck a chord. Reading their books, I suddenly had the language to describe what I was experiencing. And yet something was still a little bit off. The way that these theorists described relationships made them sound inferior somehow – like relational connections were something to be transcended. This was a little confusing for me, because as a woman, I felt that this kind of transcendence was impossible. If I surrendered the need for relationships, how could I function in society – as a sister, daughter, friend, and hopefully one day as a mother? Also, I couldn't help but wonder why many of these theorists were men, and if their models of transformation accurately represented women's lived experiences...

This was the point at which the researcher decided to enlist in a phenomenological study, one that investigated women's lived experiences. She continues:

I have had some experience with the journey myself. I've attended transformational groups, therapy sessions, spiritual and religious seminars, and 12-step groups. So I knew which themes played a key role in my own journey. This was kind of a starting point for inquiry. Also, because of the different fellowships that I've attended throughout my journey, I've had multiple friends and acquaintances who have also undergone a process of transformation. They also served as starting points for inquiry. In everyday conversations I've come to notice themes emerging from women's experiences, and it's those themes that served as inspiration for my research. I wanted to know what was important; had anything been left out of these "integral" approaches to spirituality? Did they, in fact, accurately describe women's experiences of the journey? From there, I looked to the literature. I sought out female authors who wrote about their own processes of transformation. I searched the internet, the library, and bookstores to find women who I felt articulately described the journey that I felt myself undertaking.

In this last sentence, "the journey that I felt myself undertaking", a significant bias emerges that colors the current investigation: it is driven by the researcher's experiences. As will be seen in chapter three, this is actually a characteristic of hermeneutic research. The researcher's present socio-historical context provides the historicity needed in order to give meaning to certain bodies of text – in this case, the accounts of women who have undergone a process of transformation. The researcher cannot separate herself from the

study. She is entering into it completely in order to more fully elucidate the phenomenon in question – namely, women’s experiences of transformation.

The following subsections will describe the themes that arose from women’s accounts of transformation, and thus the biases that the researcher had towards the themes that would arise during her research. These accounts were gathered from several female authors who identified themselves as being on a journey of transformation – psychologists, spiritualists, religious contemplatives, as well as others, who have been challenged by their circumstances to move into a different level of consciousness. In an attempt to recognize some important aspects of women’s journeys, particularly those that are not identified by male-authored transpersonal models, this collection of literature has been synthesized in the following paragraphs. The objective is to gain a better understanding of women’s lived experiences as they relate to the journey towards wholeness, and especially as it influences their self-other relationships.

Worshipping an Unattainable God

Prior to embarking on the journey towards wholeness, women usually describe a process of avoiding negative feelings in their life and simultaneously seeking happiness and joy. One woman (Beck, 1993) describes this process as being born out of fear – a fear of pain and suffering. She describes a preoccupation with the idea that “if we pursue life madly, going after any pleasant situation, any excitement, any entertainment, perhaps we won’t have to feel any pain” (Beck, 1993, p. 11). According to Beck (1993), the “god we actually worship” is one that affords us no discomfort and no unpleasantness. She describes what happens in the hunt for such a god: “As we pursue it, we lose touch with

what really is. As we lose touch, our life spirals downward. And the very unpleasantness that we sought to avoid can overwhelm us” (p. 11).

This unpleasantness, for a number of women, led to a ‘seeker’s’ orientation to life; rather than acknowledging the roots of their suffering, they began to search for solutions to their pain. Generally, certain experiences were sought with the expectation that those experiences would alleviate the increasing sense of emptiness that these women felt. Some traveled great distances in search of spiritual or academic teachers, while others looked for comfort in the abuse of substances. Still others believed that the void could be filled with companionship: “we sense an emptiness inside and we want desperately to fill it. Something is missing; it must be our other half” (Ingram, 2003, p. 89). Even in the instances where women were already in significant relationships, they still believed that something could be done to alleviate their discomfort: “If our partner doesn’t make us feel good, we assume that things have to be changed, that he or she needs to change” (Beck, 1993, p. 19). In most circumstances, external changes were pursued frantically in hopes that some dramatic change would alleviate their misery.

Even if women were successful in acquiring moments of fulfillment, they invariably found that these were fleeting:

There was always something missing, and so the search went on. The problem was that no matter how satiated and alive I felt in moments of profound experience, it didn’t last. Like the hunger that returns only hours after the gourmet meal, or the thirst that follows soon after being quenched, the experience of fulfillment was limited by time. I yearned for a satisfaction deep in my being,

unmitigated by time, but I found only a collection of experiences that had all ended. (Ingram, 2003, p. 5)

What these women discovered was that happiness, when contingent on an external person or experience, never lasted – and so they would find themselves in an endless cycle of seeking to satisfy, satisfying, and then seeking again. The process rarely afforded them any sense of lasting fulfillment or wholeness – the absence of which drove them to the process in the first place.

The problem, as described by most women, was the belief that fulfillment could be located somewhere outside of oneself. Most of them, in moments of profound realization, eventually recognized that “there was nothing to do or to get and that the search itself was the problem” (Ingram, 2003, p. 6). This understanding, for many of these women seekers, was the key to unlocking their journey’s secret: lasting joy and happiness comes from turning one’s awareness *inward*.

Calling off the search: Confronting Pain

The insight gained in this moment ultimately pushed women to turn their attention towards the one place they had been avoiding: within themselves. Ingram (2003) describes this process as coming into “awakened awareness”. She suggests that her own moment of realization was the instant she comprehended that all her answers were already there, located somewhere inside of her – that really there was nothing to seek, because everything was exactly as it should be:

And suddenly the search is over. We have nowhere we need to go because all is in its place as is, ourselves included. We have nothing we need do to belong here because we feel no separation from existence. We still, more than ever, enjoy and

passionately care about life, but we are no longer the beggar at its door, looking for love instead of being love. We realize that what we really wanted was not something that comes from seeking, but that which comes from being found.

(Ingram, 2003, p. 9)

For Ingram, the journey of transformation begins with “calling off the search”. It begins when one finally stops running from pain and suffering, and decides instead to stand and face herself.

The above excerpt describes basic transformations of experience, such as “being love” instead of “looking for love”, but this process is not quite as simple as it might sound. Many women describe having to face the very pain and suffering that they were avoiding in the first place. In facing this pain, they were presented with an opportunity to overcome it. One woman (Borysenko, 1995) laments that “not all is beauty and peace”, but at the same time claims that “difficulties present choices: we can either waste away from our wounds or use them to grow our souls” (p. 46). What Borysenko is describing can be read in the accounts of many women. There came a time when these women had a choice: to either accept their circumstances and use them to grow, or to succumb to their own misery. The former is really what transformed these women, when they were able to look their suffering head on and ask ‘what am I to learn from this?’ Upon answering this question, most experienced a deep sense of clarity, one that allowed them to understand that “everything, even tragedy, is a gift in disguise” (Kübler-Ross, 1995, p. 132). The journey became about accepting suffering instead of running from it. After all, “to live in majesty is to live with a broken heart. If one isn’t at least partially sad in witnessing this world, then one is not paying attention” (Ingram, 2003, p. 41).

Developing a Practice

A number of authors describe “developing a practice” (Beck, 1989) that brings them into conscious contact with their pain and suffering. They posit that the avoidance of this suffering had actually caused a dissociation from emotions in general, and this connection had to be re-established before the women could continue on their path towards wholeness. For Beck (1989) transformation and discomfort are inseparable:

Always we must practice getting closer and closer to experiencing our pain, our disappointment, our shattered hopes, our broken pictures. And that experiencing is ultimately nonverbal. We must observe the thought content until it is neutral enough that we can enter the direct and nonverbal experience of the disappointment and suffering. When we experience the suffering directly, the melting of the false emotion can begin, and true compassion can emerge. (p. 73)

For Beck (1989), ‘practice’ is sitting with those feelings that motivate the seeking in the first place. If one feels expansive emptiness, she should delve into the void instead of trying to escape it. To do so, Beck suggests something akin to meditation, though she asserts that “it doesn’t matter what our practice is called... basically, we’re all working on the same issues: ‘Who are we? What is our life? Where did we come from? Where do we go?’ It’s essential to living a whole human life that we have some insight” (Beck, 1989, p. 9). Many women’s accounts describe the acquiring of such insight through a practice that involves sitting quietly and observing their thought content. By doing so, these women were able to recognize the following: “our own thoughts can trick us, pulling us away from our true state of consciousness” (Banks, 1995, p. 75). Through the process of observing and witnessing, these women were able to actually suspend the

content of their minds and consciously experience the emotions that they were previously trying to evade.

Beck (1993) warns that this process is equivalent to opening Pandora's Box – that tapping into one's emotional reservoir is like the opening of a great floodgate; feelings are apt to erupt and overwhelm the individual doing the experiencing. Any variation of feelings can be expected to emerge from practice, such as waves of discomfort and sadness, or even explosions of rage and anger. It is not uncommon for women to report incidents of uncontrollable crying and shaking. For Beck, these are all necessary elements for developing, what she calls, a "Bigger Container", that is, the capacity to experience and withstand greater amounts of pain and suffering without being immobilized by them. She contests that the bigger one's "container" – the more in touch a person is with her own sense of despair – the more empathically she can relate to others, and reach out to them in their greatest time of need.

Pure Presence: The Animating Force

Once the emotional flood had receded, many women began to experience another product of practice. They articulate the emergence of a specific kind of 'silence' that seems to arise from the very depths of their souls. At first, it is a gentle quiet, barely distinguishable from the silence one may hear after a thunder storm. However, with time, many women begin to recognize that the silence is not as temporary as the simple absence of sound. Instead, it is the kind that originates from somewhere inside of them, from somewhere "in the deepest recesses of ourselves there is a most familiar quietude... It is a point of peace, a silent witnessing awareness that is fundamentally unperturbed no matter what happens" (Ingram, 2003, pp. 6-7). This point of peace is what Ingram calls

“presence”, and she argues that it is always there, always on the periphery of one’s consciousness. If a person chooses, she can tap into this presence at any time, and reconnect with her inner sense of peace, quietude, and acceptance – as though she is coming home to herself. Even in times when one is unable to suspend the habitual thought patterns that keep her disconnected from this presence, she can still tune into it, recognize that it is there, and continue to observe the content of her mind.

To do this, Ingram suggests reflecting on the events of one’s life. A person will immediately realize that although she is often unable to recall the specific events and details that occurred, she is able to remember precisely the fact that she had existed.

Ingram elaborates:

Pure presence is our fundamental experience, even when we seem to be lost in the stories and activities of life. Like breathing, it is taken for granted. Yet it is what we most clearly remember when we think back to the earliest times of our existence. The details of our past may be fuzzy, but *being* itself is clear. At the ages of four, ten, twenty, or ninety, what has or will most consistently define our experience is the simple fact of being... (Ingram, 2003, pp. xvi-xvii)

This passage indicates that Ingram differentiates between “pure presence” and the content of one’s mind. She does not, however, suggest that either is more valid or real, but instead suggests that they both constitute the basic elements of consciousness. Although a person’s awareness can be submerged in either presence or in the stories, she can still be aware of the other by purely witnessing its existence.

For others, however, pure presence is more than just one component of consciousness; it is consciousness itself. Roberts (1993) for example, describes a similar

process to the one outlined in the preceding sections of this paper. She too acknowledges a certain kind of seeking, and ultimately a turning inward to discover the true path of transformation. Further, she describes in detail the development of her own practice, and how she came to discover this silent awareness at the most desperate stage of her journey. For Roberts, though, this presence is the very foundation of existence. Everything else – the memories, the stories, the concepts of who one is – are ultimately fabrications perceived to be one's self; for Roberts, self is what remains when all these fabrications fall away:

I felt the greatest need to stay constantly awake and alert at a time when my personal energies were at the lowest possible ebb. On one such occasion I merely watched – as an unmoved observer watches a light grow distant and fade away altogether – the choiceless ebbing away of the last ounce of physical energy I had. It was then that I learned that the passing away and becoming of anything is not the way life really works; for despite the coming and going of what we call life and energy, something remains that never moves nor participates in these passages. Something is just there, just watching, and 'that' is true life, while all the energies that come and go are not true life. (Roberts, 1993, p. 63)

True life, for Roberts then, is that which watches, that which peers out from within, free from all the conditioned thoughts, emotions, and conceptions, that which is being itself.

This recognition is paramount for many women's journeys. By recognizing the true nature of their being, they are connected to the current of Being coursing through every aspect of existence – the pulse of life that animates every living creature, every breath of wind, every lap of the ocean against the shore. Ingram (2003) elaborates:

The deepest contentment comes from recognizing the pervading life force in everything. It is the experience of witnessing an infinitely creative intelligence endlessly manifesting itself. We call its comings and goings *life* and *death*. But from another perspective, all is consciousness, endlessly rearranging itself into form and formlessness... Knowing this, we are witnesses to eternity, if only for a very short while. (p. 188)

In other words, ‘life’ and ‘death’ are simply terms used to describe Being’s transition from one form into another. Consciousness does not belong to us. It belongs to the great reservoir from which it sprung. Human beings are manifestations of this consciousness, as are other life forms. So when we pass on, the energy that is consciousness will retreat back to its original source. The cycle is endless, and by witnessing it, we become “witnesses to eternity”.

Embodiment: Nurturing the Soul

When women came to understand the ‘truth’ about their existence, they simultaneously redefined the importance of their relationship to the physical world. Historically, superstitious and religious societies encouraged themes like disembodiment and transcendence of the physical environment so as to attain unity with a supreme being. But these themes are remnants of ancient civilizations, where life was both brutal and harsh, and for many women was no longer valid. Ingram (2003) for instances, argues that “we are embodied expressions of the animating force, not disembodied spirits trapped in flesh, awaiting final release” (Ingram, 2003, p. 64). By adhering to such outdated philosophies, Ingram worries that people will distance themselves from their own suffering and subsequently experience a dampening of their compassion.

Instead, many women indulged their bodily experience, and used it to connect themselves with the animating force and the truth of their existence. It was not enough to just acquire the insight. Some women needed “to experience teachings about truth and consciousness in a physical way in order to make them part of [an] inner circle of truth” (Andrews, 1995, p. 97). One author for instance, describes using drumming to “bridge the gap between the inspiration that comes from a higher consciousness and the reality of daily life” (Andrews, 1995, p. 97). Others also discussed the necessity of finding ways to enhance their spiritual life through a connection with the manifest world – what many of them identify as ‘honoring the soul’. Some physically manipulated their environment, i.e. by arranging flowers or designing a living room to reflect an inner nature (Woodman, 1995), while others participated in physical activities such as dancing. Each of these experiences was seen as a “union of spirit and body” where “soul is the bridge” (Woodman, 1995, p. 34).

The relationship with the physical body is one that afforded women much satisfaction and joy, particularly once they had dissolved the constraints of a preoccupied mind. Ingram (2003) relays her experience:

In wakefulness we exist in a divine affair of the senses. Smell, taste, touch, sound, and feelings are all heightened because our awareness is not drained by obsessive thinking and is therefore free to experience the full range of bodily and emotional sensations. Though thoughts continue to arise, they do not transfix us, and our attention is available for the rich array of sensations that life offers. Our sensual appreciation intensifies in wakefulness and becomes more and more refined. (p. 75)

In other words, without the constant fixation on one's thoughts, a person is available to fully participate in their own bodily experience. This seems to have been a vital aspect of women's journeys in particular. Many authors articulate the formation of an interactive relationship with their physical selves, 'tuning in' to what their bodies were telling them by listening to their "gut reactions" (Kübler-Ross, 1995). In many instances, these bodily intuitions were actually regarded as having more accuracy than the rational mind. Part of the journey was actually learning to trust these intuitions instead of reasoning them away.

Women's connections to their bodies seemed to provide them with a certain richness of experience. Within their stories, the very language they use is striking in its ability to convey the connection they had acquired. This is exemplified very clearly by one woman's writing:

I need to be by the water; I've spent a lot of my journey getting closer and closer to this water. I need to remember, to get up in the morning and watch the sunrise and take a moment at night to see and feel the sunset. I need to see the colors of the sky; I need to feel the colors. I need to surround myself with music, because my soul resonates to music. I've decorated my home with the colors of the universe – bright colors. Color is light. Colors help me feel alive, help me feel passionate, help me remember that I'm here to be an alive, passionate human being. (Beattie, 1995, p. 186)

Music, color, and light are all aspects of sensory perception. Without embodying one's physical existence, such perception would not be possible – a potential tragedy for this woman, who describes sensation as being "needed" for her journey.

Communing with Nature

The last few sections of this paper have hinted at another important element of women's wholeness: their spiritual connection to nature. Even in the last excerpt, the woman wrote about needing to be near water, needing to watch the sunrise and sunset. Almost every woman's story contains some process of communing with nature (Arrien, 1995; Bolen, 1995; Borysenko, 1995; Schaeff, 1995; Woodman, 1995), though they relay different reasons for participating in such a process. Some describe being able to comprehend their own existence more clearly when they are in nature "because the state of knowing is such that what Is becomes the only reality seen everywhere" (Roberts, 1993, p. 111). Whereas others seem to gain some sense of spiritual and psychological humility from being in nature:

I need to continually reconnect with my own awareness that I am part of a larger process, a larger universe. I need to remind myself that I am not dominating it, nor am I necessarily dominated by it. Instead, I am a participant. Somehow, this realization becomes clearer to me when I am in nature. (Schaeff, 1995, p. 138)

In other words, nature allows some women to experience an increased sense of smallness, the perception that there is something greater than them. This permits their full participation in the journey, instead of trying to direct or be directed by it.

The connection with nature is so strong for some women that many of them even use it as a metaphor for the journey itself. The cycle of the changing seasons provides women with a conceptual representation of the different phases of their lives: "In spring, things open. In summer, they come to great fruition. In fall, things go out in a blaze of glory. In winter, the seed is in the dark ground and can't be seen" (Leonard, 1995, p. 78). The point is that the process is cyclical rather than linear; women can understand the

journey as being the process itself, instead of movement towards a destination. Such a metaphor allows women to embrace harrowing or flat moments as being part of the cycle, rather than times to be avoided or overcome. Ingram (2003) expands:

There might be times in one's life, for instance, that may seem fallow. On the surface, it may appear that nothing is happening. But if we are attuned to the depths of our existence, those times could be metaphorically experienced as winter. Although it looks as though life is dormant on the surface, there is a powerful force of energy going on beneath... We might burst out of such a winter-of-the-soul period like the arrival of spring, with all kinds of creative ideas and insights. Even if that is not to be, we can bask in the deep peace of life's expression in quietude. (Ingram, 2003, p. 159)

Times of great pain and suffering, for instance, are cast as a "winter-of-the-soul", a hibernation of the spirit where a person takes refuge within themselves. Some women describe retreating into their own company, seeking longer periods of solitude, and partaking in isolated activities such as meditating or reading. When the winter subsides and spring arrives, women further describe creative forces stirring within themselves and ultimately springing forth. In this light, the soul's "winter" is actually seen as a precursor to a beautiful and bright new beginning.

Oneness with the True Other

Part of this new beginning often involves the reframing of a very important aspect of women's lives – their relationships with others. It was stated earlier that many women often sought to medicate their emotional suffering by changing or manipulating their relationships, whether those be with family, friends, or even partners. In some cases,

women even perceived other people to be the source of their misery, or conversely, the source of their joy and happiness. Both notions are delusions. The only ‘other’ capable of alleviating such suffering is the Other found within oneself. Encountering this Other is what Roberts (1993) believes to be the turning point, the moment where dysfunctional relationships are transformed:

It is only when we realize our oneness with the true Other that we come upon a unity and wholeness that can withstand the test of all encounters with other selves. In this way, no matter what happens in our relationships with the outside world, we are not fragmented, we do not fall apart, become lost, dependent, or see problems where there are none. It is only after we come upon the Other – the still-point at the center of our being – that we find the key to a powerful sense of security and independence that then allows us to go out to others, to be generous, to give them their freedom, to be open-minded and understanding. (pp. 191-192)

Finding the true Other empowers women to satisfy their own emotional needs themselves rather than seeking fulfillment through another person. In other words, rather than being confined to relationships based on what they can get out of them, women become free to approach the same relationships looking for what they can put into them. This is, in its very essence, need-free love.

Relationships characterized by need-free love operate on a whole different set of principles than those that are not. Many authors discuss an emerging sense of selflessness reflected in a person’s ability to grant forgiveness and other “tender mercies” (Ingram, 2003). Women learn to relate with empathy and understanding, rather than reacting negatively to their partner’s behavior. Even communication becomes easy,

“because we don’t need anything in particular from the other person. Real love doesn’t seek to acquire. It gives itself away” (Ingram, 2003, p. 37). In awakened awareness, true compassion develops for other people, instead of a constant preoccupation with self, so that these women were able to disengage from dependent relationships where they were trying desperately to satisfy their own wants. Instead, they were able to participate in the relationship freely, learning how to be open to the other person.

Most women found that this openness permeated all their relationships, not just intimate ones with family, friends, or lovers. By embracing all aspects of their journey, they could comprehend how many taken-for-granted notions about right and wrong, or good and bad, were actually just relative understandings of the conditioned mind. With this realization, women found an increase in their ability to reach out to, and connect with, all human beings:

In releasing our judgments and assumptions about others, we find compassion in the most trying of circumstances. Compassion comes easily when we see a sick child or when someone we love is hurt or in trouble. But in awakened awareness, compassion flows for those who are seemingly the least likely recipients of it.

(Ingram, 2003, p. 58)

By letting go of their judgments, women found that they could attend to all people in a sensitive and responsive way, not just those within the familiar interpersonal circle. The homeless person on the street, an estranged family member, the stranger on the side of the road: they all become close members of the family that is the human race, and all become subjects for one’s love and compassion.

Essentially, the animating force within an individual is the very same one flowing through all of life (Ingram, 2003). When a person realizes this, they gain access to the understanding that love is more than just a feeling one has towards a partner or friend. It is an attitude, an angle of approach, that one has towards the entire universe. In awakened awareness “love is not tribal but universal” (Ingram, 2003, p. 37). It is an energy that saturates every aspect of existence, provided one surrenders to it. As Ingram (2003) stated, “in love, we are beauty itself” (p. 170).

This beauty infused many women’s everyday interactions with others. In wholeness, they were able to let go of other people – to allow others to take responsibility for themselves and for their journeys. Yet, at the same time, they developed a unique ability to honor and express the feelings of love that arose for other people:

Ultimately, however, we must recognize that whatever we call *other* exists as a part of the whole. In wholeness, we are able to consider what is best for those we love without worrying over the question, How is this going to affect *me*? Because we enjoy what comes and are able to let go what goes, our need for anything to go a particular way diminishes greatly. We delight in another’s delight and champion that person’s right to follow his or her own journey wherever it may lead, with or without *me*. Just as a loving parent, with tears in her eyes, sees her son off to college when he leaves the nest, she also celebrates his solo flight, and her heart soars with dreams and possibilities for him. In the same way, we can soar in our relationships, however they play out, when we love in freedom. (Ingram, 2003, pp. 91-92)

In essence, women became able to love people unconditionally and needlessly without the need or desire to have anything fulfilled by that relationship. Love is love for its own sake, rather than something that is necessary to fill a void of emptiness in one's life.

The Truth and Nothing Less

The woman's path of transformation does not, in actuality, lead anywhere. It is a journey 'of' rather than a journey 'to': "[It] is nothing more, yet nothing less than a period of acclimating to a new way of seeing, a time of transition and revelation as it gradually comes upon 'that' which remains when there is no self" (Roberts, 1993, pp. 13-14). In other words, it is learning to let go of one's attachment to their being, so that they may come to realize the truth of Being in general, that the same animating force coursing through themselves gives life and consciousness to all other beings as well. Roberts (1993) claims that "this is what the journey was all about: to find the truth and nothing less" (Roberts, 1993).

The "truth", for Roberts, is that once we strip away the illusions created by our egos and self-structures, the only thing left is pure unaltered consciousness. The source of this consciousness is the same for all beings. It is the Formless, the Abyss, or the Void. It is what exists beyond the manifest world. When concepts of subject and object are dissolved, the Source is what remains. Some women called it God, others called it the Divine, while still others called it Spirit, Consciousness, Creative Energy, or simply the Universe.

This Source is available at all times. Though many of the women discussed in this section describe having gone on great journeys in search of, it was already there inside of them, ready to be accessed at any moment. This is part of the illusion that many

women buy into – the notion that God is somewhere outside of themselves waiting to be found. In actuality, God resides in each and every living being. Dissolving the illusions of a separate self can happen in an instant, with the spontaneous recognition of one's true essence. In that moment, women are able to reconnect with the Source and live from a place of authenticity. This is what Roberts wanted people to understand, that there is in fact nowhere to go but inside themselves.

Summary

The above section has reviewed the accounts of multiple female contemplatives, women who claim to be on a psycho-spiritual path of transformation and who have articulated their experiences in writing. A number of themes were extracted from these women's accounts in order to elucidate the phenomenon in question, and to provide guidance to the researcher in choosing areas of exploration for her research. Because many of the themes carried hints of existential issues, the researcher will now turn towards a discussion of Existentialism, especially as it applies to women's journeys of transformation.

Existentialism as a Catalyst of Transformation

Now that we have a better understanding of the themes typifying women's experiences, it may be worth establishing those characteristics that provoke such a journey in the first place. As was shown earlier, there was usually a moment in women's lives where their existing approach to life was no longer affording them any lasting sense of fulfillment or satisfaction. Many of them described experiencing a 'world collapse', a moment in their lives where their entire system of perceiving the world was deconstructed, only to leave them questioning the realities of their existence (Rich, 2004;

Welwood, 1982). The term ‘world collapse’ is one that often appears in the writings of existentialist thinker and philosophers.

Existentialism itself is generally considered to be a branch of philosophy that deals with the conditions of existence as they apply to individuals – for example, a person’s emotions, actions, responsibilities and thoughts (Garko, 1999; Macquarrie, 1973; Solomon, 1972). The 19th century philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, is often regarded as the father of Existentialism because his writings referred to the sole responsibility each individual must take in establishing meaning within his/her own life (Macquarrie, 1973). Kierkegaard believed that people ought to live their lives passionately and sincerely despite existential distractions like despair, absurdity, angst, anxiety, and boredom. Further, Kierkegaard’s writing often placed emphases on the lived experience of the subjective individual, as opposed to mathematical or scientific ‘truths’ (Macquarrie, 1973). He believed that empiricism was too detached and objective to accurately represent the human experience. This is a theme that continued into 20th century Existentialism, where philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir sought to put ‘existence’ back into living things (Garko, 1999; Macquarrie, 1973; Solomon, 1972).

Throughout history, there are two schools of philosophical thought. The first is of ‘essences’ (not to be mistaken with the essence referred to by Almaas), and is based on the notion that there are certain measurable truths that apply to all of reality. The second is of ‘existence’, and is founded on the idea that truth depends on the living individual who exists in a given situation at a given time (Corsini & Wedding, 2005). Sartre was the first author to adopt the term Existentialism in reference to his own philosophy, and

coined the famous statement, “existence precedes essence” (Corsini & Wedding, 2005). In other words, human beings are defined by their acts; a person is not born as either good or evil, but can become so by choosing to be that way. A ‘bad’ person can spontaneously become a ‘good’ person by choosing to engage only in rightful acts, and vice versa. Existentialist thinkers have therefore highlighted the importance of personal agency and responsibility in the lives of individuals.

When science returned to the lived experiences of human beings, it found a number of concerns emerging that had to do with the givens of existence (Corsini & Wedding, 2005; Macquarrie, 1973). For instance, human beings are ultimately free to make whatever choices they see fit. With such a profound sense of freedom comes the inevitable anxiety and fear of making wrong decisions. Since we are responsible for the outcome of our lives, we are responsible for all the situations we bring upon ourselves, good or bad. Another existential given is that all living things must someday die. Grasping the impermanence of their existence can often lead people to feelings of despair and meaninglessness, such as “Is there any point in doing what I am doing now, since I will eventually die?” Another major theme in existentialism is aloneness, since the reality of the human condition is that no two beings can share existence in exactly the same way. This often leads to feelings of isolation and a longing to be validated by other people (Corsini & Wedding, 2005).

