

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE
IN HELPING PROFESSIONALS

by

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Abstract

Current literature in the field of counselling psychology shows a great deal of interest in spirituality, meditation techniques, and how these may be more fully included in counselling practice. There are very few studies that examine contemplative practices such as Christian Centering Prayer, and very few that look at professionals who hold these practices. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people in helping professions who self-identify as having a Christian contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer. By exploring these people's experience of their contemplative practice in relation to their personal and professional life, the study reveals an area of counsellor development and professional practice that is rarely discussed. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used, and eight people from eight different professions were interviewed. Seven themes emerged from the interviews: (a) Changes in self-understanding and/or relationship with God, (b) Skills and learning related to thoughts and emotions, (c) Changes in personal relationships, (d) Quality of client and professional relationships, (e) Getting self out of the way, (f) Openness to others—sense of universality, and (g) Embracing life, mystery, and change. The study promotes greater awareness and understanding of contemplative practice and how its teachings relate to counselling and psychotherapy. As well, it offers insights into how these professionals integrate an understanding of spirituality into their work. Implications for practice and recommendations for further research are suggested.

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*“Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do
infinitely more than we can ask or imagine...”*

Chapter 1 Introduction

Background for the Study

This study has emerged from my studies in the disciplines of Christian spiritual direction and counselling psychology. I decided to pursue concurrent studies in the two areas because of a sense that my own journey of personal growth included deepening my understanding of both the psychological and the spiritual dimensions of life. In considering a thesis topic, I attempted to identify an area of research that would allow me to work at the borders of the two disciplines, integrating knowledge from both, and hopefully finding ways for each to gain deeper understanding of itself and the other.

As a part of my studies in Christian theology and spirituality, as well as a part of my personal practice, I gained familiarity with a number of contemplative practices. These practices included (a) Christian Meditation, a form of meditation which uses repetition of a mantra as a means of clearing the mind (Main, 1981); (b) Centering Prayer, another form of meditation which will be further defined later in this paper; (c) lectio divina, a method of using Christian scriptures involving reading, reflecting on, praying with, and contemplating short passages (Keating, 2004); (d) the labyrinth, a form of walking meditation that predates Christianity, using a pattern laid out on the ground (Artress, 1995); (e) others from different religious traditions, such as Sufi whirling, a meditative form of movement (Howe, 2005); and (f) chanting from Christian, Sufi, Hindu and other traditions. My training in spiritual direction, in part, involved learning to assist others in the development of a practice suitable to them, and to help them explore their understanding of and relationship with God.

Spiritual direction is a practice in which one person acts as companion or guide for another person who is seeking to explore and deepen the spiritual dimension of his or her life. Definitions of spiritual direction vary among faith traditions, and also from one Christian denomination to another. Spiritual Directors International, an international organization of

spiritual directors, has compiled a variety of definitions of spiritual direction that reflect the many different forms that spiritual direction can take (Spiritual Directors International, 2008). Spiritual direction differs from counselling in that the primary focus is on the spiritual life of the person seeking direction and on their relationship with God or the Divine. The term “spiritual direction” is often misinterpreted to mean that the “director” instructs the “directee”, or holds answers that the directee needs in order to move forward. The actual nature of spiritual direction is more of a listening process that director and directee enter together, in order to help the directee understand better how God is working in his or her life, and how the directee might respond to God’s action in his or her life. It is understood that God, or the directee’s understanding of a transcendent power, is present as a third party in the direction process. Spiritual direction does, however, have many commonalities with counselling psychology. Both practices seek to assist individuals in their personal development, to help them live more fulfilled lives, and to deepen their awareness of how they think and act in the world and in relationships. Counselling psychology is largely based in the teachings of Western psychology, while spiritual direction draws on the teachings of religious traditions.

I was fortunate that I was pursuing studies in psychology concurrent with my theological studies, and was therefore learning about various counselling theories that address psychological growth and health. As I continued my studies in theology and counselling psychology, I began to see an overlap between the kinds of growth that people experienced through contemplative practice and through psychotherapy and counselling. Both contributed to a development of greater understanding of self, to a healing of old psychological wounds, and to a greater ability to participate fully in the world. I felt that I could contribute to the exchange of knowledge between my fields by looking at the experiences of people with contemplative practices (contemplatives) through the lenses of a student of both counselling and Christian theology.

Research Problem

Since my exposure to contemplative practice has been within the context of Christian theology, I found it necessary to address the relationship between psychology and religion. The science of psychology, emerging in the last century, has distanced itself from religion, instead pursuing empirical methods to understand human functioning. Christianity in turn has tended to view science in general (and psychology in particular) with suspicion. In addition, especially in the West, Christianity has lost touch with its own contemplative roots. The division between scientific inquiry into human development and the spiritual practices that religious traditions use in developing various human capacities has become well-established. However, in the last few decades there has been a revival of interest in spiritual practices, both within the Church (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002) and in the field of psychology (Benner, 2002; Duerr, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Langer, 1989; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Welwood, 2000).

As Western psychology and the field of counselling have witnessed a surge of interest in spirituality over the last decades, articles have appeared addressing client interest in exploring spiritual issues in counselling (Rose, Westefeld & Ansley, 2001), counsellor competence in dealing with these issues (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Eck, 2002; Hage, 2006; Russell & Yarhouse, 2006), and the logistics and ethics of including a spiritual component in counsellor training (Eck, 2002; May, 1982/1992). Many of the studies exploring spiritual practices, meditation techniques, and contemplative practice have focused on how or whether these concepts might be integrated into counselling practice, but tend to overlook the unique philosophies and insights behind them (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

One relationship addressed in this project is that of spirituality, contemplative practice, and counselling. As a part of my reflective process, it is important for me to acknowledge the understandings and experiences that I hold regarding contemplative practices. In my observations of others and in my own experience with these practices, I noticed common themes.

It seemed that Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices often led people further into their own healing journeys, helped them gain self-knowledge, and also helped to facilitate new, renewed, or deeper interest and involvement in organized religion. In this study, my own experiences were a part of the hermeneutic process, but the stories of participants remained foremost.

While the practices to be studied in this project are native to the Christian tradition, many of them bear resemblance to practices from other traditions such as Mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Transcendental Meditation (Duerr, 2004). Thomas Merton, John Main, and Thomas Keating, all important figures in the modern rediscovery of Christian contemplative practice, each looked at practices from different faiths and learned from them in their development of Christian practices (Keating, 2002; Main, 1981). While acknowledging the unique flavour of each individual tradition, the work accomplished in any of these practices transcends religious affiliation, and addresses human potential more broadly. I believe that engaging in these practices can contribute to human growth, development, and health in ways that are not necessarily addressed in the field of counselling psychology.

Duerr (2004) states that in 2001 an estimated 10 million people in the United States and hundreds of millions worldwide practice some form of meditation. While the number of people who practice a form of Christian contemplation is not estimated, Duerr notes that “hundreds of Catholic and Protestant centers around the U.S. include Christian contemplative prayer and meditation retreats as part of their programs” (Duerr, p. 23). Canada also has many retreat centers offering this kind of programming. Two organizations that are active in British Columbia are Contemplative Outreach (a worldwide organization) and The Contemplative Society.

Until recent decades, the integration of knowledge from contemplative practices into counselling practice has simply not occurred. There are, of course, many historical reasons for the disconnect between the science of psychology and counselling and the disciplines of religion

and theology. However, a holistic approach to the development of human beings demands that attention be given to the spiritual element of our experience. As a neophyte counsellor and spiritual director, I see great potential for the sharing of knowledge between my fields, in order to contribute to greater holistic understanding of the human experience.

My research interests continued to solidify around an exploration of Christian contemplative experience as I recognized the growing desire in the counselling field to address spirituality in counselling. Much of the literature I encountered dealt with practices from Zen Buddhism or other traditions (Brazier, 1995; Brazier, 2003). Little literature existed addressing contemplative practices from Christianity, even though much of the discourse on religion in psychology has a Christian focus. In my own theological school, contemplative practice was not a significant component of the curriculum for students training to be clergy in their various Christian denominations. This fact is perhaps an example of how Western Christianity has until quite recently lost touch with its contemplative traditions (Bourgeault, 2004). A study addressing these deficits will be of benefit to both fields.

The Lower Mainland of BC has a very active community of people involved in contemplative practices, both Christian and otherwise. There is a network of people who practice Centering Prayer, and there are organizations that offer retreats and workshops, both in Christian practices and practices related to other faiths. I have heard people within these organizations express a desire to find counsellors who have some understanding of their practices. They are noticing a gap in the knowledge base of counsellors with traditional training in Western psychology. Because this population is a part of the larger population served by counsellors in the Lower Mainland, counsellors could benefit by having a better understanding of the experiences of those who identify themselves as Christian contemplatives. While more counsellors today are interested in including spirituality in their counselling practices, there are few who have backgrounds in Christian theological studies or Christian spiritual direction. A

greater understanding of how this population engages with the world and with the traditions of its own faith is an outcome of this study. Likewise, spiritual directors within the church do not necessarily have an educational background that would give them insights into aspects of psychological health such as psychopathology, mental illnesses, personality disorders, or other theoretical perspectives that psychology offers. My study contributes to an exchange of knowledge between the two disciplines that is emerging in the literature. It addresses an area that few studies have specifically addressed, namely Christian contemplative practice, as distinct from religion or spirituality more generically, as experienced by people working in helping professions.

Rationale

One aim of the field of counselling psychology is to better understand the human experience in order to assist clients in increasing their self-knowledge and their functioning in the world. I believe that spirituality is one aspect of the human experience that has been neglected in the field, and that research in spirituality will contribute timely advances to our knowledge. This opinion is supported in literature from recent years, indicating a need for recognition of spirituality in counselling, and a desire of clients to have this component of their experience included in the counselling process (Beck, 2003; Benner, 2002; Pargament, 1997). Rather than focusing on a number of different Christian contemplative practices, I chose to look at participants who have a practice of Centering Prayer. Some of the participants have held or do hold other practices in addition, but a common practice among all participants helped to create a more focused exploration of the experience of this particular form of contemplation. There is also a body of literature on Centering Prayer, but few studies have looked at the experience of people with this practice who work in helping professions. Contemplative practices from all traditions work towards giving people deeper insights into their connections with self, others, the world, and the Divine by offering instruction on calming the mind and becoming less reactive to

thoughts and emotions. My study focused on one particular form of instruction, while looking at the overall stories of individual experiences of Christian contemplative practice. It has shed light on how these practices play a role in the lives of participants. It also contributes to knowledge that will benefit the counselling profession by offering an inside look at these practices. When examining the nature of existing studies on contemplative practice from within the field of psychology, Walsh and Shapiro (2006) noted that

... psychologists usually regard meditation as just another therapeutic technique to be applied and investigated in conventional ways. ... Moreover, research findings have been interpreted almost exclusively within Western psychological frameworks, ignoring meditation's complementary psychological and philosophical perspectives. This has been widely described a necessary "decontextualization," but it is actually far more. It is also a major recontextualization and revisioning of the practices within an exclusively Western psychological and philosophical framework (pp. 227–228).