According to existentialists, a ‘world-collapse’ is what happens when a person comes face-to-face with his/her existential situation in the world (Rich, 2004). After years of living in denial of life’s truths, the shock of reality can sometimes send people into periods of profound anxiety or depression. Many writers claim that these moments

are integral to any lasting processes of change or transformation. They posit that only by facing existential challenges can people find meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1963; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). According to western proponents of existentialism, the main concerns brought on by a world collapse usually fall within one of the four existential givens of existence: namely, death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). Growing awareness of any one of these concerns can result in increasing anxiety, or what philosophers call an ‘existential crisis’.

Existential isolation, according to Yalom (1980), can account for many of the dysfunctional relationships that human beings engage in. He claims that “no matter how close each of us becomes to another, there remains a final, unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone” (p. 8). In other words, despite the sharing of a physical presence between two people, one can never fully explicate his/her reality in such a way that another can truly know and appreciate what it means to be him/her. Instead of accepting and embracing this reality, people avoid it, by flailing towards one another in desperate attempts to bridge this gap. Yalom (1991) elaborates:

One’s efforts to escape isolation can sabotage one’s relationships with other people. Many a friendship or marriage has failed because, instead of relating to, and caring for, one another, one person uses the other as a shield against isolation. A common, and vigorous, attempt to solve existential isolation, which occurs in several of these stories, is fusion – the softening of one’s boundaries, the melting into another. (p. 11)

This kind of fusion was observed in many women’s descriptions of their relationships prior to embarking on the transformative journey, or shortly thereafter. Their accounts

seem to confirm Yalom's speculations about existential isolation; as soon as they started to feel the expansive void of emptiness opening inside of themselves, they often sought out new relationships or ways to change their present ones so that the emptiness might disappear.

Relationships born out of isolation denial invariably lead to disappointment. The emotional pain and suffering brought on by realizing one's profound aloneness in this lifetime can barely be subdued by the mere physical presence of another person. There is simply too much: "So much wanting. So much longing. And so much pain, so close to the surface, only minutes deep. Destiny pain. Existence pain. Pain that is always there, whirring continuously just beneath the membrane of life. Pain that is all too easily accessible" (Yalom, 1991, p. 3). This is perhaps why women often found that their pursuit of love and companionship ultimately resulted in more frustration and disillusionment.

Yalom (1980) believed that the quest for wholeness is taken up when people confront their existential situations in this world. In terms of relationships, a person will always be confined to those that ease their isolation anxiety – until, that is, they are able to embrace their isolation as a fundamental condition of their being in this world. Only then will they truly be free to participate in expressions of needlessness:

If we are able to acknowledge our isolated situations in existence and to confront them with resoluteness, we will be able to turn lovingly towards others. If, on the other hand, we are overcome with dread before the abyss of loneliness, we will not reach out toward others but instead will flail at them in order not to drown in

the sea of existence... The other, now no longer an ‘other’ but an ‘it’, is placed there, within one’s circle of world, for a *function*. (p. 363)

Ultimately, suppression of existential awareness simply breeds relationships that provide some sort of product (such as power, protection, validation, etc.) and deepen one’s concealment of their isolated state (Yalom, 1980).

Instead of engaging in isolation denial, Yalom posits that an individual must dissolve their conceptions of others as ‘its’ – sources of function in one’s life – and re-establish their status as living, breathing others who have their own needs, wants, and desires in the context of the relationship. He proposed that “[in order] to relate to another in a need-less fashion, one must lose or transcend oneself” (Yalom, 1980. p. 365).

Rich (2004) believes that this transcendence demands an encounter with what human beings tend to fear most: Nothingness. Ironically, it is this encounter that often leads to experiences of deep fulfillment and satisfaction (Daly, 1973; Rich, 2004), those experiences that would qualify as ‘transpersonal’ in nature; by facing life’s ultimate concerns, people learn how to embrace their existential void and utilize it as a catalyst towards wholeness. In other words, wholeness is a product of facing one’s existence in the world, not avoiding it. Only then can one fully appreciate what it is to transcend their self:

We experience ourselves as a luminous night sky, transparent and pure, light and happy, cool and virginal, deep and peaceful... It is a nothingness, but it is a nothingness that is rich, that is satisfying precisely because of its emptiness. It is a direct sense of endless stillness, of pure peacefulness, of an infinity of blackness that is so black it is luminous. It is a transparent blackness that is radiant because

of its purity. This is not the experience of a self, an observer beholding the endlessness of space; rather, it is the experience of the self experiencing itself *as* the infinity of peaceful space. (Almaas, 1996, p. 338)

‘Transcendence’, according to Almaas (1996), is an actual dissolution of the self and identity, and a resting in that place of Nothingness. This fits with Yalom’s (1980) statement earlier about the necessity of transcendence in the experience of need-free love; once a person realizes that the self-structure is really just a figment of the complex imagination, that their job/house/car/income/boyfriend does not reflect who they are as a person, they are free to experience authentic connection. In other words, removal of the relationship’s function results in a deep appreciation for the inner being of both the self and the other.

Summary

The above section has given a brief summary on Existential philosophy, and has illustrated how encounters with existential issues can serve as invitations to the journey. A world collapse often acts as a psychic jolt, forcing an individual to turn their attention inwards. Once he/she sees the faultiness of trying to acquire meaning outside of himself/herself, the only option is to find meaning within oneself. The invitation is to take responsibility for oneself and one’s emotions, and to embark on a quest that leads to meaning.

The next section will further develop the idea of existentialism and discuss how it specifically applies to women undergoing a process of transformation. Specifically, because women are more inclined to develop a sense of identity and meaning based on

relationships in their lives, they are more susceptible to experience situations of existential aloneness. The following section will elaborate.

Women's Encounters with Existential Issues

For a woman, whose definition of 'self' has come to rest on where she sees herself in a complex web of relations, the essence of her 'beingness' becomes intricately interwoven into her relationships with others (Grimshaw, 1986). To not exist in a relationship could, for her, mean to not exist at all. Rich (2004) states that, as an already devalued 'being' in today's society, a woman is even more at risk of being disconnected from her 'Being':

Women's existential situatedness, which is politically, economically, and socially as a devalued being in a dominant culture of male values, may place them in a particular constellation of estrangement from Being. As a devalued being, a peculiar first order estrangement of "being from being", may make a second order estrangement of "being from Being" more pronounced. That is, as a devalued being, women are often in the position of not knowing their own inherent value as being. Perhaps women need to first reclaim their right to being as primary, before an authentic experience of being as Being... can unfold. (p. 76)

If this statement is considered in the context of Almaas' (2004) model, *the Inner Journey*, one gains a clearer understanding of what Rich is trying to articulate. Because women are already being devalued in a "dominant culture of male values", they are at a heightened risk of estrangement from their essence. The soul itself is suffering, because women's field of experience is being devalued in society. She has been taught that to be female means to be inferior. This kind of message can damage the soul and make the

process of inquiry that much more difficult. Hence her “estrangement from Being” becomes that much more pronounced. The subsection below touches briefly on Almaas’ process of self-realization, and why it might be a more difficult process for women than for men.

Dissolving the Self: Transforming Self-Other Relationships

Almaas (1996) calls the disconnection from the self a person’s ‘core wound’, a fundamental disengagement from their pure essence. He also suggests that a person’s narcissism (their need for external mirroring of the self) can be transformed in a process similar to that described by Wilber (1996). Almaas (1996) describes this process of ‘self-realization’ as follows:

When we are being ourselves fully and directly, free from all influences of past experiences, a quantum leap occurs in the experience of the self...To be ourselves fully, spontaneously, and authentically, means simply to *be*. Not to be a reaction, not to be determined or influenced by image or experience from the past, not to be according to memory and mind – is to simply be. (pp. 18-19)

What Almaas is describing is a surrendering of self-structures, of all systems of knowing, in an effort to exist free and liberated in the moment. Only then can one fully appreciate their true being.

For women, however, this disengagement from one’s construed self-representation (based on her own conceptions, as well as those mirrored to her by others), is not always a smooth process, and what can often result is a more fragmented sense of self than existed before the process began:

If... women tend to define themselves in the context of relationships, then it is not surprising that women making a break with their pasts and former relationships may enter a period where there is considerable flux in self-concept. If new relationships and new self-definitions have not yet emerged or been articulated, past images or labels that others supplied may have a peremptory hold on the woman's experience of herself. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 81)

On the other hand, Rich (2004) argues that the idea of a consistent 'self' is an illusion anyway – that “consciousness is always, already in a state of transcending the self as it is and its immediate situation, so it is never possible to find a solid ground on which to anchor one's self and rest” (p. 42). This seems consistent with Almaas' (1996) moment-to-moment self-realization, and Wilber's (2000) notion of self-transcendence.

Conclusion

While the preceding literature review sets the stage for an exploration into women's experiences of transformations through self-other relationships, it is important to remember that the researcher was guided by themes that are either currently emerging, or have already emerged in her own journey towards wholeness. Subsequently, generalizations cannot be made between these themes, and women's experiences of transformations in general. Further, while a list of potential interview questions were generated from information collected during the literature review process, the researcher attempted to practice sensitivity to other themes that emerged during inquiry.

Chapter III: Research Design

Approach to Research

Before divulging the particular methods of the proposed study, a brief discussion will clarify the decision for the researcher's chosen methodology. The following section will outline the feminist demand for qualitative research, and the compatibility between this demand and the phenomenological-hermeneutic investigation that the researcher has chosen as her means of investigation.

Following will be a systematic breakdown of the 'three-stage interview process' – the particular method that was employed by the researcher in a) the selection of participants, b) the gathering of data, and c) the analyzing of that data. Also included will be a discussion about the validity and reliability of a phenomenological-hermeneutic investigation, as well as the limitations of such a study.

Honouring the Research Question

Because of the focus on women's experiences of transformation, the researcher chose an approach to research that was consistent with the feminist concern that quantitative, hypothetical-deductive methods are inappropriate for gathering information about women's experiences; due to their emphasis on traditional male-oriented values – such as objectivity, empiricism, and the quantification of human experience – quantitative methods further minimize the complexities of women's journeys (Garko, 1999; Merrick, 1999; Ussher, 1999). Similarly, the purpose of the study called for rich and thick descriptions of women's experiences of transformation. Subsequently, the method chosen for the proposed study was a phenomenological-hermeneutic investigation.

A Qualitative Investigation

A number of feminist researchers have been arguing against the use of more traditional and empirical quantitative methods (Belenky et al., 1997; Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; Garko, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Lather, 1992; Merrick, 1999; Ussher, 1999). The aim of quantitative studies is usually to identify quantifiable traits and characteristics that can ultimately be generalized to a corresponding population. In order to adequately quantify and generalize, researchers are encouraged to detach themselves from the methods that they employ. However, the present study is not aiming to quantify and generalize, but rather to investigate and explore women's lived experiences. Hence, a qualitative approach to research is the most appropriate method of inquiry (Giorgi, 1985; Jardine, 1990; Macquarrie, 1973; Polkinghorne, 1983; Solomon, 1972; Van Hesteren, 1986; von Eckartsberg).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, or the study of lived experience (Jardine, 1990; Van Manen, 1990), has been defined as “the attempt to describe our experiences directly, independently of the causal explanations that historians, sociologists, or psychologists might give” (Mautner, 1996, p. 421). The idea is that often times researchers get so caught up in explaining human experience, that they often lose sight of the actual experience itself. Van Manen (1982) illustrates how phenomenology tries to refocus the attention on the experience of the individual:

Phenomenology... is that kind of thinking which guides us back from theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experiences – the lived experience of the child's

world, the lived experience of schools, curricula, etc. Phenomenology asks the simple question, what is it like to have a certain experience? (p. 296)

It is important to note, however, that the phenomenon being alluded to is the individual's experience, and not the individual him/herself (Husserl, 1965); the investigation is the extraction of that experience, allowing the individual to let the phenomenon "speak for itself".

Merleau-Ponty (1962) described phenomenology as "a philosophy which puts essences back into existence... a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins" (p, vii). Like Husserl (1965), he believed that the determinants of human behaviour could not be separated from the lived experience of the person doing the experiencing, and that the world exists as-is, prior to human interpretation. However, Merleau-Ponty (1962), as well as several others (for instance, Heidegger and Sartre), disagreed with Husserl, in that this reality already existed as a 'world-as-meaning'. In other words, 'reality' as it is experienced is already coloured by human interpretation. The relationship between the "structures of experience" and the "embodied condition of human existence" is far too overpowering to allow for any kind of subjective 'witnessing' of the world.

Prior to the establishment of Husserlian phenomenology, there existed two predominating theories regarding the epistemology of human experience. The first, empiricism, proposed that knowledge is a product of observing the external and natural world, that it consists of 'facts' to be learned and integrated by the person doing the observing. Rationalism, on the other hand, posited that knowledge is essentially constructed in the rational mind of the knower (Stenner, 1998). For Husserl, however,

neither of these two theories offered an adequate starting point for inquiry into human experience. Instead, Husserl sought to launch his inquiry from where these two hypotheses intersected; in other words, he chose to study phenomena as they appeared through consciousness.

Though some would regard Husserl's work as unscientific and 'soft', others claim that Husserl was actually preoccupied with the notion of certainty, and that he expressly sought to develop a "rigorous science" which was capable of firmly grounding other scientific theories (Stenner, 1998). His goal was to design a set of principles that would allow him to systematically arrive at a position completely devoid of uncertainty regarding the lived experiences, or "life-world", of human beings. Specifically, he wanted to inspect the 'taken-for-granted' nature of experience by examining their descriptions, and thereby elucidating certain structures of consciousness and how these structures functioned to make "sense of it all" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1987).

The method he arrived at, which he called 'reduction', included three basic tenets. First is the 'epoch' – a process in which the researcher brackets his own beliefs and assumptions, not only about the research to be undertaken, but also about the phenomenon to be studied. As we will see over the course of the next several paragraphs, more contemporary research theorists have abandoned Husserl's call for bracketing, suggesting instead that understanding of a given phenomenon can only occur within the context of the researcher's interpretation (hence the evolution of hermeneutics) (Bleicher, 1990; Conroy, 2003; Gadamer, 1976; Meichenbaum, 1988; Sass, 1988; Van Manen, 1990).

The second tenet is called ‘eidetic reduction’, and includes a process of imagining, recalling, or perceiving certain characteristics of an experience. Husserl believed that ‘description’ was a key component in uncovering the nature of the “things themselves” and, subsequently, the basic structures of consciousness. This leads to the last tenet, which Husserl called ‘transcendental reduction’, where the descriptions of the experience can be reviewed and re-reviewed in order to elucidate the framework which underlies the organization of the experience’s meaning (Brooke, 1999).

If pressed to summarize the above, one could describe Husserlian phenomenology as “a disciplined attempt to allow phenomena to show themselves without being obscured by unquestioned theoretical, cultural, and metaphysical assumptions, and an appreciation of the way in which consciousness and world are mutually implicated” (Brooke, 1999, p. 5). In other words, Husserl adamantly believed that it was possible to deduce a method for investigating the structures of consciousness, free from the subjective interpretation of both the researcher and the individual doing the experiencing.

The Shift to a Hermeneutic Reworking of Phenomenology

Some authors however (Brooke, 1999), argue that consciousness is actually a function of the self and is therefore incapable of being free from subjectivity. Since human experience (the phenomenon being investigated) is conceived of, articulated, and received within the arena of consciousness, it is presupposed that a process of interpretation has already been undertaken (Bleicher, 1990). Heidegger (1982), in particular, criticized Husserl’s method for being too insensitive to the ‘being’ of the subject-matter; it was viewed that by aiming for a ‘science of certainty’ Husserl was actually attempting to irresponsibly force his inquiry into pre-established expectations

and conceptualizations. It would seem that this type of investigation was undermining the very nature of what Husserl explicitly set out to do: investigate “the things themselves”.

Heidegger conceded with Husserl’s argument that inquiry needs to be free from empiricism and rationalism, and that subject-matter needs to be understood “as it is in itself”. He argued, however, that beginning with the explicit aim of achieving a science of certainty was insufficiently phenomenological. In order to even pose this aim, Husserl was missing the essence of human experience: he was assuming that human beings are a) subjective entities seeking to theoretically understand the natural world in which they inhabit; b) detached from the world in such a way that they can contemplate the nature of reality; and c) preoccupied with certainty. This, however, was not a sufficient starting point for Heidegger, who would likely contend something similar to the following:

Before we are detached, contemplative, and theoretical we are involved, concerned and practical; before relating to the world as radical externality (such that we might ask, say, ‘Does this table exist?’) we are *alongside* and within an already significant world (such that we might say ‘Pass the salt please’); and before we insist upon certainty we must be anxious about uncertainty. (Stenner, 1998, p. 61)

Heidegger, therefore, sought to re-define phenomenology in a way that incorporated both the object and the subject of inquiry.

For Heidegger (1962), being exists even before it is differentiated into subject or object. At the point of inquiry, for instance, the researcher is objective, as someone detachedly investigating a particular phenomenon; and yet, simultaneously subjective,

because the focus of his inquiry has been so intimately shaped by his own condition and historicity. This precise moment of investigation was important to Heidegger for two reasons: 1) because it illuminated, what he called, the “Being” of a human being; and 2) because it underscored the importance of historicity in understanding the very nature of this Being. Heidegger, therefore, insisted that beings must reflect on their own systems of interpretation in order to move beyond them to a fuller and deeper understanding of Being.

The relationship between the knower and the known is what Heidegger (1962) called the ‘hermeneutic circle’. Essentially the hermeneutic circle begins when a being takes up inquiry. There is always a reference point for commencement, thereby stipulating that some knowledge about the question already be acquired. From there, understanding is circular and dialectical:

A fact never stands on its own, independent from its context or interpreter, but is always partially constituted by them, since it can be evaluated only in relation to a larger theory or argument of which it is a part. Therefore we go back and forth between the part and the whole as we attempt to understand the given ‘facts’.

(Chessick, 1990, p. 260)

Take the inquiry with Being, for example, where the nature of the investigation is already intimately shaped by the questioner’s Dasein: the very questions people ask are products of their own experience and historicity. When a person receives the content of another being’s Being, it is filtered by his/her own expectations and prejudices, so that it might fit within his/her received understanding of Being in general. Then when Being must be interpreted, it is further subjected to the limited interpretations of the Dasein doing the

inquiring. In order to move beyond our understandings, Heidegger believed we must enter fully into them (enter into the hermeneutic circle), and recognize limitations “by grasping not only *what* we understand, but also *how* and *why* we understand it” (Stenner, 1998, p. 68).

Phenomenological-Hermeneutics

Heidegger’s work was the precursor to an expanding body of literature pertaining to interpretation. Researchers were moving away from the Husserlian notion that one’s own world-view had to be bracketed in order for investigations to establish and maintain any validity. Instead, it was becoming apparent that bracketing, in its Husserlian sense, was nearly impossible; one could not fundamentally suspend history’s understanding of Being so as to continue in an unbiased and unprejudiced manner. On the contrary, beings must embrace the socio-historical condition so that they can appreciate the context in which Being reveals itself. The difficulty was establishing a method by which to do so.

Gadamer (1982) in particular was critical of Husserl’s assumptions. He argued that people cannot possibly separate themselves from their own historicity by simply bracketing their judgments and presuppositions. Instead, he suggested that the knower’s boundness to their own present circumstances were the very grounds of understanding, not a factor to be negated or an obstacle to be overcome. He elaborates:

History does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live... The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. (Gadamer, 1982, p. 245)

Here, one can pick up traces of Heidegger's philosophy; Gadamer is arguing that our historicity plays a key role in defining how we experience our being, and therefore our Being. In fact, Gadamer is often credited for having refined and extended Heidegger's theory into what is presently called 'ontological hermeneutics'.

Like Heidegger, Gadamer (1975) believed that understanding is historical – shaped by those presuppositions and prejudices that are shared by the greater culture to which one belongs. Though some may perceive the term 'prejudice' to have a pejorative connotation, it seems that this was not Gadamer's intention:

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 9)

These prejudices are what Gadamer perceives to be an attempt of one individual to merge his 'horizons' with another.

Gadamer also believed that certain meanings are specific to the context in which they arise, that meaning is actually co-constituted by the interpreter and the subject of interpretation. He posits that, "to reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we are" (Gadamer, 1982, p. 341). The transformation that takes place, Gadamer would argue, is not one that can be replicated by any other interpreter, or even by the same interpreter at a

different time. To grasp this concept, one must reconsider the importance that Gadamer placed on historical understanding. He perceived meaning to be a product of the interpreter's own socio-historical condition in the world. This socio-historical condition is radically subject to change; it exists only for a particular moment in time and space, before it shifts again to incorporate the experiences of the next time and space.

According to Gadamer, this would imply that, should the interpreter contact the subject of his interpretation at a different time and space, the meaning drawn from that encounter would be different.

Summary

The section above has illustrated the basic tenets underlying phenomenological hermeneutics. Because of the researcher's desire to explore the lived experiences of women undergoing a process of transformation, phenomenological hermeneutics was chosen as the best approach to research. In the following sections, the researcher will elaborate how she actually applied these tenets to the research study at hand.

Research Procedure

Bearing the above discussion in mind, it is appropriate to now illuminate the specific approach used during the study. Being a qualitative, phenomenological-hermeneutic investigation, no standard protocol was found by which to structure the investigation. Instead however, the researcher relied on a description which was found relaying some basic strategies of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982):

We use *qualitative research* as an umbrella term to refer to several research strategies that share certain characteristics. The data collected has been termed *soft*, that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily

handled by statistical procedures... While people conducting qualitative research may develop a focus as they collect data, they do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypotheses to test. They are concerned as well with understanding behaviour from the subject's own frame of reference.

External causes are of secondary importance. They tend to collect their data through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time. (p. 2)

While this study did aim to be soft, and the researcher did not approach the question with a set of hypotheses to test, she nevertheless developed a list of potential questions to ask the participants (see Appendix D). This was to ensure that the phenomenon in question was actually discussed and attended to during the interview process.

Selecting Participants

There is some agreement amongst phenomenological researchers that participants need to have experienced the phenomenon in question, and, further, must be able to articulate it (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). Thus a preliminary selection and screening process took place to ensure not only that a) the participants had indeed experienced the phenomenon, but also that b) they were able to speak about it in such a way that the phenomenon took on a character of its own.

A total of seven individuals were chosen to participate in the study. The researcher selected four of these women from acquaintances she knew – people she had encountered during her own journey, and who she knew would be well-versed in the dialogue of transformation. During the interview process with these participants, two

more people were recommended who also qualified for the study (and upon contacting them, expressed interest in participating).

Finally, the researcher posted an advertisement on a social networking website related to transpersonal psychology (a copy of which can be found in Appendix C). Although two individuals voluntarily contacted the researcher, only one woman was able to devote the time necessary to participate in the study. Thus, the seventh participant was found.

All individuals, when contacted, were asked a series of pre-screening questions, either over the phone, or in person, depending on the nature of the initial contact with each person (see Appendix D for sample pre-screening interview questions). Once it was established that each participant had indeed experienced the phenomenon in question, and was able to articulate and express it in a way that informed the current study, they were deemed appropriate subjects for participation.

In the planning and preparation stages of this investigation, the researcher decided to base her numbers on something Morse (1994) called ‘indices of saturation’. Rather than committing the study to a specific number, individuals were incorporated until recurring themes emerged from their stories. Bearing in mind the constraints of time and resources, the researcher did not want to accept more than ten participants for the study, and sought to include no less than six. As the goal was to obtain thick descriptions of women’s experiences, the researcher tried to include “as many participants as it [took] to illuminate the phenomenon” (Osborne, 1990, p. 82).

Data Collection

Once a participant had met the inclusion criteria, the second stage of the interview process commenced. Because three of the participants were geographically removed from the researcher, these interviews were conducted via telephone, and were recorded over a speaker. The other four participants were asked where they would be most comfortable engaging in an open-ended dialogue about their lived experiences (Osborne, 1990). Based on the responses, and bearing in mind the safety of the researcher, meetings were arranged in quiet and comfortable locations chosen by the participants. For all women interviewed, discussions ranged between 60 and 120 minutes.

As was mentioned earlier, some qualitative researchers have argued for an entirely unstructured interview format. However, the purpose of this study was to gain descriptions of a specific experience, and so the researcher entered the discussion with a list of questions that she may have, or may not have asked, depending on how successfully the experience was being described (Appendix D). In accordance with the research stating the importance of rapport-building with the participant (Osborne, 1990), the researcher clearly explicated the nature and purpose of the discussion with each individual. She also emphasized that the experience was the phenomenon to be studied, and not the individual herself. Following, the researcher also explained the limits of confidentiality and the necessity of audio-taping the interview. For those participants conducting the interview via telephone, the confidentiality agreement was emailed prior to the telephone interview, and the signed copy was faxed back to the researcher. For those individuals engaging in a face-to-face interview, the confidentiality agreement was discussed in person, and signed before the beginning of the interview. (A copy of the agreement can be found in Appendix A).

Some researchers have argued that data collection and analysis happen concurrently and inform one another (Tesch, 1990). As was mentioned earlier in this paper, meaning is often context-driven and difficult to assess when removed from specific situations. Because this study seeks to provide a hermeneutic interpretation of women's lived experience, it is aiming to attribute meaning to the dialogue that the researcher is engaging in with each of the participants. In order to carry context into the data analysis procedures, the researcher took notes during the second stage of the interview process recording tone of voice, breaks in conversation, relevant silences, and, where necessary, body posture and mannerisms. These can all be considered aspects of a dialogical encounter, and further inform context-bound interpretations.

Data Analysis

Because phenomenological hermeneutics is largely an unconventional approach to research, it might first be useful to elaborate some basic tenets of this kind of investigation. Van Manen (1990), who is often regarded as a leading phenomenological researcher, has offered some guidelines:

Phenomenological research and writing is a project in which normal scientific requirements or standards of objectivity and subjectivity need to be re-conceived... "Objectivity" means that the researcher is *oriented* to the object, that which stands in front of him or her. Objectivity means that the researcher remains *true to the object*. The researcher becomes in a sense a guardian and a defender of the true nature of the object... "Subjectivity" means that one needs to be as perceptive, insightful, and discerning as one can be in order to show or disclose the object in its full richness and in its greatest depth. Subjectivity means that we

are *strong* in our orientation to the object of study *in a unique and personal way* – while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions. (p. 20)

This presentation of phenomenological hermeneutics provided the researcher with some insight into how best to analyze the data. First and foremost she sought to be objective, in the sense that she was “true to the object”, or in this case, women’s experiences of transformation. Secondly, she sought to be subjective, in the sense that she attempted to be insightful and discerning in the way that she discussed the findings of her research.

Subjectivity, as described by Van Manen, demands a certain skill in writing about the phenomenon in question. In fact he asserts that “hermeneutic phenomenological research is fundamentally a writing activity. Research and writing are aspects of one process” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7). This proved to be true in the current study. Writing and interpretation happened concurrently from as early on as the transcribing process. The simple act of typing each participant’s account gave the researcher insight into the participant’s experiences and the meaning that the woman sought to express.

At this stage in the study, the researcher was already experiencing elements of the hermeneutic circle, the notion that for understanding to be acquired, one must look from the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts. One author states, “the data have no meaning in isolation from the whole, and they require looking from the whole to the parts to the whole again” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p 238). Thus, for the purpose of the current study, the first step in data analysis was a compilation of the ‘whole’. This was accomplished by transcribing each interview and including the documented notes of the

researcher. Once the transcribing had taken place, the researcher attempted to follow Giorgi's (1985) recommendations for data analysis:

1. Read the entire description to get a sense of the whole.
2. Discriminate meaning units within a psychological perspective and focus on the phenomenon being researched.
3. Transform subjects' everyday expressions into psychological language with emphasis on the phenomenon being investigated.
4. Synthesize transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of the phenomenon being investigated. (pp 10-19)

Although this list offers some important suggestions for phenomenological research, it seems lacking in its sensitivity to the cyclical nature of hermeneutic analysis.

Driving a phenomenological-hermeneutic investigation is the concept of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is the process of inquiry that begins with the researcher's curiosity of a particular phenomenon. Once the researcher decides to investigate the phenomenon, he/she has entered into the circle. From there, the researcher is always looking to various parts of the phenomenon in order to gain an understanding of the whole, and then to the whole in order to gain understanding of the various parts. One author (Smith, 2007) describes the process as follows:

I start where I am at one point on the circle, caught up in my concerns, influenced by my preconceptions, shaped by my experience and expertise. In moving from this position, I attempt to either bracket or at least acknowledge my preconceptions before I go round to an encounter with a research participant at the other side of the circle. Whatever my previous concerns or positions, I have

moved from a point where I am the focus to one where the participant is the focus as I attend closely to the participant's story, facilitate the participant uncovering his/her experience. This requires an intense attentiveness to and engagement with the participant as he/she speaks... Having concluded the conversation, I continue the journey round the circle back to where I started. So I return home to analyze the material I collected from the perspective I started from, influenced by my prior conceptions and experience. However, I am also irretrievably changed because of the encounter with the new, my participant and his/her account. Then I engage in movement round a virtual mini-circle where, in my home location, I mentally take on again a conversation with my participant, as I rehear his/her story, ask questions of it, try to make sense of it. Indeed the various actions inherent in the hermeneutic circle between part and whole... take place in this cognitive space at home base. Moreover, I may later even choose to go round the research relationship circle again, to literally revisit the participant and engage in another conversation with them about my interpretation – to have a literal interpretative dialogue about my virtual interpretative dialogue. (p. 6)

This descriptive passage offers a literal way in which the hermeneutic circle can be applied to a research study. Subsequently, the researcher adhered to these suggestions as much as possible. She had illuminated the preconceptions she held prior to research by divulging a section on the themes she expected to arise during her interview processes, and she also disclosed the aspects of her own journey that led her to investigate this particular phenomenon. With regards to going “round the research relationship circle

again”, the researcher revisited the participants in order to check with them regarding the appropriateness of the themes that she extracted.

Evaluative Criteria

In Chapter 11 of the book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Lincoln and Guba (1985) articulate a process of establishing the “trustworthiness” of a qualitative study. According to these two authors, “the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?” (p. 290). In contrast to the conventional terms used in quantitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have coined a set of corresponding evaluative terms that are specific to qualitative research methods. Instead of “internal validity”, Lincoln and Guba use the term “credibility”, or confidence in the truth of the findings. Rather than “external validity”, they describe “transferability” – showing how findings have applicability in other settings. “Reliability” becomes “dependability”, or showing how the findings are consistent and could be repeated. Lastly, they replace “objectivity” with “confirmability” – the degree to which the study maintains neutrality. The techniques for establishing these four criterion will be discussed below, as will the present study’s ability to meet each of them.

Credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are a number of techniques for establishing the credibility of a study: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member-checking. In order to establish credibility in the present study, the researcher utilized three of these techniques. The first was prolonged engagement – a process in which the researcher immerses him/herself in a particular cultural or social

setting in order to facilitate understanding of that culture, as well as to build trust and rapport with the participants. In the present study, the researcher selected participants from social settings in which she was already engaged, or was at least familiar with. For those participants whom she previously knew, trust and rapport had already been established. For those she did not know, these qualities were easily generated over a short amount of time because of the researchers' familiarity with the themes being discussed. The next technique she used was triangulation – using multiple data sources in order to generate understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the current study, the researcher has utilized theory/perspective triangulation (Denzin, 1978). In other words, different theoretical perspectives have been used to examine and interpret the data – namely the theories of both Wilber and Almaas. Finally, the researcher has also utilized the technique of member-checking, where data, analytic categories, and interpretations are tested with the individuals who originally generated the data. In the third stage of the interview process, the researcher reviewed her thematic analysis with the participants of the study in order to determine the accuracy of the meaning units that she extracted from each of their accounts.

Transferability. Transferability reflects whether or not the findings of a specific study can be applied to other contexts. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability exists if the conditions of the two contexts are consistent – i.e. the context of the study in which the findings were extrapolated, as well as the context in which the findings are going to be applied. Similarly, the characteristics of the people that the findings are applied to should be consistent with the characteristics of the participants that they were derived from. For instance, in the current study, transferability might be

achieved by finding women with similar backgrounds, life stories, and demographics. Under such conditions, if interviewed in a similar fashion, those women might express the same themes that emerged during this particular study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation for establishing transferability is the technique of "thick description". Thick description refers to the way in which the researcher describes the phenomenon in question. By providing sufficient detail, the researcher and others can determine whether the conclusions are applicable to other people, times, and settings. In the current study, the researcher has attempted to provide thick descriptions of the phenomenon in question.

Dependability. Though Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that inquiry can never fully be 'replicated', so to speak, they do state that, "the naturalist seeks means for taking into account both factors of instability and factors of phenomenal and design induced change" (p. 299). The way that a naturalist does this is by employing what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call an "inquiry audit". In this kind of external audit, researcher (or researchers) not involved in the inquiry process examine the study to evaluate whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data. Because the present study is being submitted as a thesis, it will have undergone review by several committee members, as well as an external examiner, not involved in the research process. This review will assist in establishing the study's dependability.

Confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the term "confirmability" to refer to the amount of neutrality established in naturalistic inquiry. They recommend keeping an "audit trail" that consists of raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, personal notes, and instrument development information. This trail provides some transparency, to the researcher

him/herself as well as others, regarding the biases that have shaped the inquiry. In the present study, the researcher kept her raw data, and all the notes she acquired from the beginning of the inquiry.

Summary. In light of the chapter written by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the present research study can be said to exhibit “trustworthiness”. The researcher has ensured that the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, have to some degree been met.

Conclusion

Chapter three has taken a look at all aspects of the current research. First, the researcher discussed her motivation for choosing a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to research, and then relayed the philosophical underpinnings of this approach. She articulated the ways in which she practiced both phenomenology and hermeneutics in choosing her participants, gathering the data, and analysing the data. The result of this work can be found in chapters four and five, *Themes of Women’s Journeys of Transformation* and *Discussion*, respectively.

Chapter IV: Themes of Women's Journeys of Transformation

Introduction

In previous chapters of this paper, the researcher has introduced relevant concepts and ideas that have shaped the current research investigation. She has reviewed the literature that pertains to psycho-spiritual paths of transformation, as well as topics sensitive to studying women's lived experiences. She has further mentioned existentialism, particularly as it applies to themes arising in this investigation. It is time now, to turn to the phenomenon in question and let it speak for itself.

The following chapter includes five major sections. In the first section, *Meeting the Participants*, the researcher will introduce the seven women who participated in the study. The next four sections are a division of the journey into four consecutive stages: 1) Before Embarking: Unawakened Existence, 2) Looking in the Mirror: Facing What We've Become, 3) Awakening to the True Self: Moving Beyond Masks, and 4) Arriving in the Moment: the Ongoing Journey. Within each stage, the researcher has presented the main themes as they relate to that stage in the journey.

Meeting the Participants

Prior to elaborating on the themes that emerged from the interview, we will undergo a brief introduction to the women who participated in the study. Getting to know a little bit about the co-researchers will aid the reader in developing a greater understanding of the emerging experience of each individual, and the more universal experience of transformation. Each woman has been given a pseudonym, which will be used throughout the following discussion.

Leah is a 34-year-old woman from the Pacific Northwest. Her family descent is Swiss and Norwegian, though she describes herself as a fourth generation Seattle-ite. In terms of her familial upbringing, Leah describes her background to be middle class, with no significant religious education. In her formative years, Leah experienced abuse and neglect within her family structure, which she believes had a momentous impact on her relationships with others as well as with herself. She recognizes these experiences as having set her on the course for transformation.

Leah identifies a number of other events that also shaped her experiences of transformation. At an early age, she experimented with certain kinds of drugs, which illuminated aspects of life that she was previously unable to perceive. When she was 16, Leah was introduced to ideas of co-dependency and family shame, and subsequently began working with a therapist (on and off) from that age onward. At 22, Leah embarked on a solo travelling venture for seven months, through Europe and Africa. She continues to travel when she gets the chance. Since 1997, Leah has been experiencing bouts of major depression, which come and go. Presently, she works in a prison, providing counselling to other women undergoing rehabilitation. She expresses that her work helps her to stay connected to her own journey and recovery process.

Andrea is a 32-year-old woman from Kansas, who is presently living and teaching English in South Korea. She too is from a middle-class family. Her parents divorced when she was young, and Andrea and her brother were raised by her father. Andrea identifies alcoholism in her family from a young age, but other than that describes her childhood as fairly standard. Andrea herself battled with alcoholism on her own journey,

and identifies her first experiences of transformation coinciding with her decision to stop drinking, which was approximately seven years ago.

Andrea's religious upbringing was Lutheran, though she no longer considers herself religiously affiliated, except for her Unity Church which she expresses a fondness for. Prior to moving to Korea, Andrea had actually become a chaplain in her church, and states that her role there helped shape her journey significantly. Not only did the church provide her with a sense of community, but becoming a chaplain allowed Andrea to develop deep and intimate connections with the other church members. She describes how having people confide in her opened her up to the experiences that she herself had undergone; by listening to others courageously face their issues and work through them, Andrea in turn was able to process through aspects of her life that she had previously avoided.

In terms of formal education, Andrea has completed her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Latin American Studies. Though she doesn't plan to utilize this degree in her current vocation, she does hope to travel to Latin American countries. Currently, she is living with her partner of two years, and expresses that she doesn't believe in marriage. Prior to this relationship, Andrea describes having held a series of committed relationships. She admits that she hasn't spent much time as a single woman since early in her teenage years. Working through co-dependency issues has been a major theme in Andrea's journey of transformation.

Mary is a 32-year-old woman from Colorado, but has lived in various cities throughout the United States. Like Andrea, Mary is also presently teaching English in South Korea. She initially moved to Korea three years ago, during a rocky period in her

marriage. She has subsequently divorced, and built a life for herself abroad. Since her divorce, she has dated several men, but none of whom she has considered serious. Mary also described having multiple co-dependency issues, and stated that she feels irresponsible entering into committed relationships. She described feeling quite neurotic and paranoid most of the time, and during the interview would often display moments of intense introspection and self-analysis. Despite her self-criticism, Mary comes across as an educated, well-spoken, and mature woman.

Although Mary did not express a particular religious upbringing, the fact that she was raised in a military family seems quite pertinent to her journey. She was moved around a lot, and describes a lifestyle that she believes to be unique to her father's position in the military. Mary remembers money being scarce throughout her childhood, and significant psychological and emotional abuse from her mother, who she describes as having been quite unstable. Mary has an older brother and sister, who are both married, and a younger sister, all of whom she expressed having strained relationships with. Mary has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. In fact, it was during one of her university courses that Mary first became consciously aware of her own journey towards wholeness (though she expresses that earlier events shaped her journey).

At 29 years old, Julie identifies with having been on a journey for most of her life, though she consciously became aware of it during her teenage years. She was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, and has subsequently lived in St. Catharines, ON, Victoria, BC, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, CA, Indian Wells, CA, and Calgary, AB. Julie is of Irish, German, and Norwegian descent, and was raised Catholic. Presently, however, she

describes herself as “non-religious-spiritual”, and recognizes her mother’s spirituality as having a profound impact on Julie’s psycho-spiritual development.

Julie describes having three significant romantic relationships in her late teens and twenties, which contributed to her transformational journey, and at the time of the interview, had been in her present relationship for two years. Julie’s awareness of her transformation began at the age of 17, when she began experiencing bouts of depression and struggled with eating disorders. These persisted into her early twenties.

Julie identifies several events as having played key roles in shaping the development of her transformation: going to a substance abuse treatment center at the age of nine, having an alcoholic father in childhood, and spending six months in Thailand in 2002 are several examples that she cites. Another important aspect of her journey has been her educational upbringing. Julie studied Psychology in both her undergraduate and master’s programs. Yet in 2005, she came across a very different healing technique, Thetahealing. She has subsequently received training in that modality, and now practices it at an alternative medicine clinic in Calgary, AB. For the first time in her life, Julie describes feeling congruence between her personal and professional life; she feels that she can actually be herself in her work place, experiences a sense of acceptance and belonging, and nurtures those qualities she has acquired on her journey.

Sarah is a 40-year-old woman from Oshawa, Ontario. She has lived in multiple cities in Ontario and Alberta, and even spent time living abroad in Australia. Her cultural descent is English and Irish, and both her parents were Protestant. In terms of her religious upbringing, Sarah went to church with her parents until she was nine years old, which coincides with her parents’ divorce. After that, Sarah did not engage in any

religious activity, except for a year that she spent dabbling in Buddhism in her early twenties.

Sarah describes having tumultuous relationships with others throughout her journey. As a child, she underwent extensive sexual abuse, which she believes shaped her future relationships with men. For the most part, her intimate encounters were of a sexual nature, and Sarah even uses the word 'promiscuous' in describing herself in the context of relationships. She did however, engage in a serious romantic relationship where she cohabitated with a partner in her early thirties. Sarah also describes having difficult relationships with her family. Being significantly younger than her three sisters, Sarah felt pressure from her parents to follow in their womanly footsteps. This was difficult for Sarah, who deeply rejected her feminine nature. She responded by repressing aspects of herself and rebelling against their expectations.

Several events played a key role in shaping Sarah's journey of transformation. In her teenage years, Sarah experienced profound moments around life and death, and even recognizes herself as having undergone an existential crisis at the age of 17. In her early twenties, Sarah was kicked out of University, which contributed to her sense of loss and aloneness, and even later underwent a physical aloneness while lost in Australia. Also in her twenties, Sarah became the confidant to her sisters, who shared their extramarital affairs with her, and thereby contributed to her felt-sense that human nature was essentially fickle and untrustworthy. In her early thirties, Sarah moved to Alberta where she had her first encounters with Nondualism; she began acquainting herself with the theory and the practice, and even entered into a Nondual group. This ultimately led to her participation in several methods of self-discovery and development, including

shamanic and tantric experiences, as well as exploring past lives. Sarah continues attending Nondual groups, but describes her current process as less rigid. She has been able to surrender more to the flow of existence, and enjoy her own energy.

Emily is a 48-year-old woman who was raised as a single child in Portland, Oregon. Her parents were Irish-Catholic, and raised her as such, though she describes losing her affiliation with the church over time. She does however, still strongly identify with being spiritual, and mentioned God repeatedly throughout her interview. At the age of 18, Emily eloped with her high school sweetheart, and moved to rural Oregon, where her main preoccupation became her husband. Although Emily remembers her husband as a good man, her marriage was not fulfilling. She remembers feeling deeply unsatisfied for a number of years, until in her mid-twenties she finally separated from him and moved to Washington in an effort to “find herself”.

In her late twenties, Emily recognized that drinking was preventing her from finding her spiritual path. It was at that time that she quit drinking and entered Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Attending 12-step groups proved extremely transformational for Emily as they allowed her to connect with spiritually like-minded individuals. Since entering AA, Emily has opened her mind to various forms of religion and spirituality. She has travelled to multiple countries and continents to explore different religious modalities, and to learn what she can from other people. She has attended classes on meditation and yoga, as well as frequented Satsangs and intellectual lectures. She believes that all religions attempt to guide us to the same spiritual truth: that we are all one with Spirit.

At present, Emily is teaching English in Korea. She holds a college degree in Social Work, though if she ever returns to the States, she hopes that she can pursue a career as a writer. Also pending her return to the States is a romantic relationship that sparked before she left for Korea, though Emily expresses some trepidation about committing herself as she did in her marriage. Despite the fact that she enjoys her intimate connections with friends and family, Emily finds it difficult to maintain boundaries within the context of romantic relationships. She finds issues of co-dependency resurfacing as she seeks to maintain the status quo of the relationship.

Finally, Jennifer is a 33-year old woman, born and raised in Calgary, Alberta. Her parents are of Israeli descent, and Jennifer, as well as her younger brother and sister, were all raised Jewish. Though Jennifer doesn't actively practice her religion, she still deeply identifies with it and recognizes her heritage as playing an important role in her upbringing. Jennifer describes her relationship with her father as being quite positive, while she felt that her mother was always very critical and controlling.

From a very young age, Jennifer describes feeling different from other children. She couldn't articulate exactly where the feelings originated, but she distinctly recalls feeling ugly and inferior, even as a small child. Jennifer began experimenting with drugs and alcohol at the age of 11, and began engaging in sexual behaviors shortly thereafter. She describes her early teenage years as being dark and chaotic. She was diagnosed as clinically depressed, and also as having Seasonal Affective Disorder, however, according to Jennifer, her substance abuse had escalated to such extremes that any psychiatric diagnoses were likely inaccurate.

At 16 years old, Jennifer signed herself into a long-term adolescent treatment center for chemically-dependent youth. She identifies this as being her first conscious steps on the journey of transformation. Once completing treatment, Jennifer became actively engaged in 12-step groups as well, and perceives these to be keystones in her process of recovery. Since leaving treatment, Jennifer has engaged in one significant romantic relationship – a man to whom she has now been married for five years. Though it has not been an easy relationship, it has been the arena for significant growth and maturation in her relational skills.

Recovery has also become the field for Jennifer's occupational preference. Since leaving treatment, she has completed both an undergraduate and master's degree in counselling related fields. She is presently working as a clinical director at the same treatment center she herself graduated from. The foundation of Jennifer's spirituality has become giving back to others who are undergoing the same process that she is.

Stage 1. Before Embarking: Unawakened Existence

Stage one of the journey encapsulates all the qualities that women experienced before they were even aware that they were on a journey. While exploring this phase of transformation with the participants, the researcher sought to gain a better understanding of the nature of the participants' selves as well as their relationships. The themes that she extracted are explored below.

Masking the Self: Creating and Maintaining Emotional Distance

One theme that emerged from several of the interviews was the lack of connection that these women seemed to have in their various personal relationships. For almost all the participants, their true self was essentially unknown to them, and it became necessary

to create personas, or masks, that they could then project outwards to the world around them. The difficulty was that these masks were false representations of self, and therefore prevented the women from developing any genuine or authentic connections, not only with others, but also with their selves. The following paragraphs elaborate.

Sarah, for instance, talked about a split that she had in her personality; there was the persona that she would display to the world, and then there was her private self – the self that was totally incongruent with the image she presented to those around her:

I was very much indulged in self-pity. I would outwardly seem like the care-free, gypsy, party-girl person. Outwardly, I had lots of friends, you know, would travel a lot. People would say, ‘Oh, nothing bothers [her]’... But inwardly, I was very much indulged in self-pity, I was very sad, I was very lonely. You know, I kept people at a distance. I had a lot of friendships, but I didn’t have anybody who was really close.

In this case, the people in Sarah’s life had an inaccurate conception of what was happening with her internally. They believed her to be confident, out-going, and care-free, whereas in reality she was actually feeling quite sad and alone.

Jennifer also describes feeling cut-off from the people around her. Yet in her case, the emotional distance seems to stem from a fear of getting too close to people, as though if people were to really understand who she was internally, they would realize that she had somehow deceived them:

In terms of feeling close to people, like really feeling like I had friends, I really didn’t. I didn’t trust anybody, and I always felt like I had to watch my back, and always competition, and always fear, and always comparing, and um, I felt like if

anybody ever had me figured out at all, I just moved on – moved on to a new job, a new group of friends, new everything, just always kept moving on... I don't think I felt really close to people in years. I don't feel like anybody really knew me. I was a total fraud.

As Jennifer describes in the passage above, she reacted to her fears with avoidance. She would change situations, change locations, or change social groups so that none of her associates ever had a chance to get to know her. She used her masks to effectively keep people at, what she perceived to be a safe distance.

While the two passages above exemplify a kind of proactive distancing on the part of the interviewees, there was a different kind of emotional distancing that took place in the experiences of other co-researchers. Emily, for example, described how emotional distance presented itself in her life. Rather than avoiding others, or portraying a false identity to the people in her life, Emily would pursue relationships with individuals who were emotionally unavailable to her:

That's been a really big trigger for me, or a pattern in relationships, has been people not being really available. I guess it's history with my family, but especially men, have been unavailable a lot... workaholics, not really able to support me emotionally, or too busy physically. And of course I have been also, so maybe I attracted that kind of person into my life... maybe other people that I had in my life before were going pretty fast... so I had a sense of, that when I tried to reach them, they weren't there – however that might be, emotionally, physically, whatever.

In this instance, emotional distance was a product of the relationships that Emily chose for herself. She had created a pattern of disconnection in her life, even though that was not what she had desired. For Emily, the masks were not so much projected personas as they were a denial of her essential emotional needs within the context of the relationship.

Some of the co-researchers may not have identified such a distinct disconnection from others, but they certainly reported feeling an emotional distance from their own selves. Instead of projecting a persona outwards for other people to receive, it's as if these women created internal masks – masks that would allow them to avert themselves from qualities they felt were unbearable.

In Leah's case, she had received constant criticism and ridicule as a small child. She internalized the messages that she received from her parents, and ultimately decided that she was worthless and unbearable: "If you hear that enough times, you know, that you're a bad kid – ugly and stupid, and whatever – you really start to believe that about yourself. I had this image of who I was: this bad, awful kid, unlovable. And in a way, I started playing that out, behaving badly and not taking care of myself." Leah had become so disconnected from her true self, her essence, that she started clinging to her parents' conception of her in an effort to develop a sense of identity. She elaborates:

By the time I reached my teens, I had completely given up hope of loving or being loved, getting good grades, being a decent human being. It was like I just sort of surrendered to that image of being the 'bad girl'. I was content to just act out, and treat people like crap, and treat myself like crap because that's who I believed I was.

With no other means of creating an identity, Leah grasped on to faulty masks of self. She clung to the images that her parents had provided her with in childhood, and eventually identified with them. Leah was never really given an opportunity to develop a relationship with her true self, and was therefore limited to her understanding of the personas projected on her by others. She then used these personas to perpetuate the distance from herself.

Mary was another co-researcher who expressed a deep disconnection from her sense of self. She explains, “Well, I didn’t in the past know who I was or what I liked. I didn’t have any independent thought. All of my thought was constructed by outside influences.” Like Leah, Mary would internalize the voices of those people who were close to her, and would construct her sense of self from them:

They were just opinions, and they were fears. And they were like – if I needed to make any kind of a decision, my decision would be based on what I perceived the opinions of others to be. So, my mother, my father, my siblings, my so-called friends, my employer – all of the opinions that I perceived them to have were the voices in my head, judging me. And I was always wrong. So usually I tried to do what I thought they would want, as a coping mechanism.

In other words, Mary was so disconnected from her own sense of self that she relied on the input from others in almost everything that she did. If she wasn’t receiving direct instructions from other people – on what to think, do, or say, and often how to feel – then she was internalizing their voices and acting accordingly. Eventually, Mary was unable to differentiate her own internal voice from those of others’.

Emily was one participant who embodied disconnection at so many levels. In the previous section, an excerpt from her interview illustrated her inability to connect with others. In the passage below, Emily discusses how, in her marriage, she would repeatedly sacrifice her own needs and wants for the sake of her husband's. The loss of something as menial as a favorite meal comes to represent so much more:

I knew, when my marriage ended, I was grieving myself. I remember some of my friends asked me, 'Do you like beef stew?' Just a simple little question, but I was like, 'Yeah, I love beef stew! But you know, I haven't had beef stew in seven years because my husband doesn't like it.' So it was just a simple little question that started me looking at, well, what have I given up? And what else of me did I lose, besides the things I really felt passionate about and really enjoyed?

Emily's reflection illustrates her disconnection from herself, her inability to recognize and affirm her personal desires and goals. This is not to say that her husband imposed himself upon her, but that she underwent a gradual and subtle process where she would surrender pieces of herself, often for the sake of convenience or so as not to disturb the "status quo".

Fragmenting the Self: Narcissistic Understandings of Identity

In Transpersonal fields of study, narcissism is the process that occurs when the sense of self becomes falsely identified with attributes of one's life. For instance, a person can develop their sense of identity around things they have, or have acquired, in their life. This can be any variety of things, but some common examples might be a person's job, income, or chosen mode of transportation – i.e. 'I am a lawyer; I make a six figure salary; I drive a Mercedes'. The implication is that this person is more worthy

and/or valuable than others because of what he/she is, makes, and drives. However, each of these assertions speaks only to the external qualities of a person's life, rather than his/her actual identity.

Several of the participants in this study relayed narcissistic patterns of self-identification prior to embarking on the journey of transformation. For example, some women had become so preoccupied with their body-image, that they falsely perceived their physical being to represent their selves in totality. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Andrea, who described her self-concept as being very tied to her physical appearance:

I was in dance class, and I remember feeling, you know, like I had big fat thighs. I had *big fat thighs* as a six year old in dance class. I was insecure about being in a leotard, and everybody around me was always telling me like, 'aw, you're so beautiful'. And I think that shaped me a lot too, like I grew up with just my dad and my brother, and my dad's friends, and all the feedback, like all the input that I got as a kid was um, how pretty I was... The primary input that I got was about my appearance. And I think that in some way, that has instilled in me a fear that if I lose that, well *when* I lose that, you know, if I lose that, then I'm in trouble – in that my loveability is very much tied to my being attractive.

It is clear from this passage that Andrea has learned to value herself for her looks, and that who she is, is largely dependent on the physical aestheticism that she brings into the world.

Another woman who struggled with her appearance was Mary. Mary had battled with preoccupations about her body image and eating since she was a small child. She elaborates:

I couldn't eat around other people. I hated myself so much for the way I looked. And I was sure that other people were judging me just as much as I was judging myself. Like if I would eat a huge hamburger, I could *hear* other people thinking, 'Oh my God, what a pig. No wonder she's so fat. Her parents shouldn't let her consume that'. I believed that my body was a reflection of who I was on the inside. Like my weight represented my lack of self-control and impulsiveness... My body was everything. If I dieted and was thin, I felt in control and acceptable. I could go out in public. But if my weight crept back up, I despised myself. I wouldn't go outside.

Mary had fragmented her sense of self so that the only thing she identified with was her body. She honestly believed that her figure represented who she was on the inside. Despite the attempts of family and loved ones to externalize Mary's weight and to reflect her inner qualities, Mary was unable to identify with those qualities. In her mind, she was her body.

In Sarah's case, the isolated aspect of herself that she identified with was also related to her body, but more so in the qualities that she associated with it. Instead of identifying with her body image, Sarah latched onto the concept of being a woman: "Being a woman, for me, was not positive. Being a woman was a way to manipulate men, and that's how I thought. And being a woman, you know, I didn't like women, and I was a woman – I didn't like that part." Instead of understanding that she was able to

embody whatever qualities she wanted, Sarah felt limited to her understanding of womanhood; she felt obliged to manipulate men sexually, and to compete with other women, because that was her understanding of how women behaved.

Desperate Connections: Relationships that Serve a Purpose

A pertinent area to explore in order to gain some insight into the research question is how women operated in their interpersonal relationships – before the process of transformation, during the process, and at present (the phrase ‘after the process of transformation’ has been avoided intentionally, for it will become apparent in later discussions that this process never actually concludes itself). This section of the paper will elaborate how women operated in their relationships before they began transforming their selves.

Getting what’s needed: Manipulating, grasping, and destroying in relationships.

In Jennifer’s case, connections with other people were usually self-serving. She built relationships based on what she could get out of them. If there was nothing to be gained, then the relationship served no purpose in her life. She elaborates:

I took; like I was a taker. So I mean, if there wasn’t anything in it for me, then I had no reason to be there. And I was a manipulator, so I mean, it was kinda like my relationships were part of a game for me. Um, and it really was. Like I even thought of it that way, you know, about how I could work people over, how I could con them, how I could get them to buy my story, how I could get them to feel sorry for me, how I could get them to give me money, how I could get them to let me stay there.

In this passage, the gain that Jennifer is aiming for is material; she wanted money, accommodation, or other essential needs. Yet at other times, Jennifer describes using people for emotional purposes too. “I was so fixated on how I looked, and my body, and pleasing men, like being enough for men, that if I didn’t please men, and if I wasn’t enough for men, then I wasn’t enough. So they just had, you know, men had such power.” In this example, Jennifer needs validation from men in order to feel attractive and desired. Her relationships are not based on authentic interactions with other people, but rather on what she can acquire from that interaction.