Walsh and Shapiro (2006) go on to suggest that a much more fertile approach to research in this area would be to view it as a mutual enrichment of disciplines, with a much broader potential than simply finding new therapeutic techniques for counselling practice. My own unique position as an insider in both disciplines offers me an opportunity to contribute to research with an understanding of the language and culture of two different fields.

A number of journals are dedicated to exploring the connections between religion, spirituality, and counselling (International Journal for the Psychology of Religion; Journal of Psychology and Christianity; Journal of Psychology, Theology, and Counselling; and Spirituality: The Journal). In addition, the APA division for the Psychology of Religion began publishing a new journal called Psychology of Religion and Spirituality in February 2009. In the past decades, research devoted to exploring the connections between religion, health, and coping has also emerged (Faull & Hills, 2006; Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph, & Shouldice, 2005; Pargament, 1997). In addition, Christian theologians and authors have contributed writings that explore the connections between contemplative practices, spiritual development, and psychological growth (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002; May, 1982, 1982/1992). Recent articles

and studies have looked at the development of spirituality in the aging process, the connections between object-relations theory and spirituality, the role of spiritual direction in nurturing spiritual growth, and the connection between spirituality and trauma (Benner, 2002; Grant, 2001; Gurney & Rogers, 2007; Wink & Dillon, 2002).

While each of these deals with a topic related to spirituality or religion in a more general way, few studies deal specifically with the experience of people with a sustained contemplative practice. In this study, I have addressed that gap in the literature by focusing on this specific area of interest under the broader research area of religion and spirituality. A study of people who have had a contemplative practice for an extended period of time is important for the counselling profession for a number of reasons. As noted earlier, the literature suggests that interest in including spirituality in counselling is growing, and current trends suggest that more research in this area would be welcomed (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Eck, 2002; Hage, 2006; Rose et al., 2001; Russell & Yarhouse, 2006; Wiggins Frame, 2003). The goals of counselling and the intent of contemplative practices have similarities that are worthy of more exploration. Both are directed towards helping people live more fulfilled lives. Dialogue between counsellors and those who use or teach contemplative practices will benefit both groups. Counselling professionals can gain access to the knowledge of contemplative practices that has existed for centuries outside the customary knowledge base of Western psychology. Those who use contemplative practices can benefit from the knowledge of scientific advances and theories found in psychology.

The literature on Christian contemplative practices includes explanations of the practices themselves, guides for people interested in pursuing a practice, and some historical information on the origins of practices and how they have evolved over time. Examining a contemplative practice in relation to more current theories of psychological development is a potential area of learning that this study can encourage.

One benefit of contemplative practices in general, and Centering Prayer in particular, is that they help people gain greater control of their thinking processes by increasing awareness of what thoughts are present in the mind at any given time. Another benefit of these practices is an improved ability to identify less intensely with one's emotions, and be more likely to respond mindfully to situations that arouse strong emotions (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). By various means, meditation techniques guide people in ways to gain awareness of, and gradually slow down or become less likely to be distracted by, the random thoughts or interior voices that every person experiences in day to day life. Cognitive Behavioral Theory describes negative thinking patterns, and offers teaching on how to catch, challenge, and replace negative thoughts with more realistic ones that promote functionality in the world. Centering Prayer offers instruction on how to recognize different types of thoughts and how to avoid getting overly emotionally involved in them. By intentionally cultivating interior silence, where thoughts can be recognized as they emerge, Centering Prayer creates space for people to recognize and let go of negative thought patterns that might otherwise influence emotions and behaviors outside of conscious awareness (Bourgeault; Keating). I see a similarity between this benefit of contemplative practice and the work of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, although Keating and other teachers of Centering Prayer are careful to point out that Centering Prayer is firstly prayer and not psychotherapy or simply a form of self-improvement. Keating reminds his readers that the prayer is not intended to be divorced from its intent to nurture relationship with God.

According to Bourgeault (2004), contemplation in Western Christianity has been, until recent decades, largely regarded as a specialized practice reserved for the religious elite. This notion has been reinforced by Western Christian churches, and has become a part of the secular understanding we see today influencing counselling psychology. The notion has been challenged, however, by re-emerging contemplative practices like Centering Prayer and by other

contemplative teachers such as Buddhist Mindfulness author Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990). Kabat-Zinn points out that “meditation is really about paying attention. ... And since paying attention is something that everybody does, at least occasionally, meditation is not as foreign or irrelevant to our life experience as we might once have thought” (Kabat-Zinn, p. 21).

The literature on Centering Prayer is rich with instruction aimed at increasing people’s abilities to free themselves from unhelpful thinking patterns. One of the primary teachings of the prayer addresses the problem of random thoughts with the instruction to “Resist no thought, Retain no thought, React to no thought, and Return to the sacred word” (Bourgeault, 2004, p. 39).

In addition to facilitating greater freedom from random thoughts, Centering Prayer also offers insights into how thoughts and emotions, rooted in our earliest experiences, influence our behaviours in adult life. Keating says “Self-knowledge in the Christian ascetical tradition is insight into our hidden motivation, into emotional needs and demands that are percolating inside of us and influencing our thinking, feeling, and activity without our being fully aware of them” (Keating, 2004, p. 83). He sees Centering Prayer as a kind of link between Christian spiritual teaching and more contemporary psychological theory and practice. The links suggested by Keating and others between this form of contemplative practice and the work of psychotherapy make it a relevant topic of exploration for the field of counselling psychology. With roots in ancient Christian practices, and commonalities with practices from other faith traditions, Centering Prayer also provides a ready example of contemplative practice that is representative of this type of work. In addition, the intention of Keating and the prayer’s originators was to create a method that drew on the teachings of psychology. A study of Centering Prayer that seeks to further explore the experience from both spiritual and psychological perspectives is relevant to the field of counselling psychology.

Research Question

The purpose of my study is to better understand the experiences of people in helping professions who have a Christian contemplative practice. The research question to be explored is “What is the experience of people in helping professions who have a contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer?” The question is relevant to the field of counselling psychology, not so that the profession can adopt or claim contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer, but rather so that counsellors can learn about the perspectives and experiences of people who draw on teachings that are different from those of Western psychology (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Centering Prayer is only one example of such a practice, but to date it has been given little attention in the counselling psychology literature. This study addresses this gap and illustrates the experiences of people who engage in this practice. My research accesses the essential experience of Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices, and addresses the following questions: What are the common experiences of people with this practice? Is there common language used as people reflect on their individual experiences? How do participants understand the role of these practices in their personal and professional lives? Are there common experiences, and if so, how would knowledge of these common experiences benefit the counselling profession?

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Definitions

In order to facilitate understanding of the research problem, a number of terms must be defined. Among them are spirituality, religion, contemplative practice, and Centering Prayer. There is wide variation in the literature concerning definitions for many of these terms.

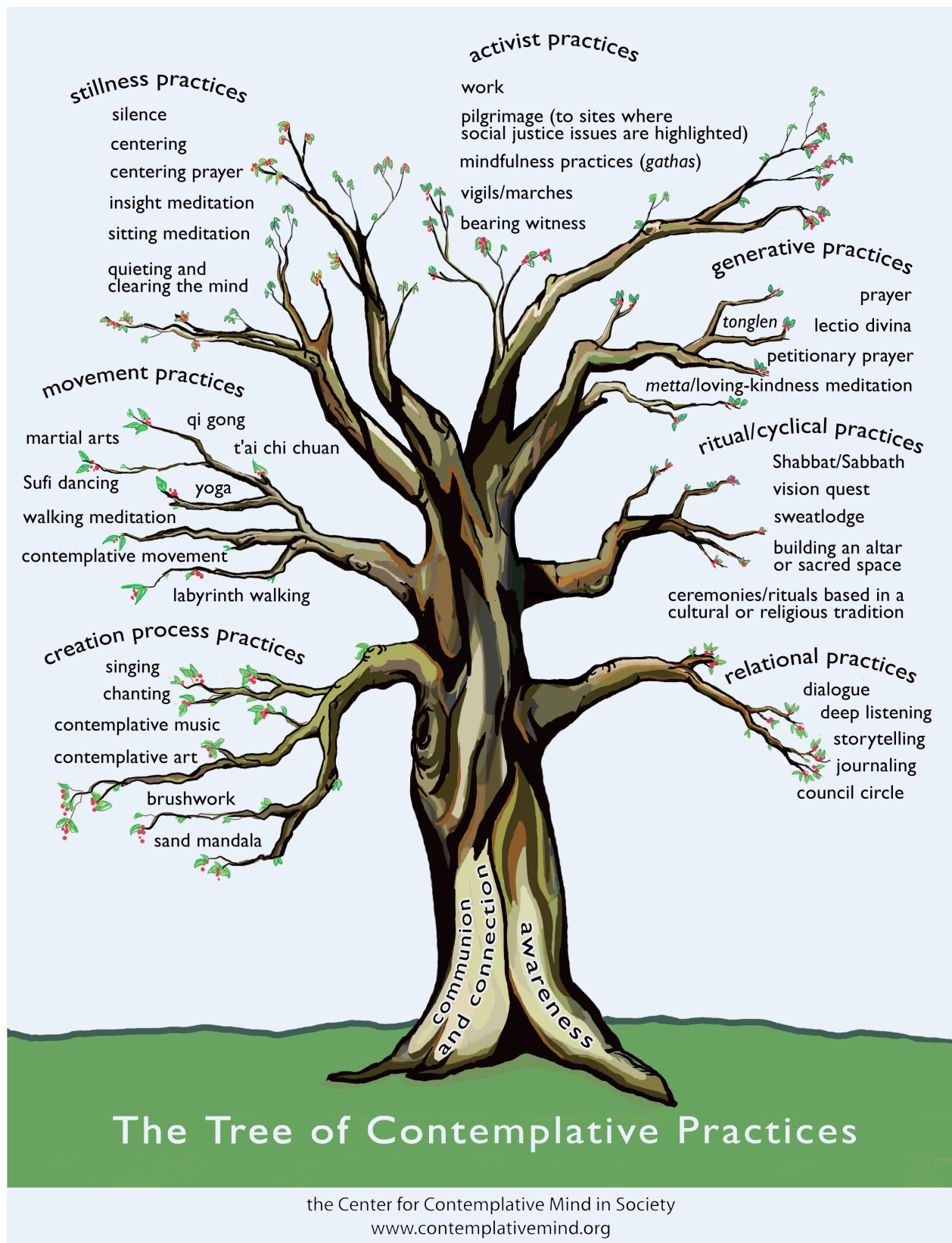
Spirituality and religion. Attempting to establish an operational definition of spirituality is difficult because many authors present slightly different ideas on how it can be described (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Russell & Yarhouse, 2006; Hage, 2006; May, 1982). However, some common characteristics of attempts to define spirituality include a search for the Divine or sacred in life, a seeking of transcendence in one's own life, and a desire to find deeper meaning and fulfillment. Spirituality is often linked with religion, although the two terms are not interchangeable. Rose, Westefeld, and Ansley (2001) make a distinction between religion and spirituality, stating that religion refers to adherence to the beliefs and practices of an organized religious group, whereas spirituality refers to the personal search for relationship with the Divine or a higher power.

Russell and Yarhouse (2006) note that spirituality is often viewed as personal experience within the context of organized religion, and that drawing clear distinctions between the two terms is not always helpful. In contemporary society, many people explore the nature of spirituality without strong roots in any particular religious context. For the purposes of the present study, spirituality will be defined as a construct that involves an individual's sense of connection to self, other, world, and concept of the Divine or Infinite. One way that people can nurture their spirituality is through contemplative practice, either from within or outside of a religious context.

Contemplative practices. Contemplative practices are activities used to quiet the mind in order to facilitate concentration, help develop deeper self-insight, and cultivate compassion and relationship with God or an individual's sense of the Divine or the sacred. These practices may include various forms of meditation such as Centering Prayer or Mindfulness, walking practices such as the labyrinth or pilgrimage, other physical practices such as qi gong or yoga, or creative practices such as chanting or singing. This list is only a small sampling of the wide varieties of practices used by people of many different backgrounds and faiths. A more comprehensive list of practices is represented on the tree of contemplative practices, developed by the Contemplative Mind in Society, and shown in Figure 1.

Contemplative practice may contribute to increased compassion for others, decreased focus on pure self-interest, or recognition of the limits of one's control over one's life. It can affect how one thinks and acts, and can involve an examination of values or beliefs leading to adoption of new ways of seeing the world.

Figure 1. Tree of contemplative practices



Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is one of the many practices listed under “stillness practices” in Figure 1. It is a form of contemplative practice developed in the early 1980s by Keating, Pennington, and Meninger, three American monks, who recognized the need for a prayer practice within the Christian tradition that would help people seek spiritual growth and transformation (Keating, 2002).

The formal practice of Centering Prayer is usually done in twenty-minute segments, sometimes with three segments in succession and short breaks between. Keating recommends that people do the practice individually twice a day for twenty minutes. People also sometimes meet to practice in small groups on a regular basis, or attend extended intensive retreats of up to ten days. While seated comfortably, an individual uses a word to help bring the attention back to the practice. Each time the individual notices the mind wandering, or random thoughts catching the attention, the word is repeated. The word is not a mantra continually repeated, but only a tool used as necessary to help the individual from becoming engaged with the random thoughts as they pass by. The practice helps to quiet the internal chatter that typically goes on in our minds throughout the day. Theologically, Keating (2002) and Bourgeault (2004) say that early Christian mystics note that this silence is the place where the individual is most able to be aware of and open to God. In daily life, the silence allows individuals to gain greater ability to respond to events of a typical day without being driven so much by unconscious internal motivations. Keating says that many of these motivations arise out of early childhood experiences, when we perceived that our basic needs for safety and security, esteem and affection, and power and control were not being met. We develop what he calls a “false self system” and “programs for happiness” that influence our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours as adults, without our realizing their existence. The Centering Prayer practice helps to cultivate awareness and an ability to respond more consciously to events.

Influence of the Literature

Spirituality in counselling practice. Before the birth of the field of psychology, care of the soul was seen as the domain of clergy, spiritual teachers, and healers from religious and spiritual traditions. As psychology began to emerge as a science, spiritual traditions and the practices associated with them began to be thought of as a separate discipline. However, from the time of Freud and Jung, the relationship between religion and psychology has been a topic of exploration. While Freud viewed religion in a negative light, Jung saw religion and spirituality as more integral to human development and functioning. William James viewed religion as a personal process of meaning-making, and of an individual's own encounter with the Divine (James, 1902/1997). His definition resembles some of the more contemporary definitions of spirituality (as presented above), rather than focusing on religious institutions as a whole. Viktor Frankl, the originator of logotherapy, believed that the human being consisted of mind, body, and spirit. Spirit, in Frankl's theory, is the human will to find meaning in life, rather than a concept connected with religion (Frankl, 1959/1984).

The Western scientific approach to psychology has historically emphasized the separation of mind and body, and has tended to view matters of the spirit or soul as being outside the scope of psychology (Wiggins Frame, 2003). Within the Christian tradition, contemplative practices became increasingly seen as specialized activities for those dedicated to the religious life, and not as something accessible to the average person (Bourgeault, 2004). In the second half of the twentieth century, partly as a result of learning from other traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity began to rediscover its own contemplative roots and the spiritual practices that have existed within the tradition since its beginnings (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002).

At the same time, contemporary psychology has seen an upsurge of interest in the varied spiritual practices of faith traditions, looking for ways to incorporate the benefits from them into counselling work. As a result, integrated approaches to mind/body/spirit are much more common

currently, and the literature reflects a growing interest in spirituality within counselling practice. With this interest comes an increasing recognition of the importance of religious and spiritual aspects of the person in counselling. The literature identifies several issues of importance regarding how integrating spirituality into counselling might happen. These issues include whether clients want spirituality to be a part of counselling, the competence of counsellors to address spiritual issues with clients, and the possible ways of integrating spirituality into counselling.

One issue, explored by Rose and colleagues (2001), addresses whether clients want to be able to discuss spiritual concerns in counselling, and whether they feel it is appropriate to raise these concerns in the context of psychotherapy. A second issue, explored by other researchers including Hage (2006), Aten and Hernandez (2004), Russell and Yarhouse (2006), and Eck (2002), is counsellor competence, because there are few training programs that address spirituality or religion. A third issue is the appropriateness of integrating spirituality into psychotherapy, and the differences between the two practices of psychotherapy and spiritual direction, the latter often taking place within a particular faith tradition and with a focus on spiritual growth (Eck, 2002; May, 1982/1992).

An American correlational study by Rose and colleagues (2001) examines whether or not clients actually want to discuss spiritual or religious matters in counselling, and if they believe it is appropriate to do so. The study found that over 50% of subjects wanted to discuss them, and noted a positive relationship between the level of clients' previous spiritual experiences and their likelihood of thinking it was appropriate to discuss spirituality in counselling. The study also noted previous research that indicated some clients were hesitant to raise spiritual or religious concerns in counselling because they might not be well received by the counsellor. The study concludes that highly spiritual clients believe it is acceptable to bring these issues into

counselling, and recommends that counsellors and psychologists gain sensitivity and awareness of these issues.

Eck (2002) also explores the issue of clients' level of desire to discuss spirituality in counselling. His review of research presents various statistics that indicate from 50 to 90 percent of clients place value on spiritual or religious issues, and that up to 78% feel that these should be discussed in therapy. Eck speculates on why clients do not raise these issues in therapy more often than they do, given the high percentages. He suggests that therapist silence on these topics might lead clients into hesitancy to bring them up. While Eck does not present experimental data of his own, he does raise important questions about therapists' comfort, familiarity, and competence in effectively addressing spirituality in their practices. He calls for research into what practices might be appropriate for specific clinical problems, and suggests a need for an integrated theoretical model. He also suggests the need for research that might shed light on what kinds of spiritual practices might be helpful for specific problems brought to counselling. From these studies, it appears clear that research into spiritual practices themselves would benefit the counselling field and begin to address a need being expressed by society.

There is agreement among researchers that a lack of opportunities for training leaves counsellors largely without the competency needed to effectively address spiritual and religious concerns in counselling, even though interest in them and acceptance of their importance is increasingly recognized (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Hage, 2006; Russell & Yarhouse, 2006). Each of these articles presents a slightly different perspective on what is lacking in training programs, how these issues might best be addressed in the context of therapy, and what is needed to better prepare student counsellors. All three suggest areas in need of further research, some of which are addressed by the current study.

Training in diversity and multicultural issues is regarded as vital for anyone entering the counselling field. Counsellors are encouraged to view all counselling relationships as

multicultural because each individual carries a unique combination of ethnic, cultural, social, and familial influences. Religion and spirituality are another aspect of multicultural experience that deserves attention, according to Hage (2006). However, she notes that this aspect of diversity continues to be a neglected component of training programs. As a result, counsellors without competency in the area of religion and spirituality run the risk of misunderstanding clients who cite spirituality or religion as important aspects of their life. Misunderstandings can include stereotyping or inappropriately generalizing client experiences and belief systems (Aten & Hernandez, 2004). Another risk is that counsellors will overlook the significance of spiritual or religious components of clients' lives that could be drawn upon to benefit the client (Hage, 2006). Conversely, these same elements could be causing difficulty for clients, while the counsellor remains unaware. Wiggins Frame (2003) includes further exploration of person-of-the-therapist issues in her book on spirituality and religion in counselling. She suggests a number of areas for therapists to engage in self-reflection when dealing with clients' spiritual issues. These areas include looking at countertransference reactions such as may result from therapists' own religious upbringing and associations, and their comfort level in articulating their own spiritual experiences.

The Russell and Yarhouse (2006) study identifies constraints on training in spiritual issues, and offers several suggestions on how these constraints might be loosened. Among those that pertain to this study are finding ways to include spiritual and religious issues as a component of diversity studies, forming relationships amongst practicing psychologists and counsellors who have background or training in these issues, and forming alliances with professionals associated with various traditions in order to learn from them. The stated purpose of such suggestions is not to train clinicians and counsellors in the field of religion and spirituality, but to offer interns exposure to these subjects so that they might gain awareness of and sensitivity to them when assessing clients.

Intents of the current study are to encourage this type of exposure, and to promote sensitivity to the subject, as suggested by Russell and Yarhouse (2006). May (1982/1992), a psychiatrist who wrote extensively on spirituality, psychology, and spiritual direction, encourages informed and sensitive inquiry into subtler ways of addressing the spiritual searching that underlies human functioning. His approach is quite different from that of Eck (2002) and others, who suggest that ways be developed to incorporate spiritual interventions (prayer, meditation, reading, etc.) into counselling, and who match interventions to specific presenting problems. May's work in spiritual direction stresses the importance of listening for emerging spiritual themes, and drawing attention to them to promote contemplation and action. It is clear that from his perspective the disciplines of spiritual direction and psychology belong in different environments, but that both practices can be enriched by awareness of the other. Like Russell and Yarhouse (2006), he supports the idea of developing networks of professionals so that referrals can be made when needed. This study may contribute to such networking amongst professionals by raising awareness of the kind of work being done by others in each field.