For Andrea, romantic relationships were the sole focus of her life. She would look to one primary relationship to meet all the emotional needs that she was experiencing. Each consecutive relationship became her source of approval, validation, friendship, companionship, etc:

I don’t know what other people are like, but for me it tends to really sort of color the tone of my world. Instead of being like, ‘I’m [Andrea] and this is my life, and I do this, this, and this, oh, and I have this relationship’, it’s like the relationship sort of becomes the primary focus. I know that I tend to look to the relationship to be more than it could or should be. Like I don’t have one girlfriend that meets all of my girlfriend needs. But I expect my boyfriend to meet all of my girlfriend needs, and my boyfriend needs, and family needs, and, you know, all of that stuff.

When not in a romantic relationship, Andrea felt lost and undefined, though it was rare that she was without a partner. Her self-reported pattern, of getting into new relationships before having left the previous ones, allowed her to continue her self-serving behavior from one relationship to the next.

Sarah also describes using others for personal gain, though in her case that gain was acquired specifically through sexual encounters with men. She relays how her pattern in relationships helped her to define herself – in this case as Kali, an omniscient and powerful Goddess, known in Hindu and Tantric traditions as conveying “death, destruction, fear, and the consuming aspects of reality”:

I very much defined myself through my sexual encounters, and um, you know, was trying to get into this Kali archetype, where [I would] go around and sleep with as many guys as I wanted, being very distant and angry, and, you know, would just kind of be emotional, just kind of like that Kali does, in the sense that she cuts the person’s head off. As many men’s skulls as I could have around my neck, the better.

Sarah’s words portray a need for power and control, and this seems to be the motivation for her interactions. She needed to develop a sense of identity that was consistent with someone in control. Her interpersonal relationships subsequently became an opportunity for her to define herself, and reinforce her self-concept.

Julie also articulated a need to define herself through her relationships, and like Sarah expressed a need for power and control. Rather than seek identification through sexual encounters, however, Julie describes how she would acquire a sense of power by challenging people’s expectations of her:

I think my defining sense of self was really around challenging convention and people’s ideas about me... And I did it, I think, to have an experience of freedom. It sort of created a space around me. When I would shock people, they didn’t know– they couldn’t make many assumptions about me, right. So it sort of

created this space around me where I could, I guess it was to have a sense of power, really, to be honest. To keep people in suspense about what I would do, or what I would say, or who I was, and things like that. That sort of created a feeling of empowerment for me.

For Julie, her ability to go contrary to others' expectations of her was what afforded her a sense of power and identity. Empowerment came from experiencing herself as unpredictable and unknowable.

Through the looking glass: Others as mirrors of the self. In the paragraphs above, one starts to see how some of the participants were engaging in relationships for a purpose. Interactions with other people often afforded these women a sense of identity. By censoring and controlling the image that they presented to their external world, and then adapting that image according to the feedback they received, they were able to use others as mirrors of their selves. In the following section, a closer look will be taken at the participants' experiences of this process.

For Julie, the mirroring provided in her relationships was essential in maintaining the concept of herself as a deep, heart-felt and spiritual person. Yet this self-concept was not sufficient in and of itself; it required validation from her peers in order to be directly experienced. She elaborates in the following passage:

I really needed someone to constantly mirror me... I was genuinely interested in [friends'] issues and things that were going on with them, but more so to prove to them, and to myself, that not only was I a good person, but that I was deep and spiritual and, you know, that I had some insight into life, and that I was, I don't

know, maybe wise. I think I really needed people to know that. I needed myself to know that.

The motivation for Julie's interactions stemmed more from her need to be mirrored than it did from an authentic interest in and connection with others. In this case, the aspects of self that needed validating were pieces of Julie's narcissistic shell – the identity that she projected to the outside world: intelligent, caring, and spiritual. Even though Julie does possess those characteristics (as we will see in later sections), by artificially projecting them outwards, Julie strips them of their authenticity.

In an excerpt from Sarah's interview, we see a similar process. She had built an image of herself as a care-free, outgoing party-girl, whose worth was defined through the volume and vastness of social encounters. In her mind, more friends, more parties, and more sex meant more social validation – worthiness through adulation:

When I was the party girl... I was defined through my relationships with men.

Like if I could have a lot of boyfriends, and a lot of sexual encounters, that was what defined me. I very much saw myself as worthy through that – not worthy through like having any kind of academics. And worthy through friendships, like as long as I was at every party, then that was what I saw as being great.

This excerpt illustrates how, for Sarah, there was very little identification with herself internally. Her entire self-concept was constructed around the external validation that she received from others. If men saw her as being desirable, then she would experience herself as desirable. If friends invited her to multiple parties, then she experienced herself as worthy and valued. This was true of her family relationships as well:

And my relationships were very much based on, with my family, being like the good girl, so making sure that I was doing everything right, as a child, I did everything right... I took care of my mother very much... and then there was no one, so I remember coming home and having to take care of her quite a bit, and her mental state. And then with my Dad, I always wanted him to see me as more like my sister, so I wanted him seeing me as like the good girl, and being responsible, and I didn't cause any troubles and that kind of stuff.

Again, we see how aspects of self were projected outwards in an attempt to get some external mirroring. If she could portray the 'good-girl' in her family relationships, then she herself might be able to internalize the feeling of being good.

In Mary's relationships, she too projected certain characteristics outward so that they might be reflected back to her in a validating way: "I don't think I studied Political Science because I was actually interested in it. It was more about the reaction I knew I would get from other people. Political Science just seemed more intellectual, more academic. I wanted to be seen that way. I wanted people to know that I was a thinker." Again, Mary's actions were motivated by the reaction she wanted to receive from others; if they perceived her as being intellectual or academic, then she might be able to internalize those qualities.

Filling the void: Veiling the emptiness inside. Earlier in this paper, the concept of 'existential aloneness' was discussed – a sense of being totally cut off from all other beings in the world. A number of the participants alluded to feeling apprehension at the thought of being alone, and often used their relationships to buffer them from such

experiences. Andrea, for instance, describes how she would go from relationship to relationship without taking time for herself in between:

Well, my dominant relationships were *always* boyfriends. I always, always had a boyfriend. Always had a long-term relationship. I guess I call it 'serial-monogamy' ... I think I was always trying to create something that was going to last forever, or be with somebody that I could be with forever... and then, you know, I either got bored, or something happened... And so yeah, if things weren't going well in the relationship that I was in, there was always somebody else around that was interested, who was caring and listening and would start to be there for me emotionally. And then I would start to fall for that person, then fall out more with the person before. Trade out, trade up, and then go through the same thing.

If she were able to create a sense of security for herself, a sense of forever, she wouldn't have to experience the anxiety that comes with facing her own existential certainty – the certainty that although she may presently be in relationship with another being, that person can never fully experience the world as Andrea does, and can never therefore share her reality. This could explain why Andrea would get bored; with the novelty of a new relationship came renewed hope that someone would finally understand and share in her experience. Yet familiarity brought disillusionment and disappointment, and as time passed her anxiety would resurface and the cycle would begin again. She would find herself seeking solace in the hope that somebody else might fill that void within her.

Although she was married for a number of years, Emily also suffered feelings of loneliness and isolation. In her case, this is ultimately what prevented her from divorcing

her husband sooner: “I was terrified of being alone. He had been a part of my life for so long, and I already felt lonely. It was difficult to imagine how much lonelier I would feel if he were gone.” In those moments of total aloneness, Emily mistakenly believed that the source of loneliness could only be alleviated by other people. She believed that if she left her husband, the sense of emotional isolation would increase.

Leah described a similar belief, and entered into relational patterns like Andrea’s; she would seek out encounters with men believing that such encounters would alleviate the emptiness she felt within herself:

There was always just this hole. I could feel it, like it was something real inside my chest. I would get so anxious, you know, like I had to escape it. And with men – I’m not sure where that belief came from, but I always felt like they could take it away, like intimacy would take it away. Of course I didn’t know how to get that. I guess at that age I thought sex *was* intimacy.

However, like the other women, Leah realized that these encounters only deepened her sense of isolation. Perhaps she acquired moments of intimacy, but they usually proved brief and unsatisfying. She was generally left with a sensation that she had been used and taken advantage of. Ultimately, the profound sense of emptiness remained.

Punishing everyone involved. For some of the women, relationships served as a means of self-abuse. A number of the co-researchers described overwhelming feelings of self-hate and self-loathing. The relationships that they engaged in were ones that were largely abusive – physically, emotionally, psychologically, or sexually. Though they may not have always consciously chosen such relationships, most of the women described feeling as though they didn’t deserve anything more.

Take Jennifer, for example, who described having reciprocally abusive relations with the men in her life:

It was just ugly. I used them and they used me, and it was just so disrespectful and undignified and humiliating. And I abused myself with it. I mean, I put myself with men and in situations that I knew weren't safe, where I knew that I wasn't gonna be respected, and I did it anyways. Just, you know, no dignity in my relationships with people. And so I guess I didn't have any dignity in my relationships with people in terms of how they treated me, and I tried to strip the dignity from the people I was in relationships with, you know. So, it was both, it was both sides. It was, you know, I was really nasty, and I was treated really nasty.

Because of the way she felt about herself, and because of the way that she treated other people, Jennifer didn't feel that she deserved any respect. Her encounters almost served as a means of inflicting punishment on herself for all her perceived faults and shortcomings.

Not only could relationships be used to inflict punishment on oneself, they could also be used to inflict punishment on others. Some of the women described patterns of vengefulness in their relationships. It's as though they had experienced the trauma of abuse or disappointment, and wanted to prevent having a similar experience. They would therefore lash out at the people around them. The following is an excerpt from Sarah's interview:

I remember I had this attitude, I'm gonna fuck you before you fuck me, that kind of thing. I'll hurt you before you hurt me, you know... I would directly punish

you, and you would know it. Like I would punish you, like I would do, whether it was, I would do two things. I would go one way or the other. Either I would fucking tear your head off, and do it in front of people so that you're very embarrassed. And I was very manipulative. I could get people on my side against another person quite easily, or I would give you the silent treatment, and I would tell others to ignore you. And I would intimidate the others so that if they did try and be friends with you or something like that, then I would intimidate them and they wouldn't want to. So it was very mean, eh? But oh well, that's the way it went.

In this example, Sarah's maliciousness is quite palpable. She expressed her need to protect herself by hurting others. In a sense, she would punish people for the emotional suffering inflicted on her in the past. It didn't matter if the person she was punishing was the one who had committed the indiscretion against her; it just mattered that somebody pay for the crime.

Jennifer also described a lack of regard in her dealings with other people, though her interactions didn't seem to have the same emotional intensity of Sarah's. In Jennifer's case, she simply was not cognizant of any moral obligation to other people:

I truly didn't even really have the capacity to care about anybody. I might have fleeting, you know, pangs of guilt, remorse, regret, but mostly it was only when it was related to consequences. Um, and I remember even thinking at times, like 'I think I'm a psychopath. Like, I really don't care.' Knowing there should be things I should react to or care about that I just simply didn't, at all.

In other words, Jennifer was unable to care about the feelings of the people in her life. Her actions were generally motivated by self-preservation, and the only time she felt remorseful for how she treated people was when she experienced consequences that were inconvenient or painful to herself.

Stage 2. Looking in the Mirror: Facing What We've Become

In the second stage of the journey, the women described undergoing a more conscious process of change. At this stage, they were starting to see that transformation was necessary, and they were taking the first steps on the path. As they gradually began to awaken, the women began recognizing the difference between their 'identity' and their true self. This stage, then, represented acquainting themselves with their inner nature.

A Moment of Truth: Recognizing the Need for Change

All of the women interviewed identified specific events or phases in their life that marked the beginning of their journey towards wholeness. Several of the women described a dramatic and profound experience that thrust them into conscious awareness of the journey, while the others relayed a more gradual and evolving awakening.

Recovering from addiction was usually described in terms of the former process. Four of the women interviewed described themselves as being in recovery from drug and/or alcohol dependence. In these cases, transformation began quite suddenly and dynamically, and was usually preceded by a period of deep dark desperation – the expanse of which was articulately expressed by Jennifer in the following passage:

Well, my experience of myself before going through this transformation was just dark. I mean, I didn't have any hope, and I certainly didn't have any faith. And I didn't feel loveable, and I didn't feel forgivable, and I was angry, and the hate I

felt towards myself – I certainly lashed out at other people, like made others wear that. I acted all of that out by hurting myself in destructive relationships, destructive drinking, destructive sex, uh, destructive ways of treating my body, seeing my body. I had this um, just really broken and shattered view of myself, you know, and I don't believe really, as I look back, that any of that perception I had of myself was grounded in reality. I just feel like my spirit was broken, and I felt so empty and so lost, and I was searching, and at some point I gave up. I gave up searching, and I gave up trying to feel better or feel whole, and I just let that darkness consume me, and then it just felt like that's all I was. When I look back at when it all started, I was just a little girl, you know. I was just a thirteen-year-old kid who was depressed, and lonely, and afraid, and didn't feel like I fit, and felt ugly, and scrawny, and stupid, and embarrassed, you know. And so I was on this relentless search to get away from that. And I couldn't find it anywhere. And then the only thing that seemed to take it away was guys, and drinking and drugging, and anger. And then I don't really know when it happened that I just totally gave into it, and it was like the more I did those things, the worse I felt, and the harder it was to come back, and I just stopped trying to come back from it. I stopped trying to – I just stopped trying at all. And then my only out was that I *wanted* to be a slut, and I *wanted* to be angry, and I *wanted* to hate, and I *wanted* to be a drunk, and I wanted to fuck up my life – that's what I believed. That was like, I mean, really, who wants *that*? Who wants that? But in the insanity, for me, that was the only way I could make sense of it: I must want it. Like, who does this to their life?

What Jennifer is describing here is commonly referred to in recovery terminology as the ‘bottom’ that one experiences prior to their involvement in the recovery process. In her case, the bottom not only represented the dwindling away of her personal relationships and material belongings, it also signified a kind of spiritual bankruptcy. Her faith in any sort of higher power, or anything at all for that matter, had eroded to nothing, and her sense of self-loathing consumed her. As she describes in the passage, her experience of the world had become so normalized for her that she eventually had to alter her value system in order to make it congruent with her reality: “As my reality changed, I shifted my beliefs and my values to match my reality, right.”

It seems that only when she had no hope left whatsoever, and nothing left to lose, did Jennifer acquire the courage and willingness that it takes to embark on a journey towards wholeness.

Andrea describes a similar process occurring for her, though her description seems to highlight the source of her self-hate and shame:

It was just really ugly behaviour. I mean, I was actually in a long-term relationship with somebody that I really dearly loved, and I was just ruining that relationship. That’s what got me in, you know, the first time... Guilt and shame over my actions, not only when I was drinking... it’s like, I heard somebody bring it up in an [AA] meeting, that it’s like, when I started drinking, all of these things that I would never do sober, and then after a time, it’s like, well, I’ve already done it. So then even when I’m sober, my behaviour is not on par with my moral standards, or what I would want them to be. It’s just like your standards kind of slip, after you’ve already disappointed yourself so much, you know.

For Andrea, the bottom came when she had failed to uphold her own moral standards for herself. Behaviourally, she was crossing lines while drinking, which would cause her to feel guilt and remorse, which led to more drinking in order to cope with her feelings, which ultimately resulted in the crossing of more lines. The downward spiral intensified for Andrea until she too reached a breaking point and came face-to-face with her reality. The truth of what she was doing to herself afforded her the motivation to do something about her life, and so began her journey of transformation.

Mary is another co-researcher who describes being in recovery from alcohol dependence. While her decision to enter sobriety marked the commencement of her transformational journey, she describes it as but a bare beginning: “It started with sobriety... That was like ‘transformation 101’ – was sobriety. It was making a choice to not have drugs or alcohol in my life, to reinforce my emotional madness.” For Mary, the pain and suffering of active addiction was of a slightly different nature. As she mentioned above, drugs and alcohol reinforced her “emotional madness”, and it was this emotional madness that ultimately drove her to seek help for her addiction. In order to illuminate that madness, Mary was asked to describe herself before undergoing any sort of transformational process. She responded with the following:

Totally closed. The expression I like the most is, ‘I could not see past the end of my own nose’. I was completely cerebral-internal. I had many many dialogues happening in my head at one time. Most of them weren’t my own, almost *none* of them were my own inner voice. Well I only have one inner voice, and I like squashed that as much as possible. And they were completely based on projecting the ideas and opinions and feelings of others. And it was *completely* cerebral.

None of this information was based on intelligent, and/or sensory or emotional connection with another individual. It was one hundred percent based on what was happening in my pain-body, basically, on my insides. I was entirely closed off to the exterior world; I was a hundred percent internal. Yeah, just a hundred percent – that describes it all right there.

The only way that Mary was able to temporarily dull the internal dialogue was with drugs and alcohol, which eventually just led to more internal breakdown. Medical emergencies finally brought Mary to a hospital where she was advised to stop drinking and using altogether. It was at this stage that Mary sought help for her addiction – in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as with a personal therapist. And so her journey into awakening began.

For several of the co-researchers, dealing with drug and alcohol addiction wasn't the precipitating force for their transformation. While their journeys seemed to be more gradual and evolving, these women were still able to pinpoint a moment in time, or an event, that sparked some kind of conscious awakening within their selves. For Emily, that moment came with the dissolution of her marriage – a relationship that she'd been in for nine years:

We started going steady when I was fifteen, so when we split up at 24, I was just like, who am I? I was really kinda trying to figure out who I am, and looking at who did I want to be, and moving towards who I wanted to be. That was sort of the intention in the transformation, and then some of it was, you know, I was kicking and screaming, and some of it was just me setting my intention, and going with the flow, and the river pushing me along, you know.

Up until Emily separated from her husband, she had suppressed any desire for self-development in favor of the status quo. Her marriage served as the sole foundation for her life and her identity. Yet in order to move forward, she had to face the reality of how she was living: in complete and utter denial of herself and her needs. Once she realized this fact, Emily became willing to move ahead on her journey.

Looking more closely at the beginning of the transformational journey, one begins to see that most women were able to identify a particular moment in time that qualified as the first instance where they were consciously aware of their own process. It's as though they had woken up from a dream-like state to one where they were cognizant of life as an interactive process. They recognized themselves as slaves to their unconscious minds and the patterns that they had created in their lives. But more than that, they recognized the opportunity for change and their ability to grow. In this moment of awakening, the women became aware of themselves as being on a journey of transformation, though they might not have recognized it as such at the time.

The Light Bulb Goes Off: Choosing the Path of Transformation

One woman in particular pinpointed a moment that marked a shift in her conscious perception of the journey. Mary describes reading the *Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*: “That moment gave me insight into how someone else has experiences of transformation. And that was the first time that those words, transformation and transcendence were so powerful for my mind, and I had to start asking questions about them... I started to wonder if this was like a commonly shared experience.” While reading someone else's account of transformation, Mary was struck with a spark of self-reflective insight. She became conscious of how she too was on a

transformative journey, and how that knowledge in and of itself was enough to perpetuate a gradual awakening within her.

Sarah's moment of insight came while she was walking in downtown Toronto. The drastic contrast between her internal and external realities created a split in her consciousness:

It was a very gloomy, gloomy day. And I was wearing this very bright dress, and I really could see the illusion, the split, of me projecting this image of a happy-go-lucky, carefree, gypsy kinda girl, out to the world, where inside I was just this miserable, heartache, angry, you know, deprecated person, like just this hateful person. And I really could see the split. And I remember that dress was like the *one thing*. I just really felt it, and I was just in that moment, I was like, what am I— like it was just really, it was very— I remember I sat down. It was raining, and I sat down on a park bench and I just cried. Like I could just feel all my heartaches come through at that moment.

In this case, the awakening came with the realization that the image she was projecting to the outer world did not match her internal experience of self. It's almost as though the dress itself was a mirror to Sarah of her incongruence – a bright dress on a gloomy day. By recognizing and acknowledging her dissonance, Sarah surrendered to her inner truth, and subsequently took the first steps on the path of transformation.

Julie discussed how she had always felt a subtle yearning for the spiritual dimension. She had surrounded herself with like-minded individuals since the time she was a child, and often found herself seeking a greater understanding of the world, particularly those aspects of the world that related to psychological and spiritual healing.

For her, awakening to the process of transformation occurred during her senior year of high school:

I started to meditate and do Yoga that year, and something just totally clicked in me and I realized that I really have the ability to heal and transform. And I just needed to seek, and understand, and learn, and incorporate the tools that would enable me to do that. So yeah, it really started then, and I took it really seriously for about eight years, like really seriously, too seriously, and I took myself too seriously. But yeah, so since then, that's when it started. I think that's when I really kicked it into gear.

As we can see, Julie's transformation commenced when she began to engage in self-reflective processes. Yoga and meditation afforded her the insight that she needed to begin her process.

Emily also talks about having a moment of realization. In her case, the journey began after spending years in spiritual darkness, penetrated only by drugs, alcohol, and her own incessant suffering. For her, the shift was subtle yet powerful. She describes becoming more conscious of the world around her and her participation in it:

I had no idea how Spirit was gonna move me, or what was gonna happen at all, but it was three years of drinking and using, and then I got sober. And then it was much more, like, becoming conscious in the world. And that was sort of the transformation: to be conscious, and to make all those choices, and set my intentions at a different level. It wasn't an unconscious level anymore, it was a conscious choice. It was all about choice, and what do I want, and what's right.

So again, it is as though a spark of conscious awareness had entered this participant's life. She could no longer be an unconscious participant on the journey, but had to actively engage in the world around her. She was awakening to the reality of her existence, and the reality of her role in existence.

An Authentic Encounter with Self

For these women to embark on their respective journeys of transformation, each one described having to come face-to-face with the painful reality of who and what they had become. For a lot of women, living an unawakened existence meant engaging in behaviors that weren't always consistent with their moral standards. In order to psychologically buffer themselves from the truth, they would rationalize or justify their behaviours and attitudes, and thereby allow themselves to continue living an inauthentic life.

However, as we saw above, that initial spark of realization often provided the insight that motivated a journey towards wholeness. For an instant, they saw through the illusions that served as the structural support for their entire belief systems, and subsequently began analyzing the rest of their personal 'truths'. It was in this analysis that these women began an honest appraisal of who they had become. In the following passage, Jennifer elaborates how this process evolved in her life:

The journey began – you know, the journey of this transformation, becoming the woman I am today – with facing who I became, really honestly and really truthfully. And then that journey continued through continued honesty and renewed faith, beginning to believe in the possibility of a new way of thinking and a new way of being. And then that, just the bare beginning of a belief, started to

change my being, and then that bare beginning gave me, you know, the hope and the faith to keep taking that path and the change just kept occurring. It kept getting deeper and greater. And the deeper that change became, the more committed to that transformation I became.

The first step in Jennifer's journey was taking a truthful look at herself and the person she had become. This step alone, though painful, granted her enough insight to realize the possibility for change. The more steps that Jennifer took on her journey, the more she realized that the process itself was what would liberate her from suffering.

Sarah also experienced a moment at the beginning of her journey where she needed to honestly face the reality of who she had become. Though for Sarah, this moment was initiated by the gut-wrenching honesty provided by one of her professors at university. Sarah described how during a consultation with this professor, she was confronting him about the content of his lectures:

I was just really angry and I was 'blah, blah, blah,' and I was angry at him, and I was saying, you know, you're a fucking idiot, and about lectures and stuff like that. And he wasn't taking it, right. And then he looked at me, and he goes, 'You're pathetic!' and I was like, 'Yes – I – am'. And that was just– it like shut everything, it was like someone had just totally woken me up. It was like that's the words I had been waiting for. And I don't know. It was just, I stopped dead in my tracks. I stopped, in that moment, I wasn't angry. I was just like, yes I am, yes I am. I could so see the pathetic-ness of it– we laugh our asses off about it now – but I could really see it, you know.

So in that moment, Sarah was confronted with the reality of how she was operating in her life. She described feeling as if someone had ‘woken her up’. From this moment onward, she had acquired a different perspective on life, on herself, and on the journey. In her own words, Sarah had encountered “the truth”.

Recognizing the Essential Self

At some point in their transformational journeys, each of these women described becoming more and more conscious of how inadequate and inaccurate their sense of self was. Prior to embarking on a journey of transformation, most women identified themselves with various aspects of their physical reality. Mary, for instance, perceived her ‘self’ to be intricately tied to her physical body; Andrea, Emily, and Leah all saw themselves as being a direct product of the relationships that they inhabited; Jennifer and Julie defined themselves in terms of their academic and professional accomplishments; and Sarah’s sense of self was dependent on the mirroring that she received from the people she interacted with (i.e. if they perceived her as being aggressive and dominant, then she experienced herself as such). At various stages in their journeys, however, each of these women came to understand a different sense of self – that part of the self that is nameless and unchanging. In essence, they were actually transcending their concepts of ‘self’ and coming to recognize the truth of who and what they were.

In Mary’s case, she came to experience herself as something much more profound than the traditional definitions and misinterpretations of self (i.e. ‘I am defined by my body’; ‘I am defined by my mind’; ‘I am defined by my belongings’; ‘I am defined by my education’; ‘I am defined by my career’; ‘I am defined by the children that I raise’; etc.). Mary referred to her newfound conception as her “essential self”:

My essential self is the eternal aspect of my spirit – the part of me that has had this human experience before, and has probably experienced other forms as well. Aspects of my essential self are parts that are alive, that are animated by my human form, like my inner knowing. My inner knowing means the levels of consciousness that my human form gives it. But my human form is not my consciousness. It's just a vessel. And my consciousness is not my essential self. Because what about people who don't have consciousness?

It's evident from Mary's description of her essential self that this concept is not derived from the physical manifestations of Being. In other words, her definition does not incorporate what kind of car she drives, or how much money she makes in a year. Instead, she refers to something much more subtle, something that animates the human form. And as she describes, it cannot simply be 'consciousness', because people who are not conscious (such as individuals who might be asleep, or even in a coma) still possess this essential self.

Sarah described how a similar understanding emerged early on in her journey. She refers to her previous conceptions of self as the "illusions" that she would "grab onto", whereas the essential self, in her case, was the ever-present and ever-pervasive awareness that permeated each moment. In the following passage, Sarah described her reaction to learning about various principles and characteristics of the transformational journey:

And I was like, god, this makes sense. This is what life is about. This is it. And I just, especially like that choice-less awareness, and um, not having to grab onto the illusions that we've created, or that, you know, were created for us in society

that we chose to grab onto. And just that choice-less awareness in each moment, you know, that ‘no choice, no preference’ that Krishnamurti talks about. And that made so much sense to me. And so, for a lot of years I would just think about that all the time. No choice, no preference. No choice, no preference. And, I don’t know, it would just put everything into perspective. You could see the effortlessness, and we would talk about just surrendering to that, and how these people, you walk around, and people busy their lives, and you think that busyness and the chaos in your head is what makes you who you are, and then realizing that it’s not. Your head is not who you are. You know, you’re much more than that.

As we can see, a crucial moment in Sarah’s journey was the moment she realized that she is not her thoughts. Thoughts are bound to arise and exist in the mind; just as the heart’s biological function is to beat and circulate oxygen-rich blood through the body, so the brain’s biological function is to undergo cognitive functions. Yet Sarah realized an important distinction between thinking and becoming identified with her thoughts. Inherent in that distinction is the reality of the essential self. In the above example, the essential self is experienced as unattached awareness. This awareness is usually overlooked because it is drowned in the content of an overactive mind, and that content gets mistakenly identified as the ‘self’. Whereas according to Sarah, the essential self is actually the ground for all experiencing: that which is doing the identifying.

Stage 3. Awakening to the True Self: Moving Beyond the Masks

In the third stage of the journey, these women had experienced a distinct encounter with their true nature. The next phase of development was learning how to

deepen their awareness of essence, and to integrate this essence into their daily living. The women described the following themes as being necessary components for deepening their journey.

Developing a Relationship with a Higher Power

Almost all of the women interviewed talked about a process in which they came to believe in something greater than themselves. Some used the term ‘higher power’, while others talked about ‘spirit’, or ‘creative intelligence’. Regardless of the terminology used, each one articulated how essential it was to develop a relationship with this entity.