Many authors indicate a need for research in order to establish integrated theories and examine the effectiveness of spiritual interventions in counselling. A few writers have outlined their own integrated theories in recent years. Benner (2005) tells of his own exploration of spiritual direction and psychotherapy over the last decade. His original position was that the two disciplines should not be combined. His later work has included exploring different understandings of how to nurture spiritual growth, and looking at the common and differing territories of psychotherapy and spiritual direction. In his 2005 article, he describes his new integrated practice, which he calls Intensive Soul Care. With a model rooted both in psychoanalytic theory and Ignatian spirituality, he creates intensive retreats for individual clients seeking psychotherapy, but also wishing spiritual growth. In an extended case study example, Benner describes a progression of therapy that addresses psychological concerns of depression

and relationship problems without mislabeling them as spiritual issues. Additionally, he looks at the religious roots and the past and current spiritual practices of the client, at the client's request. These concerns are dealt with in separate components of therapy that give the client both relief from psychological distress and material for spiritual growth and development. This model provides an interesting view of one way in which spiritual exploration and psychotherapy can be carried out concurrently, without minimizing the importance of either dimension.

Sperry (2005) presents another approach to integration with his Integrative Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy, which draws on several psychotherapeutic theories and views the spiritual dimension as a primary component of human functioning. The benefit of this theory is that it lends itself to a wide variety of clinical issues. However, it demands a therapist with extensive knowledge of a variety of theories, and with training and understanding in spiritual and religious issues.

Another element of the trend towards inclusion of spirituality in counselling is the need to recognize potential problems associated with adherence to religious or spiritual belief systems. Welwood (2000) explores a problem he has noticed among some people who associate with spiritual or religious communities. He describes the phenomenon as spiritual bypass, in which individuals abuse spiritual or religious beliefs and practices as a means of avoiding their own unfinished psychological work. He has observed people using certain spiritual teachings (specifically, ones that encourage transformation and letting go of self-absorption) as a means of subtly reinforcing old defense mechanisms and maintaining a dysfunctional way of being. Cashwell, Myers and Shurts (2004) provide further explanation and case study examples of spiritual bypass in order to raise therapists' awareness of problems clients may encounter when misunderstanding or misusing these practices. The authors present a theoretical framework for addressing the developmental tasks such clients may be overlooking or avoiding, while also dealing with the spiritual struggles present. Recognizing spiritual bypass requires that

counsellors have familiarity with some of the situations in which it may arise, and of the particular practices used. The current study explores the experience of contemplative practice, and will contribute to counsellors' ability to recognize and work with potential problems that might arise.

Spirituality, coping and health. The role that spirituality plays in relationship to health, and in coping with illness or life stressors, is another area of research that relates to the topic of the current study. Pargament (1997) has written extensively on the psychology of religion and coping. His work includes explorations of how and why people turn to religion when faced with difficult life situations, and which characteristics of engagement with religion influence ability to cope. Another area of his research looks at which personal characteristics compel some people to turn to religious coping while others disengage from it when faced with stressful life events. When examining spirituality in persons living with chronic illnesses, Faull and Hills (2006) explored the connections between sense of spiritual self and health outcomes. Chronic illness can permanently alter the self-concept of those affected and can impose limitations on functioning that challenge their definitions of well-being. The authors found that "development of a resilient, intrinsic, spiritually based concept of self was found to be pivotal in health outcomes in rehabilitation" (Faull & Hills, 2006, p. 729). Gall and colleagues (2005) also explore spirituality in relation to health, and develop a model of coping that includes a spiritual dimension. In exploring the experiences of people with contemplative practices, the current study provides insights that allow for deeper understanding of ways in which these practices may relate to coping and health.

A number of research studies in recent years have addressed various aspects of spirituality in counselling practice. One area of research with implications for counselling practice looks at spiritual development and sense of spiritual identity. Erikson's work on development over the life-span, Fowler's exploration of stages of faith, and Jung's examination

of spiritual growth in the second half of life provide theoretical frameworks for these studies. Wink and Dillon (2002) conducted a longitudinal study exploring spiritual development over the life-span. They explore the nature of spiritual growth as people age, and factors that possibly influence that growth, referencing theories of faith development and spiritual growth by Erikson and Jung. While their study did not focus on one particular spiritual practice, they examine “practice-oriented” spiritual development, which they say “demands not only an increase in the depth of a person’s awareness of, and search for, spiritual meaning over time, but ... also requires an expanded and deeper commitment to engagement in actual spiritual practices” (Wink & Dillon, p. 80). Their research indicates that individuals have a general tendency towards spiritual growth in older adulthood.

Spirituality and identity. One of the benefits of maintaining a contemplative practice over time is a deeper awareness of self, which often involves a shift in understanding of the self as old dysfunctional thinking is dismantled (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002). Writers on theories of identity have explored the influence of illness, stress, and aging on identity (Faull & Hills, 2006; Gall et al., 2005; Kraus, 2007; and Thoits, 1991). In addition, some of these studies have looked at sense of spiritual identity, and how this shifts over time and in relationship to life events.

Kiesling, Montgomery, Sorell, and Colwell (2006) looked at participants’ sense of spiritual self and its development in adults. The authors examine role salience and role flexibility in their study, using the ego statuses of foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved, as defined by Marcia (1966). In one portion of their study, they noticed life events that became precursors for a spiritual identity crisis (mirroring Erikson’s adolescent identity crisis stage). They observed shifts in sense of spiritual identity for people in the achieved status who were faced with difficult, unusual, or traumatic life circumstances. For these individuals, the shifts facilitated development of a “spiritual identity more hospitable towards themselves and others” (Kiesling et

al., 2006, p. 1275). Krause (2007) looked at role saliency and changes in feeling close to God when older adults are faced with stressful events. The study found that when participants' most valued life-roles were threatened by events, the perceived levels of stress were greater as sense of identity was forced to shift. Their study divided subjects into racial categories, and found significant differences between those categorized as "white" and "black", with black subjects demonstrating this finding more than white subjects. The Centering Prayer practice, according to Keating (2002), works to accomplish a shift in identity as people become less driven by unconscious patterns of behaviour, and more able to see themselves in relationship to the Divine. The connection between identity theory, spiritual development, and contemplative practices is one that is touched on in the current study.

Models of spiritual development. Two bodies of work that focus on understanding spiritual and faith development from a Christian perspective have been written by James Fowler (1981) and Jim Marion (2000). Drawing from the developmental theories of Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget, Fowler (1981) developed a stage-theory of faith development, tracing faith formation over the life span. His model has six stages, the first four being loosely associated with specific age groups. Between early childhood and young adulthood his stages are more closely linked to age-related psychological and social development of the human being. His final two stages—the Conjunctive and Universalizing faith stages—are in his understanding rarely seen before mid-life. Many adults, according to Fowler, seem to achieve the characteristics of level three or four in his model, and remain there throughout their adult lives. He characterizes stage 5 as incorporating a more complete integration of self, a deep awareness of inner self, an acceptance of paradox and contradiction, and a commitment to justice and understanding of the "other". His Stage 6 is described as moving further towards inclusiveness and universality in actions toward others, including compassion that goes beyond normal expectations. He cites Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Bonhoeffer among Stage 6 personalities.

Marion (2000) also presents a stage-theory of development described by Ken Wilber in the foreword to Marion's book as tracing "the overall path of consciousness development from a Christian perspective" (Marion, 2000, p. xi). Marion's stages, too, loosely follow the course of human development until adulthood, when his stages depart from close chronological associations. His final three stages—Psychic consciousness, Subtle consciousness, and Christ consciousness—describe an individual whose self-identification is moving away from the personality and mental aspects of experience, and toward the inner self, the soul, and finally Christ himself. The final stage is characterized as transformation and spiritual union with God. He again notes that few people reach these most advanced stages.

Meditative practices in counselling psychology. There is a body of literature that addresses various aspects of integrating contemplative practices and spirituality into science and education. While none of it appears to deal specifically with counselling psychology, it does address aspects of human development and functioning that are relevant to the current study. One argument for finding ways to bridge the divide between science and spirituality suggests that "science could and should more freely study spirituality in its beneficial impact on individuals' attempts to attain personal wholeness, overcome substance abuse, achieve a more communal society, and safeguard the environment," (Walach & Reich, 2005, p. 423). Walach and Reich highlight the idea that understanding spiritual experience itself is a valid area for scientific exploration.

Stock (2006) notes that the practice of meditation was included in the curriculum at universities in ancient and medieval times, and as a part of monastic life. While its impact on mind/body medicine and health is currently being explored, he believes that reclaiming the practice for the general population would benefit teaching and studies in the humanities. He suggests that "meditative practices and other intellectual activities are mutually supportive: a situation in which the person who meditates is not stepping out of the mainstream of his or her

society, but is engaging in something normal and unremarkable, like keeping fit” (Stock, 2006, p. 1762). He calls for further research to explore meditation’s potential benefits for health and well-being, as well as for larger-scale issues such as care of the environment and societal problems.

Miller and Nozawa (2004) also advocate the integration of contemplative practices into education because meditation “can be a form of self-learning. ... As we notice our own thoughts and agendas, we can gain deeper insight into ourselves and the nature of experience” (Miller & Nozawa, 2004, p. 43). In a study conducted with students who had continued a practice of meditation after completing a course requiring them to adopt a contemplative practice acceptable to them, Miller and Nozawa collected qualitative data indicating that participants benefited from their practice by feeling more relaxed and calm in their personal lives, being less reactive to difficult interpersonal interactions, and gaining a greater sense of community.

Daniel Siegel (2010), the originator of interpersonal neurobiology, has studied brain functioning and the way various parts of the brain contribute to the way we experience and interact with our world. One part of his work includes addressing social and emotional learning. He coined the term “mindsight” to describe a method of learning to manage patterns of the mind that can interfere with healthy functioning. He describes the skills of mindsight as ones that can be learned by almost anyone at any stage of life. He describes mindsight as a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds so that we can break automatic reactions, understand our emotions more fully, and understand other people more deeply. From a scientific perspective, he explains the roles that various areas of the brain hold. His description of the functions of the prefrontal region of the brain includes “1) bodily regulation; 2) attuned communication; 3) emotional balance; 4) response flexibility; 5) fear modulation; 6) empathy; 7) insight; 8) moral awareness; and 9) intuition” (Siegel, 2010, p. 26).

In Siegel's teaching, the skills of mindsight help people to recognize, accept, release, and transform emotion, in addition to addressing various other aspects of human functioning.

Research studies on meditative practices in counselling psychology. Many studies on integrating meditative practices into counselling psychology have been written from a Buddhist perspective, and there is a body of literature on psychotherapy that incorporates Buddhist philosophy into counselling practice (C. Brazier, 2003; D. Brazier, 1995; Hanh, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Langer, 1989). These authors are among many to incorporate the wisdom of contemplative practice into mainstream psychotherapy work. Incorporating Mindfulness into psychotherapy is becoming more widely recognized as a beneficial component of therapy, as demonstrated by the growing popularity of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. Mindfulness training has been used to treat wide-ranging issues including pain management, stress reduction, borderline personality disorder, and eating disorders (Melbourne Academic Mindfulness Interest Group, 2006).

Studies focusing on contemplative practices from other faith traditions, including Christianity, are less prevalent in the counselling psychology literature. More research exploring practices from different faith traditions would enrich the practice of counselling. Each tradition brings its own vocabulary and perspectives into its practices, and deeper knowledge of a wider range of practices would allow for people of different backgrounds to find descriptive language that fits with their own experience. For example, contemplative practices from the Christian tradition explored in this study use metaphors and examples that would be most familiar to those with a Christian background. Others may find new insights from them, just as practices of other traditions can give insights to someone from a primarily Christian background. It is hoped that this study will contribute to exchange of knowledge and facilitation of new insights.

Currently, the existing literature on Centering Prayer is found almost entirely within a theological context. Keating and his colleagues have written many books on the practice,

describing their own experiences and those of participants in workshops and retreats that they have led. In his comments on the initial retreat (organized by Keating, Pennington, and Meninger), Keating (2002) mentions the remarkable amount of personal work done by participants in the retreat. He speculated that the focused use of Centering Prayer for the one-week retreat had facilitated as much work as an individual might accomplish in many years of psychotherapy. He believes that the practice of Centering Prayer is as much a spiritual tool as it is a tool for psychological healing. His work since the original retreat has included learning more about the psychological processes that happen over time for people who practice Centering Prayer. The relevance of his observations for the field of counselling is strong. My own experience with Centering Prayer, both as a daily practice and in longer retreats, suggests that people do experience important shifts in their well-being alongside spiritual growth through its use.

Despite all the work done by Keating and others, there is still a lack of social science research into the practice of Centering Prayer. Few studies have focused on hearing and documenting the experiences of people with the practice. One existing study, by Kuiper (2005), used a heuristic inquiry method to conduct research on people who practice Centering Prayer. Combining reflections of her own experience of practicing Centering Prayer with data collected from participants, she found that the practice contributed to a greater awareness of a loving God, a sense of peacefulness, personal growth, and ability to make significant life changes. This study was conducted in Ohio, with a small sample, and was limited to people who practiced only Centering Prayer. Still, its results indicate that this practice can be associated with positive experiences of growth. The current study adds to this small body of research on the experience of Christian contemplative practices and expands upon it by looking specifically at the experiences of people in helping professions. By documenting the experiences of people with these practices, using the tools and methods of social science research, this study strengthens the existing

literature in spirituality. It provides an opportunity for further reducing the separation of mind, body, and spirit that is still present in contemporary thought. This study looks at contemplative practices not to adapt them for counselling psychology, but to understand the ways in which people use them and benefit from them in their professional life, and to contribute to their personal transformation and growth, separate from or complementing psychotherapy.

The literature in the field of psychology on Christian contemplative practices is limited. Much of the literature that explores the Christian tradition deals with religion and/or spirituality in a broad sense, rather than focusing on specific practices. However, there are examples of theological literature that explores the use of contemplative practice. In a pilot project at a theological school in the UK, Carroll (2005) addresses the absence of reflective or meditative training by introducing an experiential course during which theological students are introduced to a number of practices including Centering Prayer. Participants in the project reported that they gained ability to slow down and experience the present moment. They recognized the need to be familiar with a variety of forms of practice in order to find ones that fit with individual needs. They also agreed that knowledge of Centering Prayer was important for people interested in exploring their own spiritual path or assisting others.

Watts (2000) examines the problem of self-injurious behaviour from the perspective of someone in ministry. She articulates some of the spiritual dimensions in need of attention in people who self-injure. She suggests Centering Prayer as one possibility for assisting people in rebuilding a sense of trust in God, in facilitating an acceptance and love of self, and in addressing the shame and guilt that often isolates people from family and society.

The current study addresses the gap in the literature regarding Christian contemplative practices, and contributes to knowledge about the experience of Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer has received little attention in the counselling psychology literature, but it is a practice that has grown in popularity in recent years, especially in BC's Lower Mainland. Works by

Keating (2002) and Bourgeault (2004) have explored the practice, outlined how to begin and sustain a personal practice, and shown how the practice can promote both deeper self-knowledge and spiritual transformation.

Keating (2002) and Bourgeault (2004) describe the practice of Centering Prayer as a way of discovering a more genuine self-identity that is free from many of the restrictive labels and conditions we learn to accept during our early life. Contemplative practices in general encourage a quieting of the mind that allows for greater self-discovery and awareness of the factors that prevent this self-knowledge. Grant (2001) writes that some trauma sufferers experience a disintegration of their sense of self as a result of their trauma, and must learn to construct a new sense of identity that is sufficient to incorporate the reality of their experience. He says that “Every spiritual tradition contains individuals who discover conversion and transformation in and through their experiences of trauma” (Grant, 2001, p. 58). Some serious life transitions or crises, such as illness, death of a loved one, or being involved in an accident may result in a similar need for redefining the self as suggested by Grant. Contemplative practices have the potential to be beneficial tools for adjusting to transitions, coping with unexpected circumstances or traumas, and redefining the self. Negative effects of adopting a contemplative practice are not common and do not tend to be severe, although Walsh and Shapiro (2006) suggest that incorporation of knowledge of psychological disturbances would be helpful for practitioners in order to help them recognize potential problems.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Phenomenology

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of people who engage in a form of contemplative practice and who work in helping professions. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate methodology for this kind of research, because its focus is one that seeks to gain an understanding of experience rather than to isolate variables and establish links. Creswell (2003) defines phenomenological research as that “in which the researcher identifies the ‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the ‘lived experiences’ marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method” (Creswell, p. 15). Wojnar and Swanson (2007) also agree that phenomenology is a philosophical discipline as well as a research methodology, which allows for an exploration of lived experience. The link between phenomenological approaches and studies aimed at holistic health care has been established by researchers in the field of nursing (Wojnar & Swanson). Many of the same ideals of tending to the needs of clients or patients exist in the field of counselling psychology. Phenomenology has been used to explore various phenomena of the human experience. According to Wojnar and Swanson, “at the core of phenomenology lies the attempt to describe and understand phenomena such as caring, healing, and wholeness as experienced by individuals who have lived through them” (p. 173). This core understanding of phenomenology as a methodology fits with the intent of the current study, and fits with the philosophy behind phenomenology.

The questions being asked in this study capture the intent of phenomenological inquiry. The goal is “to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) of Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as developed by Heidegger and van Manen, is an interpretive approach to understanding a phenomenon. The hermeneutic approach recognizes that attempts at meaning-

making are always interpretive, and that the various contexts of the individuals attempting to understand a phenomenon are all a part of the interpretive process. Therefore in a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, it becomes necessary to acknowledge and explore social context, present and past experiences with the phenomenon, and biases held in relation to the phenomenon. This “forestructure of understanding” (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 174) provides the backdrop for uncovering layers of meaning. The interpretive process involves taking into account the assumptions and contexts of the researcher and those of the participants because “the understanding of individuals cannot occur in isolation of their culture, social context, or historical period in which they live” (Wojnar & Swanson, p. 174). Heidegger maintained that an acknowledgement and exploration of the researcher’s pre-understandings of the research topic must be a part of the process of the research. Because I have previous experience with the phenomenon being studied, hermeneutical phenomenology will enable the exploration of the experience of participants with further interpretation based on my existing knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach involves engaging in a “hermeneutical circle of investigation and understanding” (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The circle of investigation begins with an initial examination of the forestructure of understanding held by the researcher in order to raise awareness of preexisting knowledge of the phenomenon. Participants are invited to reflect on their own experience of the phenomenon and then articulate their experience. Once the researcher has transcribed the stories gathered, researcher and participants meet again to discuss the data and seek deeper understanding. The circle may continue with further reflection by researcher and participant, and new layers of understanding discovered. The methodology used for this study allows information to be gathered and processed by the researcher with an awareness of the interpretive lenses being brought to the work. Following initial interpretation of the data, the researcher returns to the participants to question, clarify, and

engage in further interpretation together. By engaging in the circular pattern of interpreting, questioning, reflecting, and revising, the researcher and participants emerge with the finished product.

The Sample

The sample included eight participants from eight different professions. The professions included a palliative care nurse, a nurse practitioner, a spiritual director, a chaplain, a registered psychologist, a family systems therapist, an executive coach, and an employment instructor/facilitator. There were seven women and one man. Participants ranged in age from 50 to 74, and have been active in their professions for between 5 and 30 years. All live and work in the Lower Mainland area of British Columbia. All have been practicing Centering Prayer for at least one year and up to 20 years. Some participants held various different contemplative practices before beginning Centering Prayer and continue to do so; for others, Centering Prayer was their first introduction to a formal spiritual practice.

The recruitment advertising specified that people who are employed in helping professions who have maintained a practice of Centering Prayer for at least one year were eligible to participate. Walsh and Shapiro (2006), in their survey of existing research on meditation, note that most studies have been done with participants who had little experience of a practice, while the most interesting findings come from studies with participants who were advanced in their practice. They also report that follow-up studies found that the majority of participants were still practicing between 6 months and 4 years later. All but one participant in this study had practiced Centering Prayer for at least four years. The participant who had only held a Centering Prayer practice for one year had a Buddhist contemplative practice before beginning Centering Prayer. Because all of the participants had maintained a practice for at least one year, this study was able to go beyond examining the beginning effects of contemplative practice and to begin to access a long-term experience.

Recruitment Procedures

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Email notifications including flyers advertising the study were sent to contemplative prayer groups in the Lower Mainland, and to people in helping professions known to the researcher. Those emailed were asked to circulate the information about the study to friends and colleagues. All of the participants contacted me after receiving forwarded email information about the study, or after hearing about it from another person.

Researcher's Reflective Process

Before the interviews began, I participated in a pilot interview, where my supervisor interviewed me about my own experience of contemplative practice and Centering Prayer, using the same interview protocol to be used with participants. The pilot interview was used as an exercise to increase my awareness of pre-understandings and interpretive principles being brought to the research. I identify myself as a liberal, protestant Christian, raised within the cultural contexts of contemporary Canadian society. I prepared for the interview in the same way I instructed participants to prepare. I spent time during the week before the interview reflecting on my own experience, looking at my old journals, and journaling about my pre-understandings of the phenomenon, with the intent of bringing into awareness my own biases and assumptions. During and after the interview, my supervisor and I engaged in a reflective process together to help me clarify my understandings and prepare myself for the actual interviews. This process allowed the forestructure of understanding to be clarified and articulated before engaging in the interpretive process with participant data so that the experiences of the participants are presented as completely and accurately as possible.