Jennifer, for instance, discussed how critical it was for her to build a concept of what a higher power looked like:

It was unconditionally loving, and not harsh, and always there, you know, like always, *always* there no matter what I did, no matter what I thought, no matter what I felt, no matter, no matter what. You know, defining that a little bit more for myself, that this higher power of mine was forgiving and kind, and patient and tolerant of me, and honest and accepting, all of those things.

Defining a higher power in such a way was truly profound for Jennifer, because until that moment, she had felt so undeserving of those qualities in human beings. But God, on the other hand, is God – an entity capable of the most benevolent characteristics. By creating and adopting this concept of a higher power, Julie accomplished two things: 1) she was able to assume a more forgiving attitude towards herself, and 2) she acquired a model for the kind of person she wanted to be in this life. She continues:

I think the relationship with my higher power is central, because if I don't have that, I don't have the capacity to have relationships with other people, to maintain sobriety, to grow as a human being. It's my inspiration, it's my strength, it's my, it's what gives me the courage, the perseverance, it's what picks me up to come up a little higher when I just feel like I can't.

The relationship with God ultimately serves as a foundation for the rest of Jennifer's life. She can look to her higher power as a source of inspiration and motivation, as well as for an example of the kind of qualities she wants to embody herself.

During Emily's interview, the concept of a higher power was constantly alluded to. It seems that once she undertook a journey of transformation, God served as her guide and director, offering subtle messages and directions to encourage her on her path. An example of this actually emerged during my interview with Emily. At one point, she glanced up and noticed her birth date etched into a mural on the coffee shop wall. To her, this was one of those small coincidences that was not really a coincidence at all. It was a gentle reassurance from her creator that she was right where she needed to be, doing whatever it was she needed to be doing. Emily elaborates in the following passage:

I've had a dark night of the soul, where I wondered if I was really on the path that I'm supposed to be on. And, you know, what is God's will for me? Those are painful struggles for me. And most of my life, I love when I can go someplace, like sitting here, looking at that, seeing my birthday, March 6th, it's just like a sign from the universe, like huh, I'm in the right place. Little things like that let me know that I'm in the right place, I'm on the right path. And if I don't get signs like that, then I get scared, and I get really concerned about am I in the right

place? And what's going on here? And how can I, I feel lost, and really need the confirmation that I'm on the right path.

It is evident from Emily's words that the relationship with God is a central component in her spiritual quest. Without a conscious contact with her higher power, Emily begins to feel lost and confused, and loses her sense of the journey itself.

Learning to Let Go: Surrendering Fear and Growing in Faith

Each of the participants, in some form or another, touched on the subject of fear as it applied to their journey of transformation. For these participants, overcoming fear was an integral part of the process, and often facilitated profound shifts in their Being. In one excerpt, Jennifer articulately describes how in early recovery, she developed a very rigid approach to her relationships, largely out of fear:

When I first sobered up, I was in a relationship with my husband – before we were married, like in our early relationship – and I was taking stands all the time, about this or that you know. Like I had my rights, and I was never gonna find myself where I was before. So I didn't pick my battles, I battled everything because I was so afraid, right. Like I'm never gonna feel like I used to. Like I'm never gonna let somebody take advantage, I'm never gonna let somebody boss me around or disrespect me, I'm never gonna do this, I'm never gonna do that. So, you know, I had a friend say to me one time, like, there's a difference between being assertive and being a bitch, and you're being a bitch.

In essence, Jennifer was fearful of being treated the same way she had been in the past. All of her reactions to her partner were born from her anxiety, rather than an authentic interaction between two people. She goes on to elaborate where her fears originated:

I had such a hard time getting that, because then I'm like, well, how do you stand up for yourself? How do you, you know, represent yourself then without just digging your heels in? And, I guess, it's been about growing in faith, because all of that was about fear. And I was trying to get somewhere I just wasn't yet, and trying to be somebody I just wasn't yet. And so I had this vision of the woman I wanted to be, and I was trying to be her from a really fearful place, and of course, I just found myself getting lost, which is what I was trying to avoid in the first place.

Ultimately, reacting to her fears drove Jennifer to the places she was trying to avoid. It was actually a process of surrendering – developing and honing faith in the process itself – that liberated her from the torment of her own behaviours. She expands in the following paragraph:

And it's been about growing in faith – back to real simplicity, like underneath my self-will is fear, just so much fear. And as the faith has grown and the fear has lessened, the less I've had to control it, and the less I've had to try and force myself to be a certain someone. I've found the freedom to just be. Not all the time, but a heck of a lot more. So that's like more faith and more honesty. And more honesty about all those motives, you know, and more honesty about all the fear, and then more faith, you know, right back to the real basics of what started that journey for me, and that belief and that hope and I was trying to be more like this higher power of mine, and how was any of that like him?

Ultimately, Jennifer describes how in developing faith, she was able to overcome her fears. She identified fear as being a quality governed by self-will, rather than the will of

her higher power, and for Jennifer, turning her will over to a higher power was of the utmost relevance to her transformational journey.

Julie also discussed having to overcome fear in her transformational journey. In her case, however, it was not her behaviours that were driven by fear, but her avoidance of certain situations: “I hadn’t had experience with independence, both financially and emotionally. And what happened for me was that I threw myself into independence, kicking and screaming the whole way.” For example, Julie went from being financially dependent on her parents to being entirely self-supporting in a very short period of time. Even though she saw herself as being “childish” in many ways, Julie challenged herself to enter a professional field that demanded maturity and a willingness to undergo continued personal and professional development. In the end, acting in spite of fears allowed Julie to sharpen the skills that would become her greatest asset: “My areas of perceived weakness have become, I cherish them so much now, because I look at how, in spite of those weaknesses, I have been able to achieve all of the things I thought I was weak at, and sort of go above and beyond.” Facing fear, or experiencing fear and acting in spite of it, granted Julie faith in her ability to overcome obstacles.

Working Through and Including

Another prevalent theme that surfaced in several of the interviews was the process of working through and including. As women transitioned from one stage of the journey to the next, they seemed to integrate each stage into their being, rather than jump immediately from one stage to the next. As their awareness grew, their essential selves seemed to expand and envelop previous aspects of themselves. One way that the journey of transformation might falsely be conceptualized is like this: the journey is a ladder that

extends vertically towards the sky, and the subject undergoing the journey is but a small circle that must hop from one rung of the ladder to the next. In order to progress, that circle must establish itself on its present rung, and then make a quantum leap to a more advanced rung. According to those interviewed in this study, however, the process of transformation might more adequately be described as follows: the journey is a series of concentric spheres, each one embedded in the last, and the subject undergoing the journey is a small pulsating mass in the middle of it. As the journey progresses, that mass grows (sometimes unevenly), and encompasses various stages in a transcending pattern. But instead of definitively moving on from the previous stage, the mass tends to include those previous stages as it gets bigger. In this fashion, different aspects of the journey are integrated into awareness – a much more holistic understanding of the journey, at least from these women’s experiences.

Take Julie, for instance, who has undergone a number of significant shifts in her being since embarking on this journey:

I’ve found that with each shift that takes place in my life, sort of each stepping stone and learning experience and growth, there’s this theme for me of transcendence – transcending what once was, potentially an issue or a conflict or whatever, and moving, how do I say this, not just getting over it, but actually transcending it and incorporating it into myself in a harmonious way. So that’s sort of what the word transformation means for me – through transcending, being able to integrate and incorporate things that once perhaps I wanted to reject, or even that bothered me or whatever.

This excerpt illustrates the conception mentioned above. Rather than seeing the journey as a series of linear and progressive stages, Julie perceives herself to be expanding and incorporating various aspects of the journey into her understanding and awareness.

Another woman relayed an example of this process, though she did not directly articulate it as such. During Sarah's interview, some of the stories she told exemplified various themes that the other women alluded to. Sarah describes having to confront her relationships with men. She had, at one point in time, insisted on attending a men's group in order to work through some key transformational issues. Becoming aware of her issues meant at first utilizing old patterns before she was able to work them through. She elaborates:

I walked into a men's group to work on my sex gig... So that was interesting in itself because I very much created that, because I came in and I could do more of like a Kali kind of wild woman archetype. And when you're doing transformational work, that energy has a lot of appeal, right. And it especially has a lot of appeal to men, and so I very much went in and just kept my old gig going. Ironically, the desire to work on her sex gig was not enough in and of itself to help Sarah transcend her patterns in relationships. Yet by attending the group, she received the necessary mirroring to gain some insight into herself:

And then it got squashed, you know, like it got squashed because they all started to pick up on it, and they stopped playing by it. And I got sick of it. And I started seeing the misery in it, because these were people that I very much enjoyed having, I very much enjoyed being friends with, and I had a connection with, but then I was like, 'Oh fuck! I don't want to have sex with them'. But that was the

only way that I knew how to connect with men, so that's what I would do, right. I would just have sex, and then after a while, I got very sad again about, you know, I want to connect with myself, I'm de-selfing by doing this, I'm not staying true to myself, and so they stopped it, I stopped it. I saw the big facade in that.

Sarah goes on to describe an incident in which the reality of her patterns became totally evident to her. She can actually pinpoint the moment where she recognized the suffering of her interactions. Experiencing that suffering brought Sarah to a point of acceptance and transcendence, where she was then able to let go of her gig and embrace her essential self:

I actually left a group one day. I became very panic-stricken outside my house and couldn't actually leave my car for about an hour, so I couldn't move any part of my body because I realized that, in that moment, that I just, it was like an ego death. And I totally— I realized the facade of that, and I saw the whole misery. It was like all of existence, all of that misery, just came washing through me, all in that moment outside of my house, and I couldn't move. Like I was immobile. And it was just, I was panic-stricken, because I was aware of the facade and the illusion, and the harmfulness of it, and then for a couple days I was pretty screwed up there. But actually, it was just having to go through that, right, like that was the transformation, that was the moment. Now I have beautiful relationships with men, and not having to, none of them are based on sex, and I don't even like to. I mean, yeah, we'll joke about stuff like that, and we'll 'blah blah blah', but I'm just so much— it's not a need.

The last few sentences in this excerpt illustrate Sarah's ability to transcend and include the lessons brought out in her experience. Rather than move from one discrete stage to the next, Sarah was able to consciously expand into greater awareness and understanding.

Emily is another participant who described going through a process of transcending various aspects of her journey. She discussed how at different times, she would become aware of her attachments to certain behaviours, people, or situations. Ultimately, when Emily was ready, these attachments were transformed, and she was able to accommodate the experience into her being:

When I got sober, I stopped hanging out with my drug dealer, and I stopped hanging out with people in bars. And then, after that, I stopped smoking cigarettes a year later, and then I stopped hanging out with people who smoked. And then I stopped debting, so I stopped hanging out with people who shopped. It was just like I kept going through these stages of my personal growth process, where, what would happen was, all the people that were in my life at that time, somehow I felt like I outgrew them, or I changed and we didn't have the same things in common anymore. My values shifted but theirs hadn't, and so I found myself moving away from them.

While using, smoking, and spending money had provided comfort and relief to Emily in the past, she had reached a point in her journey where they were no longer necessary, and were actually stunting her spiritual growth. In recognizing that, she was able to give them up or transcend them. In doing so, Emily realized the necessity of changing her social networks so that she might have a better chance of staying on her intended path. However, in the next passage, one can see how she carried the memories of her past

associations into her new life, and would revisit the lessons that she learned along the way:

I often have gone through periods of grief, where I feel like I've had to let go of different people in my life because I'm still growing and they're, I don't know. It's not that they're not growing, but it's, we head in different directions, right. And so I've had a lot of grief about that, and a lot of loss.

Emily gives an example of how she had been disconnected from her family for a period of ten years, only to reconnect with them further on in her journey. The distance was necessary for Emily to redefine her values and beliefs, but was breached once she felt that the foundation of her spirituality was unshakable, even by those who she had had unhealthy associations with in the past. Hence Emily had managed to transcend and include those aspects of the journey that challenged her in the past.

The Relationship as a Vehicle for Healing and Growth

Another theme that arose in several of the interviews was the concept of healing through relationships. Many of the women discussed needing the care and support of others, especially early on in their journey. Leah, for instance, had grown up in an abusive household and had limited experience of being totally accepted for who and what she was. It wasn't until she began her relationship with her spouse that she truly felt capable of embracing her essential self:

It's interesting. I always thought that I had to learn how to be by myself before I could, um, learn how to be in a relationship. I thought I needed to heal all these wounds – the abuse, the neglect. But it's actually been in my marriage that those

things have been healed. Like the unconditional love and commitment from my husband. I'm able to relax into that, you know.

In this case, Leah's relationship with her husband provided her the sense of security and acceptance that she needed in order to heal and grow in her journey.

Jennifer cited a similar experience with unconditional acceptance, though in her case it was not in her relationship with a partner. While Jennifer was in treatment for her drug and alcohol dependency, she was in contact with a number of other clients and counsellors. She described how the atmosphere that they provided actually enabled her to progress in her recovery. In the following passage, Jennifer explained how she managed to make those seemingly impossible first steps on a life-long journey:

Well initially it was relying on other people, because I didn't have it in me, like I didn't have anything else, so I just really had to put my faith in other people. And it was these really amazing people. Like, these were people that didn't want anything from me, they didn't need me for anything, didn't expect anything. These people that knew that I had been a monster at points in my life, and were still there. So that was such a huge piece. You know, at times when I could barely get words out of my mouth, I'd look up into these loving eyes. I'd just think, okay, really if you knew what I was about to say, you wouldn't be looking at me like that, you know. Like just these incredible people, um, who held me accountable but loved me, and the other piece was, loved me and told me their own story, of how they overcame being monsters themselves.

In this case, two important aspects of the relationship are relevant: 1) the unconditional love and acceptance that Jennifer received from those around her, and 2) the ability to relate to those people and identify a way of transforming herself into a better person.

For Sarah, relating to others was also a pertinent aspect of the journey, but for different reasons. In most of her relationships, Sarah felt different or unique to everybody else, and that prevented her from authentically connecting with the people around her. In the following passage, she relays the experience of recognizing herself in other people, and the transformation that that effected:

Isn't it ironic when you hear somebody else's stuff, and you're like, 'Oh shit, are you talking about me?' And that's always interesting, right? I mean, you think about that in relationships, and that's always interesting, cause we always think it's just our own shit, right, and that nobody else has experienced it like I have, and then you realize, you talk to someone else, and you're like, oh god. Wait, I'm not as unique as what I thought I was? That's been a total transformation as well.

These moments of realization – that she is not unique – actually facilitated the ego-deconstruction necessary for Sarah to get more in touch with her essential self. Once she broke through her attachment to 'being different', Sarah was able to settle more into her essence and connect with people from a place of authenticity.

Learning to be Alone

Even though relationships were integral to these women's processes of transformation, so too was confronting the reality of their aloneness in the world. Prior to

starting their transformation, some of the participants talked about their fear of being alone in a physical sense. In many cases, they avoided such situations altogether. Yet as their journeys progressed, and they became more in tune with their essential selves and their higher powers, several of these women describe actually seeking out aloneness as part of their spiritual journey. It seems like in being alone, they were able to disconnect from many of their physical attachments to existence, and instead turn inward to deepen their connection with self.

This is, in fact, why Andrea left Kansas in the first place. Throughout her interview, Andrea articulated how enmeshed she had been with her social network back home. While she perceived those connections with friends and family as being positive, and a key support in her recovery, she also felt like something was lacking internally. She recognized that those connections often kept her distracted from her inner world, and did not offer her the spiritual satisfaction she longed for. She elaborates:

You know, that's part of actually why I came here, because I feel like my extroverted nature and my relationships with others have, in the past, I mean at points I have felt like they have effectively cut me off from my relationship with myself and my higher power because I put all of my energy outwards. Part of why I wanted to come to Korea was because I knew that it would force me to be alone, and to be, you know, look inside for that untapped inner resource.

Moving to Korea did provide Andrea with many opportunities to be alone, though they were not always what she expected. She relayed moments of sadness, desperation, and frustration. Yet the moment that Andrea realized she could sit in those emotions, face them, and eventually come out of them – without the aid of any social network – was a

defining moment in her journey. She had tapped into that inner resource, and learned that aloneness is not only okay, but often necessary for spiritual development.

Sarah also describes a confrontation with her own aloneness in the world, except in her case it was not by choice. During one of the men's groups that she attended, Sarah had had a confrontation with the other members. They had pointed out qualities in her which, at the time, Sarah did not want to face. Yet the experience in itself provided her with an important recognition about the quality of her existence. She elaborates:

I remember I left group one day, and I was like, 'fuck you guys all', and 'blah blah blah'. I went home and I could just feel the total aloneness of it, and it was a double-sided aloneness, right. It was a loneliness in the sense of I just left people that I really care about, and I'm able to care about, and I want to care about, and then, um, and then there was this aloneness with myself, and just really seeing that, you know, relationships are great, but in the end, there's you. And you need to be okay with your own aloneness before you can even be okay with starting to have someone else in your life.

What Sarah is describing is the need to recognize one's existential truth: no matter how connected people are to other individuals in the world, they are still ultimately and totally alone in terms of experience. Nobody else in the world has had the exact same conditions – the same birth, the same parents, the same education, the same career, the same partners – and therefore nobody in the world can completely share in another's worldview and perception. The emotions are different, the thought processes are different. Human beings seem to gravitate towards others for reassurance that they are not alone, thereby denying the reality of their existence. Yet as Sarah has shown, only after one has

embraced that truth are they able to move outwards towards their fellows. Once Sarah accepted her aloneness, she was able to exist in authentic connection to the other members of her group, for she no longer needed anything from them.

Connection and Community without De-Selfing

Once these women had confronted their existential aloneness, they were then able to branch out more authentically in their relationships. Several participants articulated having a sense of longing for community. This was particularly evident to those women who had relocated to Korea; they began seeking out groups of individuals with similar interests and values. Andrea elaborates:

I've been really reaching out in a lot of different ways, like, you know, I don't know what this is all about, but I've been seeking out more and more activities where I may find people, and I may find community. Because honestly, I haven't found a lot of people that I really identify with and want to spend a lot of time with since I've been here. So I've just found a yoga class that I'm going to on a weekly basis. I've just started volunteering at an orphanage and hoping that I'll like meet some people there, and I just got hooked up with this um, vegetarians in Seoul group.

Andrea was not the only one who found herself drawn to communities that promoted healthy lifestyles and well-being. Jennifer, Julie, and Leah also mentioned participating in Yoga communities; and all the women identified themselves as having been active in spiritual societies at some point in their journeys (whether that be a Yoga ashram, meditation center, or church).

An interesting aspect of Sarah's path that has undergone transformation is the type of connections she seeks with other people. Early on in her journey, she sought connections primarily with men, driven by her desire to satisfy the sexual aspect of her ego. As was mentioned earlier, Sarah even went so far as to join a transformational group, composed mostly of counsellors or therapists who were undergoing the process themselves:

I knew that this transformational journey, experience that they were talking about, that they were going through, I knew that that made sense with me. I've always been a very energy intense person, so it was like I knew that when [my teacher] smacked me over the head with that 'I'm pathetic', like I knew that I needed more of that. And it just made sense with me, so the work was kind of in this counselling group, but um, it was a transformational group, in which we would go and we would work on our gigs with one another.

When her professor had confronted her with how pathetic her gig had been, Sarah began to see through herself. The impact of that experience drew her towards other individuals who were also going through that process. Sarah found herself attracted to the mirroring provided by other members of the group, and knew that they would be able to reflect things to her that she might not see within herself.

In Emily's case, different kinds of connection provided different kinds of fulfilment in her life. She too expressed a longing for connection in the communal sense, but also talked about needing one-to-one connection with someone felt to be an equal. She describes feeling compelled "to find somebody that I feel really met by equally, and not having a power dynamic of them being my teacher or my being their teacher."

Although Emily does not quite feel that she has connected with anybody on that level, she does describe feeling connected in a more collective sense:

Well, I've been in Seoul for one month... I already have connections, you know, to a lot of people that I have a lot in common with already. And they're people that share my values, in the sense of personal growth, and working twelve steps, and having a vision of how the world would be, or how their lives would be, so um, it's hard to say you're lonely when you have that.

In other words, Emily has found a network of people to share in her spiritual quest for betterment. Knowing that she is not alone in her journey provides Emily with an emotional sustenance; even though she may not have a single partner to accompany her through life, the sense of connectedness she acquires in her community keeps her level and balanced.

Ongoing Commitment to a Practice

Regardless of the various communities each of these participants sought out, one thing that resulted from their involvement in them was a very spiritual and very personal practice. Each of these women discussed how essential it was to keep up with the lessons they had learned about themselves. After just a few days without practice, the threat of losing that newfound awareness increased. They risked slipping back into unconscious existence and further away from their essential selves. Jennifer articulated her need for a spiritual practice in the following passage:

I really do make an effort to be a better human being, and I really know that left to my own devices, without reaching out to a power greater than me, or reaching out to someone suffering more than me, I just don't. I'm unable to move in that

direction on my own. And that belief in me is really strong. I cannot move myself in the direction of being a better human being just because I want to be. I have to actively seek that. I have to actively choose that, I have to actively do it. This follows with the concept mentioned earlier in this paper that these women all found it necessary to connect with a power greater than themselves. Relying on the function and content of their own minds only seemed to deepen the frustration and despair they felt prior to embarking on the journey. In developing a spiritual practice, each participant was able to keep the channels of communication open between herself and her relative higher power, thereby lessening the chances of getting sucked into the illusion of her own ego-constructs.

To continue with Jennifer's experience, one of the constants in her transformation and recovery has been the importance of prayer in daily living. In the following example, Jennifer describes the specifics of how and why she prays, and how this helps her to maintain that numinous relationship to her Higher Power:

I pray every day, and many times a day. I have an ongoing conversation with my higher power. There's a piece in step eleven in the book [Alcoholics Anonymous] that talks about facing indecision and asking for the right thought or action, and I do that so many times a day, whether that's in my relationship with my husband, whether that's in my relationships with my family members, my friends, whether that's during group, running group, whether that's meeting with a kid, whether that's sitting in an AA meeting – you know, in every area of my life... I reach out when I face indecision, and it's become a really natural part of my daily living. And early on, it was constant, right, like it was, 'take that

thought, take that thought, take that thought'. It was, you know, one yucky thought after another, or one debate after another.

This passage illustrates how Jennifer invokes an ongoing dialogue with her creator. Prayer, for her, has become a conversation with God whereby she solicits guidance for every aspect of her life. In the simple act of asking for help, Jennifer is reminded that she is a channel of divine grace, rather than the sole initiator of it – a very humbling and crucial perspective for her.

Andrea described a very unique and evolving spiritual practice that kept her tapped into the relationship with her higher power. Before moving to Korea, Andrea had been regularly volunteering as a chaplain at a Unity church: "I was holding sacred space with people, and even doing prayer and workshops with the chaplains sometimes, and really focusing on positive prayer." Rather than pray for what she wanted, Andrea was taught by her pastor to practice a method of prayer where she would thank her Higher Power as though it had already given her what she needed:

I guess if you try to sum it up, it sounds like a semantics game in a way, but the focus that the pastor of that congregation would point us towards was to just really affirm that what we needed was there, and the resources that we needed were available to us, and to shift prayers from asking for things to being grateful for being on the path toward that thing. You know, to being grateful for being propelled in the right direction. And so I use that in my relationships now, where I do a lot of my prayer through writing, and so I'll write affirmative prayers, like 'thank you for helping us work through these difficulties', or 'I trust that the right and perfect solution is happening'. You know, 'it's out there, and I'm headed

towards it, and grateful for every step I'm taking towards it as you give me everything that I need.'

Prayer, gratitude, and affirmative thinking are all ways that Andrea grounds herself in her transformative journey. By doing these things daily, she is able to recognize the Source of all things in her life.

Rather than incorporating a specific technique into their daily practice, several of the women described living their lives as though life itself was the spiritual practice. Emily, for instance, discussed how almost all of her day-to-day activities were centered on deepening the connection with herself and her Higher Power. Emily seemed to be conscious at all times of how her own well-being – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually – directly influenced the quality of her relationship to herself, and subsequently to her Higher Power. In the following passage, Emily outlines the various activities that comprise her life:

Right now what I'm doing is, there's a book called 'Spirit is Calling' that my minister wrote, and everyone in my church is doing it, and so it has a little meditation for every day, and you open it up and it's just been great. When I read it, it usually speaks to exactly what's going on with me that day, and that just says okay. It sets the pace for the day – maybe not the pace, but it sets the tone for the day, and it gives me a sense of connection with my Source. And coming to this AA meeting once a week, that's another thing I've got in my spiritual path right now. I'm really also doing the best I can to take care of myself physically, and making sure that I get enough rest and making sure, cause right now there's so many new things happening – new languages and new food, and new schools, and

new everything. I need more sleep than I usually do. And trying to eat well, exercise, you know, just those kinds of taking-care-of-myself things. When things feel hard, it's really important for me to go back to basics, you know. Watch the hungry, angry, lonely, tired, so that that doesn't happen, and I'm taking care of that. Um, and stay in contact with friends, talk about my feelings, reading spiritual stuff. I get some daily reminders on my computer everyday; those are really wonderful. They're little notes from the universe... you know, 'you are one in a million', and 'what would we ever do without you', and just little notes from God, or the universe. And I love reading those little reminders every day... Getting emotional support is a really important part of it – talking about my feelings to people. That's been important.

It is clear that the majority of these activities hold some sort of spiritual significance for Emily. She reflects on daily meditations in order to connect with her purpose for the day; she takes care of herself mentally and physically by attending AA meetings, getting sufficient rest, and partaking in exercise; and she attends to her emotional needs by communicating with friends regularly. For Emily, the point of developing a practice is not to make daily living easier, but rather to recognize that in every moment, daily living carries the potential for connection with a higher power and a higher purpose. Every action that Emily would take throughout the day would bring her closer to the reality of her existence – that she is but a vessel of the infinite.

In Sarah's interview, she described taking this recognition to the next level.

While she claims to have engaged in meditation practices in the past, as well as tantric

exercises and journaling, she seems to have transcended the idea of 'practice' altogether.

For her, living is the practice:

I used to do daily meditations, in the beginning, and I did a lot of journal writing, and um, that kind of stuff. And I had a friend; him and I would do some tantric practices, not getting into the sexual part, but we used to do a lot of breathing, and yogic breathing with one another, and that kind of stuff. We would meet probably about three times a week. So that's what I used to do, and then now what I do is I run every day, and I've been doing that now for two years, and that very much is a way that I can just blow my chakras wide open, and I really find that helps with me... and then um, the thing I do is just a lot of quietness, I do a lot of stuff at night where I'm just quiet. And I just sit. And I don't see it as a meditation. I just see it as just enjoying my own aloneness... I don't do a lot of doing... for me, it's become more of a moment-to-moment. I don't have to do, create an activity to do in order to get me into that space, and that's been very transformational for me.

It seems that the purpose of establishing daily rituals was, for most women, to set aside an opportunity for themselves to embrace the present moment and to connect with something greater than themselves. Yet there seems to be points in the journey where awareness expands and several of these women saw themselves as being united with that greater essence, as opposed to being a separate and distinct entity needing to connect with it. From this place, the women no longer needed to facilitate connection, but lived from that connection. It seems as though their experience took on a sense of immediacy and

importance. In Sarah's case, just sitting and being quiet is actually manifesting the divine.

Needlessness in Relationships

Earlier in this paper, a key concept was brought up regarding existential aloneness. As illustrated in most of these women's experiences, the sense of aloneness or isolation is often what led to the darkest moments of their lives. Their need to escape the discomfort of loneliness drove them to unhealthy relationships, whether those were friendships, family relationships, or intimate relationships with a partner. Several participants have discussed using sexual encounters as a means of avoiding their aloneness, only to eventually realize that such encounters, though they may have been temporarily satisfying, ultimately deepened their sense of loneliness and abandonment.