As noted by Walsh and Shapiro (2006), a personal practice of meditation increases a clinician or researcher's ability to understand the contemplative experiences of others. My own practice continued throughout the research project, and served as a way for me to sharpen my

awareness as I engaged in the interviews. My practice includes Centering Prayer, but also includes other forms of prayer and reflection. After each interview, I spent time in silence, listened to music, or wrote in a journal in order to help me fully engage with the information presented in the interviews.

The Interview

After contacting participants to arrange interview times, I emailed them a page giving suggestions about how to prepare for the interview. They were invited to journal about their experiences in order to help them focus their thoughts, and consider what they wanted to share in the interview. Participants were invited to submit any portion of their journals that they wished to be included in the data, but submitting journal content was not required. I met with each participant about one week after initial contact. Participants were also encouraged to journal after the initial interview, and were asked at the second interview if they had discovered anything new that they would like to include. Interviews were arranged at convenient times and locations for the participants, and were held in participants' homes, in their offices, or on the UBC campus.

The interviews were approximately one hour in length. Each interview began with a conversation about confidentiality and its limits, a general overview of the research project, and ended with obtaining signed informed consent from participants. Participants were emailed the consent form and overview of the project when the interviews were arranged, and were asked to read and consider both.

The interviews began with me asking the participants "Please tell me about your experience with the practice of Centering Prayer; perhaps you would feel comfortable talking about how you began your practice". Participants were encouraged to share as much as they wished, but were not pushed to disclose more than what was comfortable for them. If participants needed more guidance, I asked them about their experience with Centering Prayer at various points during the time they have been practicing, including any struggles they have had

with the practice. Participants were also encouraged to speak about other contemplative practices that they held. I asked them to speak about their experience with their practice in either their personal or professional life, or both. The last question of the interview asked participants to raise any other thoughts they felt important to include in the study or if there was anything they would want counsellors or other professionals to know about their experience.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of each interview, I created a verbatim transcript. After all the interviews had been transcribed, I used phenomenological reduction to examine each interview for identifiable themes or structures. Van Manen describes the reduction method as one of “thoughtful attentiveness” where the aim is “to reachieve a direct and primitive contact with the world as we experience it rather than as we conceptualize it” (van Manen, 2000). A detailed reading of the texts followed, in which I identified meaning units and coded these for each individual interview. Seven broad themes were identified that were consistent among all interviews. At this point, I returned to the participants for further input from them, and to determine whether the interpretations were accurate from their perspective. Participants contributed further thoughts and clarifications on the material from the first interview, and confirmed that the seven themes were consistent with their experience. Following this, a thick description of the experience of contemplative practice including Centering Prayer was created using themes from all participant interviews.

Trustworthiness

Member check. As mentioned before, participants had a second interview after the completion of data collection and analysis. The purpose of the second interview was to contribute to establishing trustworthiness of the data. Participants were asked if they felt the themes corresponded accurately to their own experience. They were also asked if they believed the themes captured a comprehensive description of their experience. The themes were

discussed, participants offered further thoughts on their contemplative experience, and agreed that the themes captured their experience.

Expert reviewer. After writing the results chapter, I asked a helping professional with extensive experience in Centering Prayer to review it and comment on the themes. She is a registered nurse, integrated energy healing practitioner, a long time practitioner of Centering Prayer, and a teacher and leader of retreats in Centering Prayer and contemplative practice. She was asked to consider the following three questions as she read: (a) Are the themes relevant to your own contemplative practice and your experience of other people's practice?; (b) Do you think the themes present a comprehensive picture of the experience of contemplative practice?; and (c) Do you think the information presented holds value for the counselling profession and/or those who accompany others on their spiritual journeys? She found that the seven themes were very relevant and presented a comprehensive picture of contemplative practice in her experience. She also commented that she believes the information presented holds value for those in any health care profession, be it body-, mind-, or soul-focused.

Ethical Issues

Informed consent procedures were followed, including explaining the purposes of the study, and providing opportunity at any time for participants to withdraw consent or to leave the study. Consent forms were signed by each participant, and consent to participate in the study was reviewed at the second interview. Participants were given information on who to contact for further information about the study. They were made aware of the likely impact of the study on them, and were informed of the time commitment involved for an initial interview and follow-up interview, as well as any time for personal journaling or reflection.

Steps were taken to ensure confidentiality so that individual identities are not recognizable. Participants are identified by number only, and any references to people or places in the quotations have been altered or removed to aid in protecting identities. Any other

identifying information has been kept to a minimum in the interview transcripts. Interview tapes and transcripts were stored separately from information that would identify participants. Interview transcripts and audiotapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Computer files were stored on a secure, password-protected computer. Only my supervisor and I had access to interview materials.

Participants were made aware that this study deals with personal experience, and might involve discussing sensitive subjects, but that they would not be obliged to disclose more information than was comfortable for them, and that they could stop at any time. They were given a list of community resources and counselling services available if they felt a need to discuss further anything that emerged for them during the interviews.

Chapter 4 Results

An examination of the transcripts revealed seven main themes that were consistent across the experience of all participants. The themes outline participants' personal experience of contemplative practice including Centering Prayer, and the ways in which they bring that experience into their professional lives. Each theme illustrates a particular way in which the participants have experienced their work and themselves over time. The interview questions were broad, and left the participants free to focus on the areas of most importance for them. Participants described their contemplative practice as a part of their way of engaging with and experiencing the world, and as a part of their identity as well as a part of their professional life. This summary of themes attempts to capture the experience of people who have embarked upon a transformative journey with contemplative practice at its center.

Most participants began their interviews by describing their introduction to Centering Prayer and contemplative practice, and traced their experience over time. The themes are presented below in a similar order, beginning with ones relating to personal experiences of change and growth, and moving toward professional life and integrating their contemplative life into their worldviews. It is important to note that the order in which the themes are presented here does not necessarily indicate a sequence or progression in the experience of the participants, but is simply a means of organizing the data. Many participants described experiencing changes in these aspects of their lives, or coming to an awareness of these aspects in their lives gradually, or becoming aware of these qualities in themselves after the fact when engaging in self-reflection.

1. Changes in self-understanding and/or relationship with God
 - Encountering loss, grief, or crisis
 - Recognizing my contemplative nature
 - Changing understanding of church, religion, and God
 - Self-knowledge and self-acceptance
 - Transformation
2. Skills and learning related to thoughts and emotions
 - Personal work aside from contemplative practice
 - Moving through crisis and loss
 - Managing thoughts/emotions/self
 - Becoming more grounded and centered
 - Returning to my contemplative practice
 - Importance of group experiences
3. Changes in personal relationships
 - Being authentic
 - Deeper connections with others
 - Emotional stability noticeable to self and others
 - Accepting people and situations as they are
 - Ego and humility
4. Quality of client and professional relationships
 - Seeking deeper engagement with people and work
 - Integrating spirituality into work
 - Facilitating client growth
 - Relating to colleagues
 - Being a calm, stable presence

- Engaging differently with clients (more space for silence, fewer questions, etc.)
5. Getting self out of the way
 - Following intuition/being led
 - Asking for guidance
 - Experiencing self as a conduit/vessel
 - Cultivating an “observer”
 6. Openness to others—sense of universality
 - Learning from other faiths/practices
 - Being a compassionate presence—human
 - Shared humanity comes first; categories/labels/titles/differing beliefs or practices not so important
 7. Embracing life, mystery and change
 - Sense of joy and well-being
 - Encountering unexpected/surprise events or turns
 - Facing mystery of life and death
 - Accepting uncertainty
 - Letting go of control
 - Valuing silence and stillness
 - Thoughts on society and recommendations for the profession

Theme 1: Changes in Self-Understanding and/or Relationship with God

The first theme common to all participants as they described their experience of contemplative practice was noticing a degree of change in self-understanding and/or relationship with God. For some participants, some changes were dramatic and sudden, while others happened over time. For other participants, a shift in self-understanding occurred when they

initially learned about contemplative practice and recognized a part of themselves they had not previously had words to articulate.

Encountering loss, grief or crisis was a common event that propelled participants into beginning or engaging more deeply with contemplative practice. Some of the experiences related include being faced with a sudden loss without having the means to process or cope, or coming to a point where a combination of circumstances were distressing enough to call the person to seek for a new way to work through emotional pain or confusion. Learning about contemplative practice or being introduced to it represented a turning point in these participants' stories.

One participant spoke about being confronted with multiple issues when beginning spiritual direction and being introduced to contemplative practice. The participant spoke of starting a process to heal from childhood sexual abuse, and experiencing the death of a parent on top of a number of other issues:

P5: My sons were in drugs. One son was in and out of prison and on the street. I was struggling with our marriage, partly because of what was going on in our home, and partly because of my own journey ... And so there was a lot of torture in my life—a lot of conflict.

A desire to find a loving and relational God, combined with a search for a way of working through personal pain and addiction, led this participant toward contemplative practice.

Another participant had experienced multiple losses, and was not sure who to talk to about her struggle before she found a spiritual director who was able to name her experience.

P1: So, I think before that—I don't know—I went through a time of so much upheaval and pain that I was just crazed. A lot of pain, sadness, grief.

It just gave me an anchor. A way of saying—this is where I belong. In this type—this way of expressing my prayer.

Another participant told about experiencing the death of a friend as a 20 year old, and not having the resources to process the grief.

P3: ... she died. I was dumbfounded that this could happen. The only place that I thought to go with that actually was to church. I don't even remember why, except that I felt I

needed to be there. ... I couldn't make sense of this ... My parents never talked about anything like that. Oh yeah, bad stuff happens—carry on... And so, that's probably what I was orienting to was that need to try to understand all of this pain and hurt that I was feeling.

Participants described contemplative practice as a part of their identity and a very natural way of being for them. Most described a point in their experience where they discovered contemplative practice and realized that it was a missing element in their lives, or something that they had a natural affinity for, but that they did not know had a defined or formal existence within Christian tradition.

P6: So, I hadn't started any sort of formal contemplative practice at that point, but I think it was the background or the beginnings of a faith renewal, an appreciation for the contemplative. Or just realizing that I had an affinity for that contemplative side of faith. It was so integrated into Buddhism—and that was what attracted me to Buddhist thinking and practice. But I was never drawn to Buddhism as a theology. I always still found Christian theology as my home, in a sense.

P5: As I read Keating, there were a lot of aha moments for me. This is what I've been living. It gave me words for it, it gave me a context for it. It helped me realize there were a lot of other people doing this. ... there was hardly anybody I knew. ... So then it was a lonely journey. Am I weird? Is this really strange stuff?

Several participants noticed that as they continued to develop their contemplative practice and move through their journey of personal growth, their previous understandings or experiences of church and religion had been dramatically changed. Most also experienced a significant shift in their understanding of God.

P2: It was a feeling of "Where have I been my whole life? I've been a practicing Christian my whole life, and I don't really know how to pray." ... And it's just like—my spiritual life has been in the dew—in the dew! Where ever did the heart and soul connect??

P4: But that was an amazing healing point—so that was learning this combination of counselling—... But basically after 6 months going back into seminary, starting studies but continuing my therapy. Realizing that I came out of that experience with a totally new understanding of who God was. Just this unconditional acceptance—you know—I am a creature—created in the image of God.

P8: I've always thought of God as more external to myself, rather than... With contemplative prayer, you experience God in you. I remember having an experience of that when I was very young, about 9 years old. ... I always remembered that, but that was never nurtured in a lot of the churches I went to.

In combination with a new understanding of a relational God, several participants described growing in their own self-understanding and became more forgiving and accepting of themselves.

P4: I came out of there, that whole two and a half years—no guilt, and yet a changed person. All of a sudden waking up one morning and realizing that I wanted to live. And thinking—Oh, this is a different way. Where did that happen? It was self-acceptance, being accepted, and having that all of a sudden change you. And then moving from that.

P8: I think it opens an awareness of what's happening inside of you. That's what I find, too with the contemplative prayer and also with contemplative photography. From that place of letting go and openness, there's things that enter my consciousness that let me know something about myself that would have been really hard to see, or something about the world or my relationship in the world, or someone's relationship with me. In a really gentle way, a really knowing way.

P3: The other big thing is—I treat myself with much more gentleness. I was very hard on myself before. My yardstick against what I measured was always finding me wanting. The deeper I've gotten into these practices, the more comfortable I am with myself, and with what I've done. If I need to make a critique of myself—you should have done this, or should have done that—It doesn't come along with the extension of all the added dialogue it might have a few years ago.

The amount and depth of change participants experienced over time as they continued their contemplative practice and personal journey was described as transformation.

P5: This contemplative prayer, being silent in the presence of God, knowing that I am opening myself to his transforming love has brought more healing to my life than *anything else, ever*.

P3: Yes, the quality of my professional relationships changed. But also my professional practice changed... Everything changed, not just who I am in the interactions. But I have to honestly say that my way of being in the profession changed. It was transformative in my professional life.

Another member said jokingly that if she had realized how much this practice was going to change and challenge her, she might not have started. A common thread amongst all participants was an active desire to further their own personal development and their desire to support others in their own journeys.

Theme 2: Skills and Learning Related to Thoughts and Emotions

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was skills and learning related to thoughts and emotions. Participants explained how contemplative practice and Centering Prayer gave them skills to manage strong emotions and a way to break out of negative thought patterns. The skills were particularly important for them during times of personal struggle when they were experiencing overwhelming emotions or thoughts. As described in the writings of Keating and Bourgeault, Centering Prayer offers instruction on how to manage thoughts that arise during the prayer period. It also offers guidance on understanding and processing one's emotions (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002). The experiences described in the interviews show this process in action.

Several participants mentioned that their contemplative practice in combination with counselling or other professional help was a part of their experience of personal growth. Participants did not identify any single practice as the only means of their change process. Rather, most expressed an attitude of being open to the possibility of growth from many different approaches, and a desire to do the work. What seemed important to many was the ability to do the emotional and cognitive work with the establishment of relationship with an unconditional source of love and acceptance, facilitated by their contemplative practice.

P3: I don't know that contemplative practices would have been "it" 100%. I needed to do a lot of the conscious work, a lot of the reading that I've done along the way. All of that needed to feed me, before the contemplative practices would have been (I think) as important to me as they are. It's both sides of the equation.

One participant offered some thoughts on how both contemplative work and Bowen theory complement each other in their aims.

P6: So again, Centering Prayer and the whole mystical movement to me, works out of the more intuitive, right-brain process, and Bowen theory is working more out of the left-brain, cognitive, verbal process. But they both call one to calm oneself down in the body, let go of whatever one is doing to anxiously fuel—to fuel anxiety. "Anxiety" is used a bit, it's not the same term, but it is about letting go of whatever distracts one from centering in on God and creating sacred space.

Moving through crisis and loss was a common thread amongst participants. Their healing process included working through their personal pain, as well as seeking a way to reach beyond their own experience to engage with others and find deeper meaning in their losses.

P1: I had also had a major loss in my life around that time that was very painful. I thought, what do you do with all the love you're left with when the person isn't there anymore? What are you supposed to do with that? I kind of heard this voice saying "Love one another" which meant to me to share that with others. ... So that was going on in me, and at the same time I learned about hospice, and I just knew. I just knew. All of that together made me feel that God was guiding me to this work.

P4: But what I realized was that as devastating as it was, I was at such a totally different place that what I noticed was that it didn't drop me into despair. It was just one of those things in life. But how do I do that, as difficult as it was. I truly believe it was this being able to settle in to that place where I could just be—which is what Centering Prayer does. So it was really changing my way of looking and I was growing from my experiencing rather than becoming bitter.

Several participants described experiences similar to the following, where they broke with their normal patterns at a time of confusion or grief, in response to a sense of being drawn toward God or toward something new. In these cases, often a seeming mistake or wrong turn led to an important revelation or encounter.

One participant describes a grieving process that led directly to finding a group that practiced and taught Centering Prayer.

P2: I was just weathering through some difficult mourning processes, members of family and whatnot who had died. Going through my own mourning that was going on for far too long, basically.

I remember driving in the village, and I was driving down the street. I so understand now when people say, "I cried out to God"... What I would normally do is go home, and I didn't. I stayed straight. ... And I'm still mourning my own loss. I just couldn't get a grip. Driving down the street, and I'm in this place of really crying out. I got stopped at the light, which just started to frustrate and irritate, and put me into a bit of a throw. I'm turning left to go up to see this house, and underneath the lights at the parish, is "Be still and know that I am God". ... It's just the course of events that happened—it was like—it's a message. I'm getting a message. I couldn't find my way...I continued to make the effort until I actually connected with the group. And I have not missed a beat.

Participants described various experiences of their process of managing thoughts and emotions by using the tools of Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices. Their

descriptions resemble Cognitive Behavioural techniques, but include an element of relationship with God:

P4: It's very much learning how to replace—practicing a new sentence that you want to be your automatic tape. ... My therapist talked a lot about how do we change those tapes... Because that's all they are—tapes. ...

Keating talks so much about erasing tapes through the contemplative practice and introducing new tapes. If you intentionally introduce them, it seems to have this transformative way. So it's like positive thinking. There are a lot of ways of speaking that. I think it does—it allows us to erase them, loosen them, during our contemplative practice. To be able to gently say, that's not appropriate, and to move back to the sacred word—it's a practice.

One participant spoke about learning to work with the Active Prayer Sentence, a contemplative practice that complements Centering Prayer.

P4: It's a new practice. But I see how it helps to erase automatic tapes. I don't like being reminded that I'm a sinner all the time, so I have a different phrase. My sentence is "Glory to You, Source of all being". That's all it is. It's just to remember there's something out there that's bigger. Sort of in the higher power thing. I can see a lot of this stuff. New mantras replacing old programming. It's more automatic.

One participant commented on the experience of letting thoughts go within the Centering Prayer practice:

P7: Of course the mind never empties. Things interfere all the time, particular issues, thoughts, what am I going to do about this... should I ... and then I say Stop That. This is time out! I'm surrendering all that good stuff temporarily. I'll actually say to myself, you'll get it back. So you can let it go.

Another participant describes the Centering Prayer practice much as it is outlined in Keating's (2002) writings.

P8: So with the contemplative prayer, for me, it was just trying to find a place of being still and going deep, really deep. I guess there's some meditation and some mindfulness, but kind of beyond that. I'd be aware of thoughts that come in my mind, all the chatter of the day. Things that are undone, and have to be done, or things I haven't quite processed or sorted out. Just kind of become aware of them and kind of let them go as they come in. It was OK. Just sort of let them float by or let them go. All the while being really aware of in my body, too. Being present here in some center point in me.... From that place, there'd be some sense of compassion and a sense of connectedness with everything—a whole. A sense of a wholeness.

At the same time, this participant noticed the power of the practice and an occasional tendency to pull away from it:

P8: It's there to varying degrees and sometimes it's more of a struggle. Sometimes I give up. Sometimes I'd be even afraid of going there because it feels like, oh, it's too powerful and I can't let go of this world and the stuff I have to do.

Other participants also expressed similar thoughts about the power of the prayer practice. At times they felt drawn to it, but at other times felt like it was a challenge to stay with it and continue with the intense self-examination it called them to.

One spoke about her integration of psychotherapy training and contemplative practice as a way of working towards maturity in herself and with clients:

P6: Anxiety, when it floods up as it usually does when a person is in crisis or stress or in some kind of disrupted state, will effect their cognition, their ability to think, or use their executive functions. So I bring that into their awareness. It's not something that I can just kind of do instantly. I'm fundamentally a very anxious person. I'm working on myself year after year after year, and anxiety is lessened chronically by becoming more emotionally integrated, more emotionally mature. *So, it's not just about some kind of technique of anxiety management, but it's about fundamentally maturing myself at a deeper level, over time.*

As participants reflected on the changes in themselves over time, most reported a sense of becoming more grounded and centered, both emotionally and physically, of being less susceptible to wide emotional swings or self-critical thought patterns, and of being more able to cope with difficult situations.

One participant commented on the physical changes that he attributes to his contemplative practice.

P5: I think this does affect our body. That 20 minutes of silence allows us to relax and allows our body to be more at peace. I've found for me that it's not just emotional and cognitive, but actually physical, too. Part of my being—my body feels more relaxed, more at peace.

Other participants commented on a physical awareness of the solar plexus area and a sense of being centered on or grounded in that physical location in their bodies. For other participants, the sense of groundedness was expressed as a sustaining force in their lives:

P7: People used to say to me, where do you get your energy? Particularly in tough times when things were not going well. You always seem so upbeat. And I don't know where that came from. It's real, it's authentic. I wasn't faking it. Because you can't. You can fake things for a certain period of time, but after that you can't do it anymore. You burn out and fall down.

P1: Um, just more centered. More able to become centered—I'm not centered all the time. Just a greater awareness of that, and being able to come back to that. And I do feel as if it's growing. I feel as if it's been growing all the time and continues to grow.... And at least to be able to come back to myself, and to be able to... disentangle from whatever, disengage from stuff a lot more easily.

Most participants described the ongoing struggle to maintain their contemplative practice over the long-term. They discussed times when they had moved away from their practice. Going back to their practice after lapsing was a common experience.