However, as each of these women developed spiritually and emotionally, relationships took on a totally different function and different meaning in their lives. No longer did they lean on relationships in order to deny the reality of their own existence. Instead, relationships became an arena for sharing that existence with others. Take Andrea's experience with her current partner for instance: "You know, we would even say, like I don't need you, and that's why this is so great, because I don't need this relationship to survive, and it's okay if it goes away". She is no longer defining herself and her worth by how much the other person wants and/or needs her. Instead she is free to enjoy the intimacy she shares with this person, knowing that she would be fine without him and vice versa. According to Andrea, this relationship is the first one where she deeply appreciates her partner for who he is, rather than for what he can 'give' her.

Jennifer articulates a similar experience, stating that as she has grown and matured in her spirituality, her relationships have also grown and matured. In one particular passage, Jennifer illustrates how needlessness presents itself in her interactions with others:

I didn't even know it was possible to have relationships like I have today, uh, to feel about people like I feel about them today. Or to be myself, to have a voice, to have an opinion, to feel comfortable enough in my own skin to just be who I am in the presence of other people. I think probably one of my favorite things is letting other people be who they are too, like um, they don't have to be like me. We don't have to be the same for me to feel comfortable in my own skin. We can have different beliefs and different values, and different opinions, and different experiences. Like we don't all have to be the same.

This is the essence of what Yalom (1980) refers to as “need-free love”. Others are no longer needed to serve as mirrors of the self. Instead, as people progress on their journeys, they become more comfortable with their existential aloneness; they recognize that nobody else can possibly share their own unique and individual experience of the world. Suddenly they stop needing to take other people hostage, and they set them free. In this critical moment, if the other person reciprocates the intention of intimacy, then a genuine relationship can take place – free of motives and functions. The other person becomes an existence in and of him/herself, and a sharing can take place between two people.

In one last example, Sarah relays the freedom that comes from releasing her expectations of other people. Prior to the instance she describes, Sarah had struggled

with her family relationships, and her relationships with her sisters in particular. Yet during one particular experience, after she had been doing some significant work on herself and her relationships, Sarah was able to overcome the need for acceptance and validation that she often felt around her family members. She elaborates:

I just went home this past summer, and I went and I had a great time at home. And I very much see my relationships– I think what it is now is I see people more for who they are. And I have more of an acceptance towards seeing them for who they are, and more acceptance of who I am. I don't get wrapped up in it... I see them for who they are, and I don't push a relationship on them. And I very much allow them to, you know, I see them for who they are, and I just create a relationship based on that, not based on what I want, or my ideal of what I want. And, if there's a connection, there's a connection, and if there's not, there's not... I'm not building myself around what it should be, or what an ideal should be, or what I want. Like there's no wanting left in relationships.

Again, in Sarah's passage, one can hear a lack of wanting, or a lack of need.

Relationships no longer serve a function in her life. Instead, she can experience relationships for what they are: "It's just a beingness, you know, a presence with people that is not based on anything." This is the very essence of needlessness.

Stage 4. Arriving in the Moment: The Ongoing Journey

The fourth and final stage of the journey is when the women had learned to identify with presence as their essential identity. Although they were still in process, that is to say that they were still learning how to transcend their various ego-structures, they had for the most part learned how to merge their sense of self with presence. They had

identified their true nature as the ground of all being. The following themes emerged as being important to these women at this stage in their journey.

Realizing the Cyclical Nature of the Journey

In the earlier review of the literature, there was a discussion regarding phases of cognitive/consciousness development. As was brought up, many of the current theories describe a linear and progressive stage-like journey of development. One key characteristic of each theory of development is that there is a final, culminating state of the journey. However, for transpersonal theorists, like Wilber and Almaas, the final state of consciousness development is when a person reaches ‘non-dual’ awareness, Oneness, Enlightenment, etc.

Yet what stood out for the researcher while interviewing these seven women was that the journey never culminates. There is no final stage. The journey itself is a dynamic evolving process – a phenomenon that cannot be pinned down as having discrete and discernable units, and certainly no discernable ending. This is not to say that current transpersonal theorists would state that the journey ends, so to speak, but rather that existence itself is the journey. Once an individual reaches his/her fully awakened state, or transcends the personal stages of development, he/she can go on existing and embracing Beingness as it arises. However, this was not the experience of the participants. While they did often catch glimpses of awakened consciousness, what Wilber called the transpersonal stages of awareness, they often fell back into the personal or even pre-personal stages of awareness. The ‘path’ of transformation wasn’t really a path at all. It was a cyclic pattern of learning, transcending, stagnating, reverting, re-learning, incorporating, and re-transcending – and not always in that order.

In Julie's interview, for instance, even the awareness of being on a journey arises and passes away. At certain times in her life, personal development takes on a key role and motivates her to grow beyond her present state of consciousness. At other times, however, she gets drawn back into the routine of everyday existence, and that awareness that she has honed and developed seems to fade into the background:

Well, definitely it comes in waves, you know, and cycles. There are definitely times over the past nine or ten years that I've been much more introspective, and I've spent a lot more time working through and processing on myself. But I think it's pretty much gonna be an ongoing journey. And I hope it *is* an ongoing journey, because it's a pretty fascinating one.

In her experience, Julie has not yet acquired a state of being that persists over time. Instead her recognition of true self ebbs and flows depending on various aspects of her life.

With regards to relationships in particular, Jennifer's experiences illustrate a prime example of how, regardless of how much work a person has done on certain areas of her life, there are still fears and insecurities that arise. She states:

I have the capacity to love. And honestly, still sometimes that can scare me, like it still feels really vulnerable. I can still have some walls up around that, like just feeling vulnerable, and letting people get really close, or letting myself get really close to others, like letting myself really care. Not because I don't want to. I just really believe that to care means to hurt. Like I mean to care deeply means to hurt deeply, because people are people, and I'm gonna disappoint people and they're gonna disappoint me, or we're all gonna make our mistakes, and people are gonna

die, and um, people are gonna make mistakes, and life's not always gonna go according to plan, and relationships aren't always gonna go according to plan. In this passage, we can see how Jennifer still experiences fears and inhibitions about personal relationships and becoming intimate with others. Fear and inhibition can be considered constructs of the self. Yet in other parts of her interview, Jennifer describes moments of actually transcending herself, moments that she calls "God-consciousness", where she feels united with her Higher Power and totally free from thought, judgement, or cognition – moments that might be referred to as pure consciousness. So despite attaining what certain transpersonal theorists would qualify as the final stage of development, Jennifer still falls back into previous stages. She cycles through various phases of awareness and consciousness, rather than acquiring and maintaining them.

Sarah had similar experiences of non-linear consciousness development. As was seen in previous sections of this paper, Sarah managed to work through a number of her personal issues, thereby transcending various aspects of herself. She described how, for the most part, she is able to exist in awakened consciousness on a day-to-day basis. When thoughts and emotions arise, she is able to detach from them, and recognize them as constructs of the mind, rather than identify with and get attached to them. However, in the following paragraph, she relays how potential relationships of a romantic or sexual nature are still a sticking point for her. She finds herself getting drawn back into the stories that her mind creates, and it becomes difficult for her to maintain a state of pure consciousness:

And then in relationships with men, it's funny because just this week someone said to me, 'Oh, I think that your energy would go great with this guy, and the

next time he comes into town, you know, I think you guys would have great energy together and I think you need to meet him'. And I was very aware that I got very bashful and shy in that moment, and I don't know, I got very caught up in, almost like a, I don't know, I was like a little kid all of a sudden. So I don't think I've worked through that stuff yet.

This is a good example of how a person is able to transcend and integrate stages of the journey into select areas of their life, and not others. Even though Sarah largely exists in a state of self-less awareness, she still has triggers that draw her back into her structured sense of self. So again one sees that while the final stage of consciousness development has been achieved, it is momentary and fleeting, leaving more work to be done.

In this particular journey, the journey of transformation, there is no final destination. The destination is the journey itself. Awakening can happen at any given moment, and can be lost as easily as it is acquired. This is also true of the various lessons that a person learns along the way: they are learned, lost, and relearned again.

Consciousness development is a dynamic and evolving process, fluctuating over time, and never fully complete. For these seven women, it is a cyclic and fluid process that takes place of its own accord. It cannot be forced, or strenuously attained. In Andrea's experience, "Sometimes I feel like I'm right where I need to be... and then on other days I just feel totally lost and uncertain about what it is I'm supposed to be doing." This is the essence of the journey: finding oneself, only to get lost and need finding again. It is an ongoing, never-ending adventure of self-discovery.

Accepting Impermanence

At some point in their journey, most of these seven women recognized the concept illustrated above – that is, that the journey of transformation never ends and a final destination is never reached. In recognizing this fact, many of them had to concede to another ultimate reality: that nothing in existence is permanent. This is a relevant realization, because so much of North American society is geared towards creating the illusion of permanence. From a young age, people are encouraged to select an occupation that they can continue working in for the rest of their working life. Young adults feel pressured to choose a life-partner – somebody they will be with until the end of time. Young couples talk about ‘settling down’: finding a house with a long-term mortgage and establishing a family. Speaking generally, many individuals fear change, fear instability, and fear not knowing what is around the next corner.

Yet the irony of these fears is that they are inescapable. Nothing in the world is guaranteed. People change their minds, love fades, economies collapse, and the truth of human frailty is such that even existence cannot be guaranteed from one moment to the next. Therefore recognition of impermanence is a key feature of the ongoing journey. Furthermore, acceptance of impermanence can actually help people overcome difficult moments in their lives. The illusion of permanence, which so many people cling to, can actually serve to hinder the psyche rather than liberate it. For instance, if somebody is experiencing pain or trauma, their mind will automatically grasp the notion that this pain is going to last forever. They might resign themselves to the idea that they are always going to suffer, and their egoic self-constructs will begin identifying with stories of self-pity, rage, anger, frustration, etc. Whereas an individual who has accepted impermanence

can realize that their current state is just one of many. Emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations are constantly fluctuating, and will give way to others in time. Thus knowledge of this concept can help a person detach from pain and suffering, letting it come and go of its own accord.

Several of the participants in this research study described having to incorporate this awareness into their everyday journeys. Andrea, for example, uses her understanding of impermanence to help her overcome difficult moments:

I guess part of transformation is awareness of the passing nature of everything in my life. So I have a lot more comfort in knowing that whatever I'm going through at the moment will pass. And I think before I always felt like that was it, and I was gonna feel that way forever, and it really overwhelmed me and scared me, and I would get into pretty dark depressions over it. Whereas now I think I sort of roll with it better.

This is a good example of how the concept of impermanence can actually facilitate moments of dis-identification with constructs of the self. Andrea is able to release her attachment to painful thoughts and emotions, and to recognize that each moment will eventually pass.

Julie describes a similar awareness. She too is able to recognize the ebb and flow of the journey, and thus exhibits acceptance over the painful moments, as well as the pleasant ones:

I definitely have times where I get lost, and scared, and you know, all of that stuff. But I wouldn't be a human without that I guess. But it's different, because after being on a journey for a few years, you start to understand the rhythms of it, and

how things are really great and really smooth for a while, and then, you know, I go through another growth spurt and it's painful, and it's like that for a while, but I know that I'll break through it and come through it and transcend it. So that's what makes it easier, and I think makes the journey, for me anyways, more doable, is knowing that there's a process to it. It's gonna cycle through that, you know.

Again, Julie's understanding of the rhythmic nature of her own transformation affords her the ability to let go of the process, and as she says, transcend it. She no longer feels resistance to the painful moments because she recognizes them as impermanent. They are simply the precursors to periods of growth and transition.

Embracing One's Own Energy

At various stages of their journeys, these seven women described experiencing moments in which they were able to completely let go of their egos. To clarify, they experienced moments of quiet in their minds, where the internal critic or judge would cease commenting on every action or event that took place in their lives. In other words, these women were able to surrender to their true nature. That which arose in consciousness was consciousness itself, free from all the self-structures that the mind imposes on it. Though each woman articulated the experience differently, we can see the underlying theme of each woman learning how to embrace her own energy.

Andrea, for instance, had often experienced surges of creative energy in her life, but rarely acted on them because of the stories she created internally. She would tell herself, "now is not the right time," or "this idea can't possibly be unique; somebody else has probably already thought of it". She would literally talk herself out of her creative

ideas. However, as her journey progressed, and she was able to transcend her beliefs about herself, she was actually able to embrace and enjoy her own creative energy. She was even able to channel that energy into other areas of her life.

In the following passage, Andrea was describing a situation at work. As a university-level ESL teacher, Andrea had designed many of her lesson plans based on the belief that she had to follow a very traditional teaching model. She felt restricted in her methods, and believed that if she utilized her creativity, then the institution she worked for might get frustrated and terminate her. However by repressing her natural energy, Andrea began feeling drained and exhausted. After several months, she realized that continuing on this way would lead to a complete burn-out. At this stage, Andrea surrendered her old belief system, recognizing that if she continued the way she was going, she would likely lose her job anyway. She decided to have fun, embrace her own energy, and infuse her lessons with a creative spark. Not only did the students enjoy her lessons more, but her colleagues commented on her unique style of teaching, and she found herself much more enthusiastic about her job:

You know, I do have some good ideas, and I'm kind of excited about that, because I'm realizing if I just keep going, and keep plugging away, and sort of doing my job and showing up, and putting it out there, that this is what I'm looking for, I'm looking for something to do. I'm working on it. I feel like I'm kinda putting my feelers out into the world right now, and I've started, I think as a result of that to have more creative inspiration, and started to get a little bit more excited about what I think I want to do with my life.

It is ironic in a sense, that Andrea has been repressing this energy, telling herself that it should not be a priority at this stage in her life; by incorporating creativity into her work, Andrea finds she has more energy and enthusiasm for other parts of her life as well.

Jennifer also describes being able to enjoy her own energy as her journey continues. As we saw earlier, Jennifer's greatest struggles were in her relationships with others. She often found herself pretending to be something she was not so that she could acquire a sense of validation from the people in her life. Her basic survival strategy was to be fraudulent in relationships in order to gain acceptance. Every action was an act – a staged performance for others based on what she perceived she could get from the interaction. Yet today, Jennifer is able to come from a place of authenticity because she has been able to dissolve her judgments about herself. Rather than constantly criticize herself for perceived defects, she is able to surrender to her true nature and let it shine through in her relationships:

The coolest thing for me is to be able to laugh from my belly, like I mean, even that was scary for me in early recovery. Like it wasn't just the bad feelings that I struggled with, it was the good ones too. It was just being real, period. And I love that; I love being able to sit with a group of people that matter to me and be able to be myself, and be able to sit with a group of people that I don't even know, that don't matter to me, and not have to put on airs and be something I'm not, you know.

Jennifer is finally able to embrace herself as she is rather than how she thinks others would want her to be.

In describing her experiences, Sarah is able to distinctly articulate the process of detaching from the mind and embracing the energy that arises: “I just enjoy my presence and enjoy my present awareness. I still have anger arise, and all that kind of stuff still comes up, but I don’t see that as who I am. I just enjoy, I just see my humanness, I guess. I enjoy my Beingness.” In other words, Sarah is able to recognize the function of emotions and thoughts as being to serve one’s true self, rather than drive it. She still feels emotions, and she still processes her thoughts, but the content of each no longer drives her sense of identity. She recognizes her identity as something much deeper – something that lies at the very core of her consciousness: in her own words, her “Beingness”. In the following passage, Sarah describes a unique experience that occurred with her father, where she was truly able to let go of her expectations around the situation, and to trust her intuition:

My dad died, and so when I started the journey, my dad was ill with cancer, and I remember sitting with [my teacher] right, cause he was the one who I started this with, and just talking to him about what I needed to do. And I went home one day, and went back to Ontario and spent a month with my dad. And I remember, the best thing I ever did, was I went and I told him every little shit ass thing that he did to me, and I did to him. And then I told him every little thing that I absolutely loved about him and every little thing that I thought he loved about me, and that kind of stuff. And so when he died, it was like, ‘Oh, someone passed along’, and I was okay with that. There was no grabbing, there was none of this, you know, sort of sadness about him not being on the earth, or anything like that.

It was, me doing that, I was able to just let it go, let all that crap go. And so that was really great.

This experience was deeply rewarding and gratifying for Sarah because she did not censor herself or abide by her internal critic, which might have previously told her that such actions are not appropriate. Instead she let her inner voice guide her and embraced the emotions that arose in the moment, rather than repressing them. This resulted in the authentic and genuine interaction she had with her father before he died.

Solidifying a Sense of True Self

Something else truly amazing happens as one journeys down this path of self-discovery. As women who have built their entire self-concept on others' perceptions of them, that concept has become grossly skewed and disfigured. Yet women begin this process of awakening, and they start to see how false that image is. They learn to deconstruct the notions they have of themselves, to tear away the faulty layers of belief and judgment. They start digging below the surface of imagery and illusion in an effort to learn who they truly are. And they do. They strip away layers and layers of illusion, and discover a core Beingness, free from all the labels that the world has imposed on it. Once they experience their inner essence, they develop an understanding that that is who they truly are. Though this awareness may come and go over time, it's never lost, and they can return to it whenever we wish. Subsequently, the deeply held beliefs about self begin to dissipate, and the awareness of true self solidifies. This then becomes the concept of self that they relate to.

While talking with Leah, she relayed the difficulty of relinquishing others' expectations of who she should be: "Even once you experience that, that shift, it's hard to

stay there. Other people have commented to me, you know, that I'm becoming flaky or something. And then that voice kicks in – that voice in my head that says, you know, 'stop being weird', or something like that." Yet her commitment to herself and to her journey allows her to transcend her judgments of herself. Ultimately, she is able to embrace her evolving concept of self and to surrender others' judgments. As she states, "I just get to a point where it doesn't matter anymore. I know who I am, and if other people can't handle that, then I don't need them in my life. The most important thing for me today is nourishing my Spirit. I can't afford to fall back into those old beliefs, or trying to please others." Leah is able to recognize how detrimental others' perceptions and expectations can be. Yet by developing a new and healthy self-concept, Leah becomes stronger in her convictions about herself, and grounds herself in beliefs and actions that nourish her well-being.

Jennifer shared an experience that more specifically illustrates the point Leah was alluding to:

You know, a huge one is with my mom, and learning that, just because she was mad and saying terrible things didn't mean that those things were true. And being able to say that – like just being able to say to her, 'That's not true. I won't believe that about myself, because it's not true.' And that's been a cool part, like being solid enough in what I believe about who I am, that someone can't come along and say something nasty and shake me to my root, you know, because although I know I'm not perfect, I know I'm decent. I know I'm good. And I make mistakes, and I know I have defects, but overall, I'm a pretty decent human being.

This is a profound thing for Jennifer to acknowledge. She has had such a convoluted and dynamic relationship with her mother, that in the past, even when Jennifer has gone through immense periods of growth and development, she would look to her mother for validation and instead feel demeaned, inferior, and degraded. It has been a struggle for Jennifer to detach from the mirroring she receives from her mother, and from the self-concept that she feels her mother imposes on her. Yet in the example above, Jennifer describes being able to finally disconnect from her mother's imposed judgments and to stay true to her newfound beliefs about herself.

For several of the women interviewed, there were certain aspects of self that they either ignored or repressed based on the beliefs they held about that quality. In Sarah's case, that quality was being a woman. Because of her history with both men and women, Sarah felt threatened by femininity. She related femininity to the values held by her older sisters and her mother, and felt that it had been imposed on her as a child: women ought to be proper and pretty, attracting husbands and bearing children. Because her experience of herself did not mesh with the expectations of others, Sarah learned to resent that aspect of herself. Instead of embracing the qualities that made her a woman, Sarah either rejected them, or used them in order to obtain the things that gave her power:

In my earlier life, being a woman was not a positive thing – it was a thing that I used. It was almost like a tool that I used, right, to manipulate the world and to, you know, screw and kind of get at the world with, right. And now being a woman is something that I don't find threatening, I used to find it threatening... I guess I saw it as a weakness before. Now, I very much enjoy feminine energy,

and just being able to appreciate it, I guess – appreciate it but not get attached to it.

One can see how Sarah's current self-concept is much more integrated. She no longer feels threatened by qualities of herself, and can embrace them rather than repress them. Throughout Sarah's interview, it was evident that her understanding of what being a woman entails has evolved drastically. She is able to perceive herself as a woman without seeing that as something weak or inferior, submissive or docile. Instead, she welcomes and embodies those qualities that fit with the concept she has of herself – powerful, nurturing, Goddess-like, etc.

Julie also described a process of having to surrender judgments about herself that were detrimental to her self-concept. Like Sarah, Julie held many beliefs about the qualities she possessed, and would try to repress or deny them. However, as she progressed on her journey, she described learning to dissolve those judgments and acknowledge herself for who she truly was. As she witnessed moments of pure presence, Julie came closer to the awareness that she is perfectly fine just the way she is. This recognition allowed her to integrate denied qualities back into her self-concept:

And the areas that I'm not so strong in still – instead of sort of deny and push it away, and you know, resent myself for it – I've just been able to hold that inside myself and say, you know it's really okay and it's kind of cute about me that I'm a little bit childish in this regard or whatever. I look at it in a different way, and that for me has been an inner transformation over the past couple years.

As a self-proclaimed 'perfectionist', Julie hadn't allowed herself the freedom to be who she actually is. She had a predefined notion of who she should be, and then would try to

live up to her own unrealistic expectations. Those expectations were always so outrageous that when she inevitably failed to reach them, she would perceive herself as incompetent, or as a failure. However, as Julie experienced moments of awakening, she began to see herself for who she truly was. The illusion of failure began to fade with her growing understanding that expectations are simply a construct of the mind. As she shed those expectations she began to adopt a concept of herself as simply Being, neither perfect nor imperfect. This understanding is what allowed her to move forward in total acceptance of herself.

Establishing Appropriate Boundaries in Relationships

As each of these women grew in their understanding and acceptance of themselves, their relationships all took on new dynamics. As we saw earlier, most of these women were either totally unable to assert themselves in their relationships, or else they utilized relationships in order to get something for themselves. Regardless, it is safe to say that their relationships lacked appropriate boundaries, and each woman lacked the ability to establish them. However as the journey continued, each of these women described a shift in how they operated within their relationships. Usually it had to do with them acquiring the necessary skills to set healthy boundaries.

A significant shift took place for Andrea once she was willing to take more responsibility in her relationships with men. In previous sections of this paper, it has been shown how Andrea would move from one romantic relationship to another, barely ending the previous one before moving onto the next. Andrea relayed how earlier in her journey, she could not see her part in the pattern. She honestly believed herself to be a victim in the relationship, and sought consolation with other men, who at the time were

‘simply friends’. Eventually the friendship would evolve into something more, and Andrea would break up with her boyfriend of the moment. However, since embarking on the journey, Andrea has learned how to look more closely at herself and her actions, and has subsequently recognized her role in the ensuing romances:

I guess I see a lot more of my responsibility in whether or not I attract someone, and so I try to be a lot more conscientious of that. I’m a lot more appropriately restrained in relation to men than I have been in the past. And then I think the other major intention that has changed is just really being conscious of trying to find the answer to the problem that is in the relationship *within* the relationship. Because before it was always like, if there was a problem within the relationship, I looked outside of the relationship to help fix it. I mean, for comfort. I’ve looked outside of the relationship for affirmation or love... and now, when I’m experiencing problems inside the relationship, I may look to other people in [AA], or like girlfriends, but I sure as hell don’t look to other men, you know. And that’s a big difference, cause I used to just talk to anybody about anything, you know. And I’m a little bit more conscious of that now.

It is clear that Andrea’s attitude has matured and she is learning to relinquish the need to search outside of herself for validation. Instead, she can exist within her current relationship and search for deeper meaning in the present context. She may not get the affirmation that she is looking for, but she does get to explore the varying levels of authentic human connection.

In Andrea’s example, she actually had to eliminate certain acts from her life – namely, seeking comfort and validation from men outside of her current relationship.

However, for women like Sarah, situations with certain people were largely unavoidable. With her mother, for instance, Sarah is confronted with a situation which she cannot avoid: “[My mother] went from never having been a drinker to having like two drinks a day. You know, getting looped and stuff like that.” Sarah describes feeling very uncomfortable when she is around her mother, and struggles with the new dynamic. One of the ways that she has managed to cope is by establishing boundaries: “I just can’t be with her. I feel almost like I kind of have to go over there and do my deep breathing, and kind of create a protection when it comes to her. I’m aware of what’s happening, but I haven’t broken through that.” Though she may not feel she has “broken through that”, simply recognizing the situation as unhealthy shows signs of maturity and self-development. On another front, however, Sarah has managed to set boundaries as well as work through her resistance to the situation:

Like I said, two of my sisters I don’t have a relationship with, and two of them I do... But I very much enjoy them and, you know, I just see them for who they are and kind of go along, and I’m much more open with them. I stand my ground with them, I don’t, you know, there’s those boundaries but there’s a boundarylessness too about it.

In other words, Sarah is able to establish the boundaries, and simultaneously surrender any stories she might have about those boundaries. She feels an openness to the situation that allows her to accept herself and her sisters for who and what they are.

Transformed Relationships: Moving Beyond Need

As has been shown throughout this paper, a foundational theme that has arisen during the course of this research is that as women progress on their transformative

journey towards wholeness, their relationships with others simultaneously transform. The importance of relationships has been highlighted over and over again in this paper because, in the experience of the researcher, relationships are a key aspect of women's journeys towards wholeness. The participants in this study verified and affirmed this notion, reiterating how the journey itself seemed to center on relationships in one form or another – whether it be relationships with self, relationships with others, or even relationships with the Divine. Transformations of self almost always resulted in transformations of self-other relationships as well.

The quality that most women defined as existing in their present-day transformed relationships is the quality of needlessness. These participants no longer needed to utilize others as mirrors; they had internalized their newfound recognition of self-as-essence and resigned the need to have it reflected by others. Interactions with others ceased being a source of validation or affirmation, and instead became an arena for authentic expression. Sarah, for instance, illustrates her ability to let go in the context of friendships: “I have people I’m friends with, but at anytime I’m very aware that those friendships could go. I’m not grasping onto them, I don’t hold onto people. You know, my relationship with myself is much more being able to stay in the moment and enjoy life moment-to-moment, and watch how I grasp onto things.” She has stopped trying to control the people in her life, or control the way in which a relationship unfolds. Instead she is able to accept it for what it is, enjoy it in the present moment, and let go of the outcome.

Julie is another participant who expressed needlessness in relationships. Earlier in her journey, Julie described how she would look to others to validate herself. For example, she would project an air of wisdom so that others would perceive her as wise

and treat her accordingly. Yet as transformation ensued, Julie was able to surrender her self-representations and acknowledge the true self within her. Once this had occurred, she no longer felt driven to seek validation from the people around her:

I don't need people to know who I am, and I don't need to be known in the same way that I did. Of course, it's really nice to have someone near and validate, you know, and definitely my boyfriend right now, you know, offers that to me in a certain regard, but it's not a life or death necessity, as it once felt. It really feels like I needed that so badly, to even know that I existed, you know, or that I was worthy of existence. And now, it's really different. My relationships are really, they're really wonderful, and substance-based, you know. I think the biggest change for me with regards to that is, I don't care if people know who I am on a really deep level, and that used to be really *really* important to me. But I meet, as much as I can and am able and conscious to do so, I meet people where they are, and not so much striving to have them meet me where I'm at – which is so much easier! And more fulfilling too, because I'm taking a lot of expectation out of how people should be toward me.

The last half of Julie's passage illustrates an interesting characteristic of needlessness. Once she overcame her need for validation, Julie was able to "meet people where they are", as opposed to where she was. In other words, by transcending the self, Julie became more present in her everyday relationships and more conscious of what she could offer to others.

In Mary's interview, the theme of needlessness arose particularly as it applied to her relationship with her mother. As has already been shown, Mary's relationship with

her mother was strained throughout childhood and early adulthood. Though she may not have consciously looked to her mother for validation, the constant criticism and disapproval affected Mary's overall sense of self. However, as her journey progressed and she was able to deconstruct her concept of self, she found that her mother's opinion of her held less and less value:

It was strange, you know. I went back there at Christmas and I had this experience with her, where I was packing, and she kept coming into the room and yelling at me – telling me to “pack this”, or “don't pack that”. I felt that part of myself that starts to reject her – you know, that part that starts getting frustrated and irritated and defensive. And then all of a sudden I just shifted. That deeper awareness kicked in, and it was suddenly almost comical. The whole thing was so pathetic, and I could *see* the patheticism. I just didn't need that dynamic anymore.

Mary goes on to describe how in that example, she was able to see her mother in a different light, and the relationship no longer served its self-deprecating function. Though she still struggles with her mother, Mary's relationship has lost the quality of dependence. She is able to exist in more authentic connection, not just with her mother, but with most people in her life.

A Vision of Wholeness

One last theme arose that the researcher found worthy of including in this discussion. At one point or another during their interviews, each of these seven women described coming to a new understanding of relationships. Their entire concept of what a relationship was had evolved into something more meaningful and liberating. Rather

than viewing other people as a source of fulfillment for themselves, they started to see in others an opportunity for authentic connection. Relationships provided an arena where the participants could practice being themselves, and practice accepting and appreciating others for who they truly were. Ultimately, relationships became an opportunity for these women to surrender their concepts of self and let their essence shine through.

As this theme emerged, the researcher explored the participants' new understanding of relationships, regardless of whether they were consistently able to put that understanding into practice. What emerged was a vision of interconnectedness based on freedom and appreciation of other people, with no expectation of anything in return. Instead of viewing two people as incomplete halves of a circle, which need to be united in order for wholeness to be achieved, these women saw all individuals as complete and whole in their own right. Instead of the relationship being a vehicle by which to attain wholeness, it is instead an arena in which to share it.

In one of Andrea's passages, she described her newfound understanding of relationships, and articulated that wholeness is something found on one's own, rather than within the relationship:

A relationship is two people that are whole and complete, and happy on their own, who come together and share their lives with each other, and don't look to each other for completion or validation. But who honestly have their shit together, feel good about themselves. Or even if they don't, they're working on themselves in their own way that doesn't have to do with the relationship making them feel better or worthy. So yeah, two people that are good, that are happy on their own,

and have their own goals and their own minds, who come together and share that out of appreciation for the other person and um, yeah, and support, and love.

We can see in this paragraph how the relationship becomes a celebration of two people, a sharing of mutual love and understanding. Andrea no longer views relationships as a source of validation or affirmation. For the most part, Andrea described being able to come from a place of wholeness in her relationships, although, like the other women, she still sometimes fell back into her old patterns.

Leah shared a similar vision when she talked about her current view of relationships, especially the one with her husband:

I used to think that he could fix me... And when we first got married, I had all these expectations of what he needed to give me in order to feel satisfied in the relationship. I don't feel like that today. I know that the work has to be done on my own, so that when we do spend time together, there's a mutual sharing and respect for each other... Now I just love him, not what he can give me.

When Leah described how she felt about her husband now, versus when they first got married, the tone of her voice would change completely. She would talk about him with a sense of admiration and love, whereas early in their relationship she described feeling frustrated and irritated with time. As her transformation progressed, Leah's expectations of the relationship evolved. Instead of needing her husband to fulfill her, she learned to appreciate him for who he was.

In order to maintain wholeness in relationships, Emily referred to the necessity of authentic communication. For her, this was an essential component of genuine relationships:

I think relationships are about sharing what's going on inside, your feelings, with somebody else, you know, so that they can understand where you are... You know, intimacy is being able to know what's going on inside of yourself – 'into-me-see' – and being able to share that with somebody else via communication.

As she illustrates above, Emily believes that one must look inside of themselves for a clear understanding of who they are, before they can share that with another human being. Once a person gains insight into themselves, they can then share that with somebody else. This is consistent with the vision of wholeness mentioned above. Instead of looking to others for self-understanding and validation, individuals can practice connections where they share the understanding they have already acquired through introspection and contemplation. Again, relationships become shared expressions of a wholeness that is found inside oneself.

Summary

For these seven participants, it seems that the journey of transformation was characterized by four separate stages: 1) *Before Embarking: Unawakened Existence*, 2) *Looking in the Mirror: Facing What We Have Become*, 3) *Awakening to the True Self: Moving beyond the Masks*, and 4) *Arriving in the Moment: the Ongoing Journey*. The first stage of the journey is comprised of themes that arose for the participants before they were even aware of being on a journey of transformation. In the second stage, the women were just beginning to take their first conscious steps on the path. As they slowly started to awaken to their true nature, they began differentiating between their 'true self' and their false identity. By the third stage, these women had experienced a distinct encounter with their true nature and began learning how to integrate this awareness into

daily living. Finally, in the fourth stage, the women had learned to identify with presence as their essential identity. Though they were still attempting to transcend their various ego-structures, they had, for the most part, experienced a merging of their sense of self with their true nature.

The themes that arose in the first stage of the journey, *Before Embarking: Unawakened Existence*, were all largely related to the ways in which the women would disengage from their true nature. Most of the women discussed patterns of unhealthy relationships and faulty identify formation. For the sake of revision, the themes presented in Stage One are listed below:

- *Masking the Self: Creating and Maintaining Emotional Distance*
- *Fragmenting the Self: Narcissistic Understandings of Identity*
- *Desperate Connections: Relationships that Serve a Purpose*
 - *Getting what's needed: manipulating, grasping, and destroying in relationships*
 - *Through the looking glass: others as mirrors of the self*
 - *Filling the void: veiling the emptiness inside*
 - *Punishing everyone involved*

In *Masking the Self*, the women talked about how disconnection manifested itself in their lives. They would either distance themselves from others, or distance themselves directly from themselves, by creating masks or personas that they then projected outwards.

Fragmenting the Self was a theme that discussed how these women's sense of identity was actually formulated around narcissistic understanding of the self. Lastly, in

Desperate Connections, the women described how they would utilize their relationships with others in order to serve themselves.

The themes that arose in the second stage, *Looking in the Mirror: Facing What We've Become*, reflected the participants' initial steps on the journey of transformation. Each one of them seemed to undergo a process whereby change became necessary. They could no longer continue living in unawakened existence, and yet they were still a distance away from uncovering the truth of who they were. These themes are listed below:

- *A Moment of Truth: Realizing the Need for Change*
- *The Light Bulb Goes Off: Choosing the Path of Transformation*
- *An Authentic Encounter with Self*
- *Recognizing the Essential Self*

In *A Moment of Truth*, the women generally faced the ugliness of their current existence. They started to look at themselves, their lives, and the reality that they had created, and felt a deep calling for some kind of change. When they described the theme *the Light Bulb Goes Off*, these women expressed an understanding that change had to come from within. They recognized the need for an internal overhaul and made their first conscious decision to undertake a journey of transformation. In *An Authentic Encounter with Self*, the participants expressed having to re-examine themselves in the context of their evolving awareness, and to assess the reality of who they had become. Lastly, in *Recognizing the Essential Self*, they were able to peel back the first layers of faulty identity, and reveal the true self embedded underneath.

In the third stage of the journey, *Awakening to the True Self: Moving beyond the Masks*, these women articulated themes related to deepening their connection with the essential self:

- *Encountering the Divine*
- *Learning to Let Go: Surrendering Fear and Growing in Faith*
- *Working Through and Transcending*
- *The Relationship as a Vehicle for Healing and Growth*
- *Learning to be Alone*
- *Connection and Community Without De-selfing*
- *The Ongoing Commitment to a Practice*
- *Needlessness in Relationships*

In the first theme, *Encountering the Divine*, the women articulated a process whereby they developed a faith in something greater than themselves, and discussed how important this process was to their journey. In *Learning to Let Go*, each of the participants talked about the role that fear played in their lives, and how crucial it was to surrender this fear. *Working Through and Including* was a theme that actually described the process of awakening for these women, a process of gradually expanding awareness as opposed to linear and hierarchical progression. In *the Relationship as a Vehicle for Healing and Growth*, several of the participants described how, in awakened awareness, relationships can actually serve as an arena for practicing authentic connection – a practice which proved very healing for them. *Learning to be Alone* was another important theme for these women, who had largely been avoiding themselves prior to the journey. Here, they were learning to sit with themselves and be comfortable in the

connection with self. In *Connection and Community without De-selfing*, these women relayed how they were eventually able to extend themselves outward in authentic connection by practicing relationships from a place of essence as opposed to faulty projections. *The Ongoing Commitment to a Practice* was a pertinent theme, whereby the women were able to reinforce their evolving understandings of themselves as essence. A daily ritual helped them to stay connected with their true selves, rather than drift back into unawakened existence. Finally, *Needlessness in Relationships* reflected the quality of relationships as these women learned to surrender to their essential selves. No longer did these women seek out relationships in order to satisfy an existential need within themselves; rather they entered relationships out of a deep and authentic appreciation for both the other and themselves.

In the fourth and final stage of the journey, *Arriving in the Moment: the Ongoing Journey*, the women had learned to identify themselves with their essential identity. The themes that arose in this stage are as follows:

- *Realizing the Cyclical Nature of the Journey*
- *Accepting Impermanence*
- *Embracing One's Own Energy*
- *Solidifying a Sense of True Self*
- *Establishing Appropriate Boundaries in Relationships*
- *Transformed Relationships: Moving Beyond Need*
- *A Vision of Wholeness*

In *Realizing the Cyclical Nature of the Journey*, each of the participants articulated having to revisit certain aspects of their journey, sometimes repeatedly. The process

itself is never-ending, and realizing this was an important part of the journey in and of itself. Similarly, the theme *Accepting Impermanence* was also vital for these participants. By understanding that nothing in life is permanent, these women were granted comfort in the knowledge that life's most overwhelming moments would eventually pass. In *Embracing One's Own Energy*, the women discussed how important it was to surrender their egoic selves and let their true nature come surging forward. Usually, these experiences of direct contact with pure presence resulted in gratifying expressions of joy, love, and laughter. The theme *Solidifying a Sense of True Self* was characterized by the participants' ability to consistently identify with their true nature as opposed to their egoic self-constructs. *Establishing Appropriate Boundaries in Relationships* was a theme where the women learned to honour their essential self by avoiding negative patterns in relationships that might draw them back into unawakened existence. In *Transformed Relationships*, the women continue to practice expressions of need-free love. Finally, in the last theme, *A Vision of Wholeness*, the women articulated their newfound understanding of self and relationships.

Conclusion

The preceding chapter has provided a synthesis of all the information gathered during the course of this research study. The first section introduced the seven women who were interviewed, and then the contents of their interviews were divulged in a thematic analysis. In extracting women's lived experiences of transformation, four stages emerged as typifying the journeys of these seven women. These four stages were discussed, as well as the relevant themes that went along with each journey.

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

The following chapter contains a discussion of the research findings. Four sections will be presented: 1) Summary of the Research Findings, 2) Implications for Counselling, 3) Limitations of the Study, and 4) Suggestions for Further Research. In the first section, the researcher will revisit important qualities about the seven participants involved in the research, as well as the themes that emerged from the interviews. She will also discuss how these themes fit within the context of both Wilber's and Almaas' models of consciousness development, and whether those models are suitable for describing women's lived experiences. In the second section, the researcher will examine how this research study can be applied to counselling situations. Specifically, she suggests that counsellors need to be sensitive to differences between men and women's therapeutic processes. In the third section, the researcher presents qualities of the research that prevent it from being generalizable. However, she goes on, in the fourth and final section, to recommend ways that ongoing research can overcome these limitations and fill the gaps in the current literature.

Summary of the Research Findings

In order to better understand the themes that emerged over the course of this investigation, the researcher will now enter into a hermeneutic review of the thematic analysis. Presented here will be a summary of the participants, as well as a summary of each theme that emerged in the four stages of the transformational process. Further, the researcher will add context to those themes by comparing them to the levels and stages of Wilber's Spectrum of Consciousness model, as well as Almaas' Diamond Approach.

Finally, the researcher will also compare the themes that arose during her research to those that were presented during the literature review section of this paper.

The Participants

Over the course of this research, a number of women were identified who constituted possible candidates for inclusion in the study. Of those identified, seven were selected as eligible participants, and having undergone a pre-screening interview, proved to meet the inclusion criteria for the study: they were over 18 years of age, they identified themselves as having been on a journey of transformation, and they had experienced a shift in the nature of their relationships. These seven women then underwent a data-gathering interview from which the researcher extracted a number of themes that seemed relevant to the various stages of the transformational journey. Once these themes had been identified, the participants were further contacted to ensure the accuracy of each individual, as well as their combined precision in divulging the entire essence of the lived experience.

All seven women were Caucasian, ranging in age from 29 to 48 years old, though five of the seven women were under the age of 35. All but one of the women described themselves as being of average socio-economic status, with Julie being the exception. She regarded her family as being relatively higher up on the socio-economic scale. All participants held post-secondary degrees at a university level, and each was working a full-time job. Four out of the seven women held positions that were related to their field of study, and three were teaching English in South Korea. Three of the four women working in their field had also obtained graduate degrees in counselling-related studies.

Because of the nature of this study, and the complexity of the research question, the researcher chose most participants from acquaintances she already knew. It was important for this investigation that participants had experienced the phenomenon in question, and because the researcher herself was undergoing a journey of transformation, she had gravitated towards environments where other women were undergoing the same phenomenon. For example, because she herself had been in 12-step programs, she had heard other women in those groups share stories about their processes, and felt they would be suitable candidates for this study.

Similarly, it might seem strange that three participants were teaching English in South Korea, yet this is where the researcher was living at the time, and teaching was the chosen occupation for most English-speakers in South Korea. The researcher did, however, select participants who had spent most of their lives in Western Canada, or the upper-Northwest of the US. Due to the importance of language and understanding in phenomenological-hermeneutics, this was the best way for the researcher to extract the most meaning from the accounts of the participants; had they been from other parts of the US and Canada, or even from other English-speaking countries, the researcher may have had difficulty interpreting their accounts.

The Stages of the Journey

Stage one: Before embarking. Stage one of the journey, *Before Embarking: Unawakened Existence*, contains descriptions of the participants before they underwent any kind of psycho-spiritual transformation. The themes and sub-themes that are contained in this section illustrate the patterns that characterized the participants' lives, particularly as they emerged in their relationships. As will be seen briefly, the passages

contained in this section exemplify aspects of the journey that are consistent with the models of transformation presented by Wilber and Almaas in the chapter two literature review. The following is a list of the themes and sub-themes that emerged in this stage of the journey:

- *Masking the Self: Creating and Maintaining Emotional Distance*
- *Fragmenting the Self: Narcissistic Understandings of Identity*
- *Desperate Connections: Relationships that Serve a Purpose*
 - *Getting what's needed: manipulating, grasping, and destroying in relationships*
 - *Through the looking glass: others as mirrors of the self*
 - *Filling the void: veiling the emptiness inside*
 - *Punishing everyone involved*

Each of these themes could be categorized according to Wilber's Spectrum of Consciousness, or else in the part of the journey that Almaas called, The Journey to Presence.

In the first theme, *Masking the Self*, almost all the women talked about creating personas for the world around them. They either did not want others to know who they were internally, or else they were so disconnected from themselves that they really had no idea of who they actually were. This resulted in inauthentic relationships, or a lack of relationships altogether. Wilber might suggest that these are issues associated with the pre-personal level of development. There is little differentiation in their emotional selves, and the participants are still struggling to define their inner representational self –

issues that are consistent with the F-2 (phantasmic-emotional) and F-3 (representative-mind) stages of development.

In the second theme, *Fragmenting the Self*, the participants discussed needing to look outside of themselves for validation. The internal representation of who they were was largely based on external factors, such as their body-type, the way they looked, or even their gender. This is a prime example of the narcissistic identity issues that take place in stage three of Wilber's model. Stage three, or representative-mind, reflects the period of development of a person's id, ego, and superego. Therefore the feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety that some women described were typical of this stage in their development.

The third and final theme in this section, *Desperate Connections*, illustrated the ways in which each participant utilized relationships for their own benefit. While some of the women described actually using other people to satisfy an external need – i.e. money, sex, drugs – most of them discussed using others to satiate their more internal and emotional needs. With such unstable senses of self, these women described needing constant validation and affirmation from other people. They needed others to mirror certain qualities in themselves, or else they were unable to feel a sense of value or worthiness. Here we see more evidence of Wilber's third stage, representative-mind, but also elements of the three personal stages: rule/role, formal-reflexive, and vision-logic. In F-4, Wilber postulates that individuals begin working through issues related to group and family roles. As we saw in this section, many of the women struggled to fit in, with both families and friends, and could not integrate this stage of development. Similarly, Wilber's F-5 stage, or formal-reflexive, centers on the formation of healthy identity

structures. However, as was mentioned earlier, the participants' were relying on the input of others as the foundation of their identity. Finally, in F-6, Wilber talks about confronting existential issues, such as loneliness and meaninglessness. This is consistent with the accounts of several women, who described feeling an emptiness inside of themselves that they felt compelled to fill. In several cases, the women began seeking comfort in romantic relationships or sexual encounters in an effort to alleviate the aloneness they felt.

Each of these themes and sub-themes fall into the stage of the journey that Almaas calls, *The Journey to Presence*. He believes that all aspects of unawakened existence comprise this stage, as they will all eventually lead to the soul's awareness of itself as presence. As people learn to self-reflect, they invariably awaken to their own essence or true self. Everything prior to this awakening is necessary to the journey, and will ultimately guide a person to his/her essence. Each of the themes and sub-themes listed above are therefore necessary components of the journey. A person must first ascend through the stages of ego-development and narcissistic identification before they can experience a glimpse of their true essence.

Stage two: Looking in the mirror. The second stage of the journey, *Looking in the Mirror: Facing What We've Become*, described the part of the journey where these women began waking up to their true essence. As their dissatisfaction grew, they slowly became aware that the source of their frustration did not originate from outside of themselves, but from within themselves. We could therefore say that stage two of the journey is when transformation itself began.

The themes that arose during this stage of the journey are listed below. They represent the later stages in Wilber's second level of consciousness development, the personal level, as well as the earliest stages of the transpersonal level:

- *A Moment of Truth: Realizing the Need for Change*
- *The Light Bulb Goes Off: Choosing the Path of Transformation*
- *An Authentic Encounter with Self*
- *Recognizing the Essential Self*

For Almaas, these themes still represent aspects of the *Journey to Presence* because the participants are in the process of recognizing their true self or essence. It is not until essence starts guiding the journey that they shift to Almaas' second and third stages of the journey.

In the theme, *A Moment of Truth*, we see how most of the women reached a state of utter desperation before they were willing to change themselves. Four of the seven women were in recovery from alcohol addiction and discussed reaching their respective "bottoms". It wasn't until they had reached a state of emotional and psychological bankruptcy that they finally became willing to face what they had become. According to Wilber, issues with addiction begin to arise around the third stage of development, the representative-mind, when an individual has difficulty developing healthy egoic structures. Addiction then builds throughout the personal levels of development. The addict usually fails to integrate healthy concepts of group and family roles resulting in inauthentic connections (F-4), and struggles to develop a differentiated sense of self resulting in flimsy identity (F-5). The descent into addiction usually culminates in "hitting bottom" around stage six, when the addict realizes his/her existential limitations

to self. For these participants, hitting bottom reflected their transition into Wilber's F-6 stage, vision-logic, where the meaninglessness of their existence became too much to bear and they were presented with a choice: to either continue living an inauthentic existence, or else to face themselves and take responsibility for what their lives had become.

The second theme, *The Light Bulb Goes Off*, contains passages that reflect participants' first conscious recognition that they have embarked on a lifelong journey of transformation. They have had a moment of insight, and have recognized the discrepancies between their egoic self and their true self. At this stage, they had to decide whether to pursue the journey, or else to return to unawakened existence. *Choosing the Path of Transformation*, represents the first moment on the journey when participants open to the idea of healing and recovery; in other words, it's the first time they have opened themselves beyond interpersonal and intrapersonal development to a more pluralistic and universal state of development.

An Authentic Encounter with Self presents passages where several of the women discuss having to look at uncomfortable aspects of themselves, or truths about themselves that they had been previously denying. This is an important aspect of the journey because in order to deconstruct false representations of self, one must first acknowledge each and every construct, regardless of how uncomfortable it is to look at or how deeply it is buried. This is the part of the process that Almaas calls "inquiry" and is of utmost importance to the inner journey. Only through inquiry is the soul able to acquire the necessary capacities for transformation.

In the final theme, *Recognizing the Essential Self*, the women described having a profound shift in understanding. They came to the experiential awareness that all their self-constructs were inaccurate representations of who they actually were. By this stage, the participants had had at least one experience of essence manifesting itself. In other words, they came to recognize their true self as that which exists underneath self-constructs, self-representations – underneath thought entirely. They came to see true self as that which exists when there is no thought, that which is consciousness itself. Here we see elements of Almas' second stage, *the Journey with Presence*, as the women were finally gaining the insight that essence is in fact the ground of all being. However, they were still in the process of transcending their egoic self-structures and identifying with that essence in a nondual fashion.

Within this second stage of the journey, *Looking in the Mirror*, the last three themes represent the shift from Wilber's personal levels of development to the transpersonal. Specifically, the participants were moving from a narrow personal and individual perspective to a universal and pluralistic one. They became more open to concepts of healing and recovery, and more receptive to the journey itself. This process is akin to what Wilber described as the opening of the "third eye", which characterizes the F-7 or psychic stage of development. No longer were they limited to the issues of mind-body integration that mark the lower levels of development; they were starting to open themselves quite literally to a psychic dimension of perception and awareness.

Stage three: awakening to the true self. Stage three of the journey, *Awakening to the True Self: Moving beyond the Masks*, depicts the part of the journey where women begin to connect with their true self and use it as a reference point for their everyday

lives. They are finally learning to live “in presence as presence” (Almaas, 2004). The focus here is on aspects of the journey that brought them into more direct contact with their true self and facilitated deeper development of consciousness. Below is a list of the themes that emerged during this stage of the journey:

- *Encountering the Divine*
- *Learning to Let Go: Surrendering Fear and Growing in Faith*
- *Working Through and Transcending*
- *The Relationship as a Vehicle for Healing and Growth*
- *Learning to be Alone*
- *Connection and Community Without De-selfing*
- *The Ongoing Commitment to a Practice*
- *Needlessness in Relationships*

Each of these themes seemed to arise in at least several participants’ journeys. The women identified each one as being relevant to the process of awakening and learning how to live from a place of pure presence. These themes helped them to connect to their essence, and subsequently be more authentic in their everyday existence.

The first theme, *Encountering the Divine*, illustrated the importance that these women placed on developing a relationship with a higher power. They all felt it necessary to incorporate a relationship with God, Spirit, or Creative Intelligence into their daily living. For several of the participants, a higher power was essentially a mental concept of their true self, and represented those qualities of essence that they had experienced within themselves. For others, the relationship with a higher power served as a compass by which to gauge their spiritual journey. The relationship with God

offered them a sense of direction, whereas without it they felt lost and uncertain. This theme coincided with Wilber's F-8 or subtle stage, where individuals are able to directly apprehend their own deity form. Almaas, however, might suggest that this theme is characteristic of the dualistic experience of soul and essence.

In the second theme, *Learning to Let Go, Surrendering Fear and Growing in Faith*, the participants discussed the necessity of surrendering their fears. Acting out of fear ultimately drove these women back into their egoic patterns of behaviour; they reacted to situations with intolerance, resistance, and defensiveness, rather than with vulnerability and openness. By surrendering their fears and growing in faith, each woman was able to come to a deeper acceptance of herself and others, as well as the process in general. There was no more need to control and manipulate every facet of her life, and by surrendering that, the tension and resistance dissolved. Faith in the process allowed these women to enjoy themselves, to enjoy the journey, and to relax into the flow of existence.

The next theme, *Working through and Including*, exemplifies how women were able to work through various obstacles to their development. Some participants found themselves stuck, unable to move beyond a certain issue. For Sarah, it was her sex gig, for Emily, unhealthy social networks. Yet each of these women described committing to the process and eventually working through their particular obstacle. According to Almaas (2004), every soul must undertake a process of "clarification" and "purification", meaning that it must examine the narcissistic attachment it places on its own ego-structures. This theme shows elements of what Almaas is describing, for the women showed commitment to burning through their own egoic structures.

Another important theme which arose was *The Relationship as a Vehicle for Healing and Growth*. For several women, relationships themselves were a prime opportunity for practicing authenticity. Prior to embarking on the journey, a few of them described having experienced abuse in one form or another. Others disclosed having been abusive themselves in relationships. Naturally, it might prove difficult for these women to just abruptly change gears in the midst of intimacy. They needed to feel safe enough to be vulnerable, and to express themselves authentically without re-inflicting old wounds. Although Wilber does not specifically address the experience of relationships in the transpersonal level, he does describe the subtle stage, F-8, as dealing with attachment to the separate self-sense. This is an accurate description of what the participants were experiencing, because in order to ‘let go’ in their relationships, they needed to surrender the idea of a separate self that could experience wounding. Or as Almas might suggest, when soul merges with essence, there is no self to be wounded.

In the next theme, *Learning to be Alone*, a few of the women discussed the difficulty of facing one of life’s existential givens: aloneness. Andrea and Sarah, for instance, had sought out multiple relationships and sexual encounters in an effort to avoid the feelings of emptiness that arose when they were by themselves. Yet these encounters rarely afforded them the relief they were so desperately seeking. On the contrary, they were usually left feeling even emptier and more isolated. Once the women were able to confront and accept their existential truth – that all beings are essentially cut off from those around them, and that it is impossible to truly share one’s reality with another – they were able to surrender the desperation that undermined their relationships. Again, in this theme we see elements of both Wilber’s and Almas’ models of transformation. The

women were learning to deconstruct the self structures that were preventing them from experiencing essence in its purest and essential form. In other words, these were the first moments where the participants were confronted with the causal stage of Wilber's model, F-9. They were learning how to release themselves into boundless and formless awareness.

The theme *Connection and Community without De-selfing* included the accounts of women who felt that sharing similar interests with people actually helped them stay connected to their true selves. It was as if the higher goal of the group facilitated introspection within the women and challenged them to bring authenticity to their everyday lives. Twelve-step groups, yoga classes, and like-minded social networks provided an arena for these women to articulate and discuss their experiences. By participating in some kind of community, the women were able to reaffirm their experiences and relax into the knowledge that they were not being judged or discriminated against.

The next theme, *The Ongoing Commitment to a Practice*, illustrated how important it was for the participants to commit to some sort of daily activity that focused on the spiritual journey. Each one of them discussed how easy it was to fall back into old thinking patterns and behaviours, and how creating rituals helped to reinforce the lessons they had already learned. Prayer, meditation, and daily readings were all examples of how these women would stay connected with their essence and avoid falling back into unconscious living. The further along the journey that the women got, the less they needed to incorporate supplementary activities into their daily life. Instead, life itself became the spiritual practice, and every activity a kind of meditation. Eating, brushing

one's teeth, or driving to work became opportunities for moment-to-moment awareness where one could commune with the divine. This is an interesting theme because we are already seeing elements of what Almaas called "the descent". Although the women hadn't quite reached the level of total emergence in essence, they were still challenging the limitations that threatened to drive them back into their narcissistic identification with ego. Developing a daily practice helped them to continue their ascent to the "absolute truth", that presence is the ground of all being.

In the final theme, *Needlessness in Relationships*, the women characterized their current relationships as being based on "need-free-love". Rather than enter relationships because of what they could get out of them, the participants described entering relationships out of a pure appreciation for the other person. They felt free enough to let others be themselves, and free enough to truly be themselves, which ultimately resulted in authentic connection, and mutual appreciation for one another's essence or being.

Stage four: arriving in the moment. By the time participants reached the final stage of the journey, *Arriving in the Moment: the Ongoing Journey*, most of them had experienced a drastic shift in consciousness that allowed them to be consistently connected to their true selves. According to Almaas, they were in that part of the journey called, "the journey in presence". The themes that arose in this section were mostly to do with the quality of awareness that these women had developed:

- *Realizing the Cyclical Nature of the Journey*
- *Accepting Impermanence*
- *Embracing One's Own Energy*
- *Solidifying a Sense of True Self*

- *Establishing Appropriate Boundaries in Relationships*
- *Transformed Relationships: Moving Beyond Need*
- *A Vision of Wholeness*

As the women recounted their experiences of this stage of the journey, elements of the higher stages in Wilber's transpersonal level seemed to emerge.

In the first theme, *Realizing the Cyclical Nature of the Journey*, a discussion takes place regarding the pattern of the transformative process. Rather than embarking on a linear and hierarchical journey of transcendence, all the women described the journey of transformation as being cyclical and repetitive. This is interesting because it counters what Almaas suggests to be a four-stage process. Rather than spending three stages 'ascending' and one stage 'descending', it is as though the women were undergoing a constant fluctuation between ascent and descent. In fact, many of the women rarely reached what Almaas calls "self-realization" before they would descend into the process of daily living without ipseity. They would connect with their essence in a certain way, and would then have to practice maintaining that connection in light of everyday limitations.

In the second theme, *Accepting Impermanence*, the women described how recognizing the cyclical and never-ending nature of the journey actually facilitated a deeper understanding of impermanence. The fact that all things in life eventually pass away afforded the women a sense of acceptance in the present moment. They were able to see that no matter how uncomfortable a given situation, it ultimately must terminate with the arising of a new situation. Here we are seeing aspects of Wilber's transpersonal levels of development. Though this theme doesn't necessarily typify a specific stage in

Wilber's model, it does illustrate the rudiments of "transcendental insight", which he suggests starts occurring around stage eight, or the subtle.

Embracing One's Own Energy presents passages where the participants were able to surrender to their true nature. They managed to overcome the fear they felt about whether or not their authentic self would be validated by the people around them. A sense of satisfaction and gratification emanated from these accounts, where the women were finally able to let go and be guided by their inner essence. Here we are seeing the process of Almaas' third stage, *the Journey in Presence*. The women were starting to experience soul and essence as one. Their essential identity was becoming that of pure presence, and the nonduality that existed before is starting to resolve itself. This is the realization that soul is essence.

The next theme, *Solidifying a Sense of True Self*, illustrated how the women were eventually able to dissolve the false sense of self that had guided them in the past. As the journey continued and they had more experiences of direct contact with their true self, that true self began to take hold as their core self-construct. They became less likely to rely on the self-representations projected on them by others, and more likely to look within themselves for validation and affirmation. Again, one can see how the participants were journeying through Almaas' third stage of the inner journey. Similarly, the women were beginning to experience Wilber's F-9 or causal stage of development. They were witnessing the physical world as manifestation of formlessness. The separate self-sense began to dissolve completely as they recognized that the very same essence within them is in fact the ground of all being.

In *Establishing Appropriate Boundaries in Relationships*, the women talked about the importance of creating and maintaining healthy boundaries in their relationships. By setting up emotional and physical boundaries, the women were able to protect themselves against falling back into old relational dynamics. For most of them, certain people or situations were enough to disconnect them from their inner self, and hence they found it necessary to create distance – a space in which they could preserve their essential self and relate to others from that place of authenticity. This theme illustrated another kind of “descent” into the limitations of everyday existence. Though the women were still practicing nondual awareness, they were learning how to integrate this awareness into their daily lives.

This was also true in the next theme, *Transformed Relationships: Moving beyond Need*. Here, the participants were witnessing how essence could guide their relationships beyond neediness. Rather than utilize relationships as a means of validation and affirmation, the participants were able use their interactions as a space to explore their true self. Once they stopped “needing” others in their lives, they were free to enjoy the presence that arose out of their connections with those people.

In the final theme, *A Vision of Wholeness*, the women articulated how their entire concept of relationships had shifted over the course of the journey. The researcher felt this was an important point to include because it illuminated how drastically the participants’ awareness changed over time. Before embarking on the journey, most women described feeling as though they needed others to complete them. Their entire sense of identity was based on the impressions they held of their relationships. Yet as they underwent transformation, they began dissociating their sense of self from their

relationships, and instead started identifying with the inner quality of essence or presence. They saw themselves to be whole already, prior to engaging in relationships with others.

Revisiting the Literature: Themes of Women's Journeys

Presented earlier in this paper were a number of themes that the researcher expected to see during the course of her research. She had incorporated the accounts of various female mystics, spiritualists, counsellors, and authors – all of whom claimed to be on a psycho-spiritual journey towards wholeness. The themes that the researcher extracted from the literature, seem to closely parallel the themes that actually arose during the course of this research. To review, those themes are listed below:

- *Worshipping an Unattainable God*
- *Calling off the Search: Confronting Pain*
- *Developing a Practice*
- *Pure Presence: the Animating Force*
- *Embodiment: Nurturing the Soul*
- *Communing with Nature*
- *Oneness with the True Other*
- *The Truth and Nothing Less*

These themes will now be discussed in light of the present research study.

In the first theme, *Worshipping an Unattainable God*, several authors described the process of seeking pleasurable sensations while simultaneously avoiding pain and suffering. This is consistent with what the current participants described during stage one of the journey. All of their actions and behaviours were focused around the denial of reality, rejecting those parts of existence that were too painful to bear.

Calling off the Search is consistent with stage two of the journey, particularly what was described as the *Moment of Truth*. At this juncture, the participants often described “hitting bottom”, or arriving at a place where they could no longer justify living in unawakened existence. Ultimately the participants recognized, as did the women in the literature review, that seeking fulfillment outside of themselves was no longer granting any lasting sense of fulfillment. It was at this stage that the women began turning their attention inwards and effecting change from the inside out. This was often one of the most difficult stages in the journey because it meant facing all the emotional pain and discomfort that they had been avoiding.

The theme *Developing a Practice* was even more evident in the present research study than in the accounts included in the literature review. The literature review illustrated how a spiritual practice could actually ground women in a state of presence, and though this was true of the current participants, it seemed to do even more than that. Their spiritual practice became a means of manifesting their essence, as well as establishing new and healthy patterns of thinking and feeling. They were finding ways of deconstructing their false representations of self, and merging their sense of identity with their true nature.

The next theme, *Pure Presence: the Animating Force*, was an extremely important theme, perhaps key to this entire research project. One could even say that recognition of pure presence is what the journey is all about. In the context of the present study, the participants began to experience glimpses of pure presence late in stage two of the journey, and then continued to explore their awareness of pure presence in stages

three and four. Eventually, as they began to shed their egoic constructs of self, these women learned to identify pure presence as the core of who they are.

The two following themes, *Embodiment* and *Communing with Nature*, did not arise as distinct themes in the context of the present research. However, some of the women did articulate the importance of both while discussing other pertinent themes. For instance, Mary described how hatred and denial of her physical body kept her from developing a relationship with her essence. In rejecting herself, Mary would turn to food, alcohol, and other distractions so as not to have to deal with the pain of accepting her imperfect self. It was not until she surrendered to the reality of her physical body, and learned to actually inhabit it, that she progressed on her journey. For Sarah, communing with nature fell within the themes related to spiritual practice. As she stated in her accounts, part of her daily practice was jogging outside every morning. According to Sarah, being in nature helped her quiet her mind and “blow her chakras wide open”. Other women also described being drawn to nature, and felt that the natural world helped re-establish their sense of smallness and humility.

In *Oneness with the True Other* the researcher presented accounts that described the “true other” as being within oneself. Once a relationship is built with that other, a person can extend outwards in authentic connection with other beings. This is essentially what stage four of the journey is all about: nurturing the connection with the true other and learning how to live from a place of authenticity.

The final theme, *the Truth and Nothing Less*, reinforces those themes listed above. The “truth” is that once people learn to let go of all their faulty self-representations, they will come to identify themselves with what they truly are: a

manifestation of pure presence. Further, they will recognize that all life forms, all beings, are actually just a manifestation of unaltered consciousness, Being. In that sense, the truth of reality is that all of existence is united by the shared ground of Being. This awareness is what the participants were learning to integrate in stages three and four of their own journeys, what Wilber calls “Nondual Awareness”. This is where the split between subject and object dissolves and a person recognizes her oneness with the universe.

Summary

In summarizing the research findings, we see that women’s lived experiences can, to a certain extent, fit within the existing theories of consciousness development. The main difference, between the accounts of the participants and the descriptions of transformation postulated by Almaas and Wilber, is that women seemed to undergo a much more cyclical and revolving process of transformation. Instead of moving up a ladder of vertical mind-body transcendence, these women seemed to alternate between the process of ascent and descent – overcoming certain self-structures and connecting with essence, and then working this awareness into their everyday existence.

The other major difference that emerged was the tendency of women to work through issues in a relational way. Most of their egoic structures seemed to be built around the function that relationships played in their lives. As they were able to deconstruct these structures, relationships became an arena for practicing authenticity and vulnerability. They were eventually able to surrender to presence, and to let their essential nature guide their interactions with others.

Implications for Counselling

The study of psychology, and particularly that of human experience, is entering a phase of development where women's voices can no longer be ignored or simply heard as an aside. With the growth of feminism as an ontological perspective, there is more and more demand on society to acknowledge women as equal contributors to all areas of life. Although this demand applies to every area of society, it becomes especially pertinent in the field of health care where practitioners are responsible for the well-being of their clients. In the field of counselling, many individuals are seeking guidance and assistance in coping with their everyday issues and existence on a whole. The counselling relationship is one of much potential, and depending on the approach that the counsellor takes, can lead to opportunities for healing and growth. Therefore many of the concepts discussed throughout this paper can be integrated into the counselling experience.

Acknowledging the Importance of Relationships

As was illustrated in chapter two of this paper, the literature review, the process of identity formation can vary drastically between women and men. From birth, males typically undergo a process of separation from the mother and identification with the father. Hence their process of identity formation is usually centered on separation and individuation. Females, on the other hand, often undergo a process of connection and identification with the mother, and therefore their identity formation is usually centered on connection and relationships. As they develop into adulthood, men are more likely to cultivate their sense of self by undergoing a process of separating and becoming autonomous individuals, whereas women's sense of self is more likely to depend on the nature of the relationships in her life.

As was illustrated by the experiences of women interviewed in this research study, relationships can be a key aspect of women's journeys of transformation, and as such, ought to be honoured and explored within the counselling relationship. As each participant described the process of her journey, she highlighted the changing nature of her relationships, as though the journey itself was a journey 'through' self-other relationships. It was as though progress and development was measured by how authentically she could exist in the context of one relationship or another without de-selfing or injuring her own essential nature.

When counselling women, especially as they undergo a process of transformation, it is important that therapists be willing to explore the nature of women's relationships. Growing on the path, for women, often means growing in authentic inter-connection; as women transform their sense of self, their relationships evolve into expressions of need-free love and appreciation for themselves and others. Therefore a woman's relationships can provide significant insight into her psycho-spiritual development.

That being said, it is also important to note that not all women will fit within the experiences laid out in this paper. Some women may undergo a healthy process of separation and individuation, and some men may experience a transformation of relationships similar to what these seven women described. The goal of the present research study is not to redefine the assumptions that counsellors carry into their practices, but to challenge assumptions in general. Counsellors ought to be aware that these experiences exist, open to exploring them, and cautious of how they frame such experiences. In fact, it can be stated that counsellors ought to be aware that other experiences also exist and can be explored in the therapeutic relationship. Carrying any

bias at all towards a developmental trend may put the counsellor at risk of minimizing or devaluing a client's experience.

Conscientiously Using Linear and Hierarchical Perspectives

Another important aspect of these women's journeys was that they were rarely linear paths of psycho-spiritual development. Almost all the women talked about a process of awakening as one that ebbs and flows. Sometimes they would be acutely conscious and engaged on the journey, while at other times they would slip back into unconsciousness and the monotony of unawakened existence. All of them described the path of transformation as circular, meaning that they would often revisit the same issues they had worked through before, if only to gain a deeper insight and awareness about how that issue presently manifested itself in their lives.

What their experiences suggest is that it is natural for women to work through the same issues over and over again. Sometimes deeper understandings can facilitate broader awareness about oneself, or the journey in general. The responsibility of the counsellor is to stay with women as they cycle through various parts of the journey, and resist any urges to pressure them 'onward-and-upward'. For each of the women interviewed in this study, the process was never hierarchical, meaning that they never ascended through the stages of consciousness development to a final state of liberation from the ego. Instead, it was as if their awareness grew outward, incorporating various stages as they reached them. Sometimes these stages were lost or forgotten and their awareness would shrink back down, only to expand once more as they continued their journeys.

However, linear and hierarchical models of ego transcendence may be fitting for certain individuals, and provide a framework for understanding that other models might

not afford them. In keeping with the above suggestion, that counsellors need to be sensitive to the emerging themes of a specific individual's journey, the implication here is that practitioners utilize the appropriate developmental theory for the appropriate client. If an individual identifies with linear and hierarchical models, then perhaps those may be the most fitting for his/her therapy. If, on the other hand, a client feels confined by the structure of these models, the counsellor can refer to a more cyclical process of change.

Adopting a Feminist Developmental Approach

Because a significant volume of guiding psychological theory and research has been produced by men, practitioners must be sensitive to the fact that these theories might not be fitting when counselling women. As was stated earlier, the lived experiences of women do not always fit within what is considered 'normal' by mainstream psychology. By adhering to the more traditional counselling practices, therapists risk minimizing or de-valuing women's experiences, particularly with respect to women's relationships. For instance, while counselling men, it might be completely appropriate to emphasize qualities of self-sufficiency and autonomy as strengths of character. Yet to make the same value statement to a woman, a counsellor may in fact be injuring her feminine nature.

In therapeutic situations, it is important for counsellors to be wary of their biases regarding issues that arise during the course of therapy. It is arguable, for instance, that men are more likely to discuss issues regarding processes of individuation and autonomy, whereas women are more likely to bring up concerns about the various relationships in their lives. Similarly, male counsellors might be more inclined to overlook the importance of relationships in women's lives, and female counsellors may minimize the

importance of independence in the lives of men. Therefore, counsellors ought to be willing to explore and expose their own biases regarding what is considered 'normal' development, and be sensitive to the potential differences in male and female clients.

The implication here is not to switch one's faulty generalizations and circular reasoning so that they apply to both males and females. Rather, the researcher is highlighting a common misconception and important factor regarding identity development. Yet there are so many misconceptions and faulty assumptions about what is 'normal' or 'healthy' in the field of counselling that an attempt to cover them all here would be overwhelming. However, what can be said is that 'feminist counselling' is the kind that is sensitive to the experiences of the client. Each individual is believed to represent their own unique reality, and it is the counsellor's duty to explore that reality as it is experienced by the client.

Inviting Women to Undertake the Journey

The stages and themes presented during this research provide a framework for understanding women's journeys of transformation. In conducting psycho-spiritual counselling with women, practitioners may wish to familiarize themselves with the various stages of the journey and the themes that are likely to arise. Two ways in which a practitioner might do this is a) undertake the journey him/herself, or b) familiarize him/herself with the accounts of individuals who have undergone transformation. This will ensure that the practitioner is sensitive to the themes and issues arising during the course of therapy, and will enhance the practitioner's ability to empathize with clients.

Also, as practitioners become more and more familiar with the journey of transformation, they are more likely to facilitate growth and development through the

various stages and themes of the journey itself. For example, in the first stage, unawakened existence, participants described their lives as being characterized by unhealthy patterns in relationships, and by disconnection with themselves and others. Moving into stage two required hitting an emotional bottom, and taking an authentic look at themselves and their lives. A practitioner who is aware of this aspect of the journey can facilitate movement from stage one to stage two by developing and designing interventions that require the client taking a more honest look at their behaviours and actions. Similarly, the transition from stage two to stage three was typified by participants' growing awareness of their true nature and being able to integrate this awareness into their existence. A practitioner might facilitate a client's recognition of their true self by incorporating activities and discussions into the therapeutic process that promote inner reflection and introspection. For example, activities like meditation and chanting might help clients to distinguish between the energy inside themselves that is pure consciousness, and the idle chatter of the thinking mind.

The specific themes that arose during this research can also provide a foundation for counselling goals and objectives. For instance, most of the women interviewed during the study described having to develop a relationship with some kind of higher power, and to nurture this relationship by developing a personalized spiritual practice. This was a necessary aspect of the journey; without it, the women often found themselves reverting back to old patterns and behaviours. Having a relationship with a higher power allowed them to aspire to greater ideals and standards, which kept them tuned into their essential self as opposed to their faulty self-constructs. By understanding this dynamic, practitioners can invite an exploration of spiritual values and beliefs. Having stated that,

it is still important that counsellors be sensitive to which stage of the journey a client is at, and particular about the language used in inviting clients to undertake spiritual endeavours. Many of the women living in unawakened existence would attest that words such as “spirituality” or “higher power”, if presented early on in the journey, would have immediately deterred them from any further participation in therapy. Yet if presented at stage three or four, the women would have gladly engaged in related activities or discussions.

Another key point worth mentioning is that the women involved in this study were intensely emotional in their experiences. During the thematic analysis section of this paper, the researcher presented a number of excerpts from participant interviews. Many of these excerpts were charged with intensity and emotion, as each woman sought to articulate the reality of her experience. Further, it is worth noting that at the end of each interview, almost all of the participants commented on the sense of release and gratification they felt at being able to share their experiences with someone who grasped and identified with that intensity and emotion. The implication for counselling then is that practitioners be ready and willing to hold a space for their clients – a space in which those clients can explore the limits of their experience. Clients who potentially share the same emotional intensity as these women need to feel reassured that their experience, no matter how unorthodox, will not be minimized or taken for granted. In fact, if their intensity and emotion can be mirrored back to them, the gravity of their experience reflected in an empathic and understanding way, the therapeutic process will be that much more successful.

Limitations of the Study

A number of limitations prevent this study from being generalizable to other populations of women undergoing transformative experiences. First of all, the sample of participants is clearly not representative of women on a whole, particularly because of their relationship to the researcher herself. Six of the seven women were individuals that the researcher knew prior to conducting the study. There is no way of knowing how the relationship of researcher to participant correlated with the results of the study. Perhaps the researcher herself naturally gravitates towards individuals undergoing a certain type of transformation, or else who articulate the phenomenon in a certain way. For example, because of the researcher's own participation in twelve-step groups, she might be more inclined to perceive 'recovery' as a significant kind of transformation, and therefore recovering individuals became sought after participants in the research. However, having similar journeys could also be seen as an asset to the research because of the researcher's and participants' shared historicity. Having shared common aspects of the journey, the researcher was more likely to extract pertinent themes and to interpret them more precisely.

Further, the relationship of researcher to participant could have influenced the nature of the data that was gathered during the study. Consciously or unconsciously, the participants may have filtered certain information or experiences based on assumptions about the researcher or the inquiry in general. Similarly, qualities of their journeys may have been highlighted so as to project a desired persona towards the researcher. In the case of the researcher, knowing the participants may have predisposed her to biased lines

of questioning and probing, and may have also colored the researcher's interpretation of the participants' accounts.

The demographics of the participants also contribute to the limitations of the study. All of the women were Caucasian, between the ages of 29 and 48 years old. In terms of education, each participant was schooled to at least an undergraduate level. They were all employed, and their families generally ranged from lower-middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. Despite several of them having lived abroad briefly, they were all born and raised in western North America. All of these characteristics could be influential in women's journeys of transformation. Perhaps women from other demographics would have experienced the journey differently, or not at all. Maybe if women had been interviewed with lesser education, they would not have articulated their experiences in the same way. Again, it is difficult to presume how these factors may have influenced the study, and only with further research will such concerns be illuminated.

Another limitation of the study is the potential biases of the researcher. Because she herself is on a journey of transformation, it is likely that her own experiences shaped the nature of the research questions and extraction of the data. Although this is a prerequisite condition for phenomenological-hermeneutic inquiry, it may have led the researcher to seek out certain themes or to interpret the accounts of women in a way suited to her own understanding of the journey. Though she tried to counter this by revisiting the various themes with each individual participant, it is possible that some themes were left out and others misconstrued.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study is but a preliminary step in what will hopefully be a series of studies on the differences between men and women's journeys of transformation. It has given a voice to the feminine perspective which has largely been overlooked by male-dominated theories of consciousness development.

The next step will likely involve broader studies of women from more diverse backgrounds. For instance, a study might be conducted that compares the lived experiences of women from different ethnic backgrounds, or else the experiences of women from different age brackets. Similarly, a pertinent area of investigation might be whether or not transformative journeys are limited to educated women in a secure financial situation; it could be that higher levels of consciousness development are limited to those who are not struggling to meet their everyday basic needs. Regardless, it is necessary to expand the existing body of literature on women's lived experiences and to develop theories of consciousness development that are sensitive to the evolving research. Further, more research needs to be conducted by women themselves, as female researchers are more likely to pick up on themes that male researchers might ignore.

Once women's lived experiences have been more thoroughly explored, it might then be appropriate to compare these experiences to male-dominated theories of development. A larger study could even be conducted that includes the accounts of men and women, and themes could be extracted that are common to both groups. Male and female researchers and authors might collaborate to develop a universal model of consciousness development that honours feminine and masculine components of the journey. Or else it might be discovered that universal models of development are simply inefficient at describing the experiences of various groups. Perhaps we will find that in

order to honour gender differences, we must continue to look at the experiences of men and women independently of each other.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in order to answer the question: What are women's lived experiences of the journey of transformation through self-other relationships? It also sought to determine whether existing models of consciousness development honour women's experiences of the transformative journey. The research question itself was explored in the thematic analysis of women's lived experience contained in chapter four. The second concern, whether existing models of consciousness development honour women's experiences is a little trickier to ascertain. The hermeneutic review contained in the preceding chapter illustrates that there are many aspects of the female journey that are consistent with Wilber's Spectrum of Consciousness, and Almaas' Diamond Approach. Yet there are key identifying factors which seem to be misrepresented or minimized. Namely, for these particular women, the process of transformation is cyclical and expanding, as opposed to hierarchical and transcending. Also, these women's journeys seemed to center primarily on how they experience relationships in their lives.

The last few sections of this chapter have provided insight into how the results of the current study can be applied to counselling relationships, and how they can inform further research. Ultimately, this investigation is but a first step in what will hopefully be extensive research on women's transpersonal experiences.

The researcher hopes that in addition to presenting her research, she has also invited the readers to engage in their own processes of inquiry and investigation. The journey of transformation is a deeply fulfilling one, as one slowly learns to uncover truths

about their own existence and reality in general. Consider the following anecdote, presented by one of the female contemplatives the researcher encountered during her research:

There is a story about a little fish who swims up to his older and wiser fish friend and says, “You go on and on about water. I have been searching for it everywhere and it is nowhere to be found. I have studied all the texts, practiced and trained diligently, and met with those who have known it, but it has eluded me.” The wise old fish says, “Yes, dear. As I always tell you, not only are you swimming in it right now but you are also composed of it.” The little fish shakes his head in frustration and swims away, saying “Maybe someday I will find it.” (Ingram, 2003, p. xviii)

As a little fish herself, the researcher frantically sought answers from wiser sages and mystics. However, by engaging in the journey, experientially rather than intellectually, she came to understand the true nature of reality. She hopes that by sharing her journey and her investigation, the reader will seek out the truth as well. May you all one day find the “water”.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Participant Consent Form



Women's Transformations through Self-Other Relationships

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled 'Women's Transformations through Self-Other Relationships' that is being conducted by Janine Nowacka. Janine Nowacka is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by phoning (403)614-0808 or emailing janine.copeland@uleth.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gary Nixon and Dr. TBA. You may contact Dr. Nixon at (403)329-2644 or Thelma Gunn at (403)329-2455.

The purpose of this research project is to provide rich and thick descriptions of women's transformations through self-other relationships.

Research of this type is important because women's processes of transformation have been largely misrepresented in the existing body of literature. An exploration is necessary to help distinguish the lived experiences of women undertaking a journey towards wholeness, and the implications that being a woman might have on those specific processes; namely, how being a woman has shaped experiences of transformation, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a woman over 18 years of age, who has reportedly undergone a process of transformation – characterized by a transition in patterns of relating to other human beings.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an interview (of approximately 1-2 hours) whereby you will disclose elements of your personal journey as they relate to processes of transformation through self-other relationships. Your participation will also include a follow-up interview (of approximately 30 minutes) whereby Janine will present you with those themes that she has extracted from the information that you provided in the previous interview, and you will be given the opportunity to assess how accurately those themes represent your lived experience.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you; namely the time that is asked of you in completing the two interviews described above.

There are some potential emotional risks to you by participating in this research; because the transformational process can contain emotionally sensitive elements, there is a possibility that discussing such elements can cause emotional distress for you. For this reason, the following list has been provided in the event that you would like any emotional support.

The benefits of your participation in this research include: the potential catharsis that you may feel after having articulated the elements of your experience to a warm and empathic listener; and also the knowledge that your experience will help to advance the literary field regarding women's experiences of the transformational journey towards wholeness.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw prior to two weeks following the conclusion of the second and final interview, without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw, your data will be removed from the study and subsequently destroyed.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will be reviewing this consent form with you at the commencement of the second and last interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name will not be used on any of the disseminating materials – i.e. the student's thesis, or subsequent publications. Efforts will be made to remove identifying information prior to the transcribing of the audio-taped interview. However, it should be understood that the descriptions provided by you about your past, may inherently put you at risk of being identifiable to the reader.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping all data and relevant information in a locked filing cabinet to which only Janine has the key. None of your shared experience will be disclosed by Janine to anybody, with the exception of two situations: 1) you have expressed the abuse of anyone under the age of 18 years; or 2) if there is an expectation that you are capable of harming yourself or others. In both cases, Janine is legally bound to breach the confidentiality agreement and inform the proper authorities. The information that you provide during the first interview will be audio-taped for the purpose of transcribing.

Other planned uses of this data include journal publications, or presentations at conferences or symposiums.

Data will be disposed of after a period of five years from the conclusion of the study; tapes will be destroyed and any documentation will be shredded.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: via Janine's Master's thesis (which will be disseminated to those participants who are interested in the results of the study), published journal articles, presentations at scholarly meetings, and relevant internet sites.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisors at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

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

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B:

Copy of Advertisement

**RESEARCH INTO WOMEN'S TRANSFORMATIONS OF SELF-OTHER
RELATIONSHIPS****Volunteer Participants Needed**

Janine Nowacka, M.Ed. Counselling Psychology student
University of Lethbridge
Supervisor(s): Dr. Gary Nixon and Thelma Gunn

This Master's of Education thesis is designed to explore women's experiences of transforming self-other relationships. Janine is looking for female participants, who are 18 years or older, for the study who have undergone a shift, from dependency to celebrations of need-free love, in the way that they relate to others. The goal is to obtain rich and thick descriptions of the process of transformation, an understanding of the role that 'isolation' has played in this process, and how understandings of *self* and *other* have been shaped. The study will consist of one information-gathering interview (approximately 2-3 hours), and one follow-up interview (approximately 1-2 hours). If you feel that you meet the criteria and are interested in participating, please email Janine for more information: **janine.copeland@uleth.ca**

Appendix C:

Sample Questions for the Pre-Screening Interview

- 1.) How do you feel that you meet the inclusion criteria for this study?
- 2.) How long have you been on the path of transformation?
- 3.) If you had to describe your pre-transformational interpersonal relationships in a paragraph or less, how would you do so?
- 4.) If you had to describe your post-transformational interpersonal relationships in a paragraph or less, how would you do so?
- 5.) How did your encounters with 'isolation' shape your experience of the transformational process?
- 6.) Are you interested in partaking in the study?
- 7.) Do you have the amount of spare time required to participate in one information-gathering interview, and one follow-up interview?
- 8.) What expectations do you have with regards to participating in the study?

Appendix D:

Sample Questions for the Data-Gathering Interview

- 1.) When I use the word 'transformation', what do you understand that to mean?
- 2.) How do you feel that your experiences have been transformed in the past?
- 3.) If you had to describe yourself before you underwent this transformational process, how would you do that?
- 4.) If you had to describe yourself as you are today, how would you do that?
- 5.) If you had to describe the nature of your interpersonal relationships before undergoing the transformational process, how would you do so?
- 6.) If you had to describe the nature of your interpersonal relationships as they are today, how would you do so?
- 7.) What do you think were some of the precipitating factors that helped facilitated the transformational process?
- 8.) How has being a woman shaped your experience of interpersonal relationships?
- 9.) How has being a woman shaped your experience of the transformational process?
- 10.) How have your encounters with 'isolation' shaped your experience of interpersonal relationships?
- 11.) How have your encounters with 'isolation' shaped your experience of the transformational process?
- 12.) What are some of the struggles that have presented themselves along the way?