P2: It's the same thing with controlling your weight, or looking after your health generally, eating properly all the time. When you know that it's right, and you know that it feels good, and you know that everything works so much easier with flow, without drag and fragmentation and worry, and frustration and anxiety, and pain, and places of anger. *Why don't I do it all the time??*

I set myself a goal a year ago, that I would be in my Centering practice every single day for twenty minutes minimum, twice a day. I came out of that 90-day period, and I can't even tell you where I was. It was calm, so at peace. I'm sure a bomb could have gone off in front of me and it wouldn't have affected me. It'd just be OK.

P4: I say I practice Centering Prayer, and how do I be honest with that? Keating says twice a day, and I don't do it twice a day. I often do it once a day during the work week. Then other times I'm drawn to it, and yet I know that it's helpful. But I'm so convinced that we cannot be legalistic about it.

It was clear in the interviews that the practice for all of the participants is a way of being, not simply a pattern of working with thoughts and emotions. Each participant engages with their practice in a unique way, without rigid adherence to rules, but with a recognition of its fruits, and a desire to return to it to deepen relationship with God. One participant expressed an opinion that the practice goes far beyond simply being a tool for management of thoughts and emotions.

P2: But what I hadn't really realized was that *the whole practice is about healing*. That was huge for me! I thought I was just going to learn how to pray, and be closer to God.

A final element of this theme was the importance of the group experience for many of the participants. Having a community of people supporting and sharing in their personal journeys, and drawing energy from group practice were both cited as important to the participants.

P2: I've certainly found this a theme with me – really wanting to gravitate towards other people who are on the path, who are more advanced than me, who could be mentors. Like wanting to stay in that place all the time. Wanting to be around those people – out of the corporate world. Emulating those advanced people, and having them pull you along.

P5: I find there's another dimension when you're with a group. It is energizing and bonding, but it also helps us realize there's someone beyond us as this group, that we're connecting with, and we're doing it together. Community – a huge community feeling. There's a power beyond us, a God that's beyond us and we're acknowledging it. It's quite wonderful.

P7: That group has become, we've become friends, and there's a dynamic that happens within that group that's quite unique. It's more than closeness. When I say dynamic, it's like an energy that's different.

Two participants also mentioned that they had benefited from the group experience enough that they had started their own groups, partly because it gave them support on their personal journeys, but also because they wanted to offer the experience to others.

Theme 3: Changes in Personal Relationships

A third theme to emerge involved changes in personal relationships noticed over time. This theme centered around interactions with family and friends, and the quality of these interactions. For some participants, concurrent with a deeper knowledge of self, came an increased ability to be authentic in interactions with those closest to them.

P8: Part of it is moving towards being more authentic and authentically knowing myself. Being honest with myself, who I am. *Even if it's things that are really uncomfortable to see.* Then, I guess from that place, there's more awareness and in my awareness and my relationships with family and friends, there's more awareness of *when I'm not being authentic.* ... And so I'll be more honest, but in as mindful a way as I can be. Sometimes that's created waves. *Even resulted in a relationship ending with a friend because I could not just hold that in if I disagreed with something,* or if something that was said that was hurtful—I could understand it, but I needed to say it.

One participant noticed that the demands of family relationships were sometimes greater than those of professional relationships.

P4: I have so much patience with my residents at work, but I go and meet the same kinds of things with my father and my stepmother, and I find myself being irritable. Because you think—we've said this already. And I think—Oh, I've got to remember that it's the same thing. I need to use that same compassion and I need to say to them every once and a while, I'm really sorry that I'm so irritable.

For another participant, this authenticity was noticed as an ability to enter into deeper connections with other people without wasting time on superficial matters.

P7: Being in the moment. Not a preconceived or preplanned thing... Something about the contemplative practice—I'm comfortable just jumping right in and getting to what's important. I don't know what the connection is with the prayer. ... There's not a lot of chitchat or wasted time. ... I think, but I'm not sure why or how, that the contemplative stuff helps one be courageous in expressing themselves to someone who looks like they might need some help.

A common experience of all participants was their level of emotional stability as they maintain their practice. Participants commented on their own awareness of this characteristic, but also sometimes mentioned that others had also noticed and commented.

It is interesting to notice that Keating's (2002) writing on Centering Prayer mentions that the fruits of the prayer are often noticed first not by the person doing the practice, but by those closest to him or her. Sometimes the changes are so gradual or subtle that they are not immediately obvious. The observations of the participants would seem to support this statement.

P5: My wife has said for a long time—you are so much easier to live with since you've been on this journey. She says—you're just so much calmer, and you're more free. We would do retreats together sometimes. ... She would always hate coming to the end because she would always think I'm just going to listen to his *wonderful highs and his dreadful lows*. *And she is just this sort of calm, steady person. And she says now it's not that way any more*. There's much more steadiness. Much more—yeah, just steady. There's not the extremes. So, she's noticed a difference in me, too. I'm glad, because that's where it really shows—with who knows me the best.

One participant noticed gradual changes over time when reflecting on the various types of personal work done.

P4: We did a little bit on dreams, we did some artwork. It just really began to open me up. My practice had already started with Centering Prayer because this was a nine-month period within that three years of the monastery. I began to see how the effect on myself over time—not reacting in the ways I usually did, not getting hooked in the same ways.

Accepting people in situations as they are was another common category of observation.

Participants observed that they were able to maintain their own well-being when dealing with difficult behaviours from others by maintaining a healthy distance and letting the other person assume responsibility for him or herself. They were able to establish a level of detachment while still caring for and maintaining a bond with the person.

P3: Kids growing up, their trials and tribulations, the issues that come along, and the things that come and go. The contemplative practice certainly helped keep me very centered with that. The ability to let go... Let go, it's their life, they have to make decisions, support them through it, but you don't own it.

Your children reach an age when they are free to make their own mistakes. And why would I want to try to prevent them from making their mistakes because: a) I don't know it would be a mistake for them; and b) they are not going to listen to me anyway. It will just be a big struggle. Certainly the contemplative practices would just anchor me back in doing the things that needed to be done, but also with the trust that the river is always flowing to its source.

One participant spoke about a son who has struggled with alcohol and drug addictions:

P5: It's given me a different sense of how to be with him even though he's in a different city. At least I have a different attitude. I mean, there was always compassion there, there was always love there, we just couldn't not. But there was also anger, there was also disappointment, there was also fear. There's all kinds of stuff. But I find that I can be more at peace with his journey, and let him live his journey on his own. We can be there if he invites us to be part of it, but right now he does not particularly chose for us to be a part of it. *But that's OK.* I can just rest there.

Another speaks about a small church community and the level of trust present among members.

P7: We're a small group. If we were larger, it would probably change. But we've somehow been able to dump all of the questionable motivations. The assumption is that we are all motivated by making things better and being better, and making our experience together better rather than spending time—there is no back-biting. We can be completely honest with each other. I can say to someone—that hurt my feelings. Can we talk about that? We're far from perfect, but we've been able to dump a lot of the debris of traditional religious groups. The change since we've introduced the contemplative prayer has been noticeable.

Participants described realizing a sense of their own smallness and cultivating humility as they continued their contemplative practice. One participant mentioned finding comfort in realizing a sense of smallness. Several also talked about being more aware of their own ego getting in the way of deeper relationships and self-understanding. The participant's stories suggest their realization that their practice is not about achieving anything, or about being better than anyone else, but more about learning to accept their own limitations. Relationships are one way in which these realizations are noticed and expressed.

P8: There's more of that letting go of the ego—which always finds its way back—it's so interesting what it does. You know, there's been times when I've had my contemplative practice and thought how wonderful this is—*I've gotten so deep! Isn't that great? Look at how good I'm doing! It's like—Oh, my God—there it is. I had it for about a second.*

P2: The ego gets a grip on us. If only we can have that conversation with it and say—gee you've really supported me over the years and I've really appreciated it, and now it's time for you to leave! I want to be free!

Theme 4: Quality of Client and Professional Relationships

Quality of client and professional relationships was a theme that emerged as participants spoke about their interactions with clients, or desire to have deeper interactions with them. Many of the observations presented under this theme are closely related to those of other themes, but the ways in which they are expressed here relate specifically to professional interactions with clients and colleagues.

The first category in this theme was seeking deeper engagement with people and work. A common reflection amongst participants was that, at some point during their career, they became disillusioned with the lack of meaningful connections with people. Several spoke about changing career paths because they wanted to find a work situation that was more satisfying. Their dissatisfaction led to new educational and career paths where contemplative practice and spirituality played a more prominent role.

One participant spoke about finding a work environment that was exactly the right fit, and that gave her a way to integrate her sense of spirituality.

P1: Then the hospital opened its palliative care unit and I went there, and I stayed with end-of-life care until I retired. I did move to the hospice in the last three years. But for me it was always all about God. I felt I was guided there, it was where I was meant to be, and I was always trying to put that part of myself—my spirituality—into my work. Sort of hoping that God was guiding me in different situations to that I would be coming from that God place within myself when I was doing the work.

One participant spoke about her educational journey.

P3: Interested in the grief and loss aspects—the feeling part of health care. When I did my first Masters, my thesis ended up being on the couple's experience of losing a pregnancy. I seem to have this orientation towards that. Of course being back at university pushes you into other things. I became interested in some of the tangential—alternative or complementary kinds of therapies—energy therapies, the whole notion that there was energy around a body—all of that. I was an avid reader and I could not get enough of it. I wanted to read it all, learn it all, do it all.

Closely tied to the previous category, is the experience participants related of looking for ways in which to integrate spirituality into work or bringing their own contemplative practices into their work.

P1: I knew that when I did end-of-life care I really needed to be coming from God within myself at the bedside and with the family. So, my work as a nurse could—I hope—only be expressed from a spiritual place. So those two things—God and nursing—started when I was three. I went through lots of years of not being all that connected to either one.

P2: I don't know that I've ever walked away from a coaching session when I didn't learn something. There's the saying "spiritual beings having a human experience". I like that one. ... So when you ask me how contemplative plays into my practice, it's pretty much all of it. *It's how I show up where the work is.* To bring that spirit and soul to the surface and get out of my way. And let that work get done.

P6: So when I'm sitting there utilizing my training in Bowen theory, and utilizing the training in contemplative practice—both Buddhist and Centering Prayer, and the directee begins to shift from purely cognitive down into what I think of as the deeper emotional material that begins to surface in the sacred space that is created in the safe holding space.

Participants each described various ways in which their contemplative practice was a part of their way of working with clients or patients in order to facilitate their growth. Their

experiences included noticing their level of attunement with the client, recognizing the spiritual within the client, and orienting to their own centering process in order to assist the client.

P8: Well, I think you're more attuned, you're more grounded. When I'm in that place, there isn't the concern in my mind, or questions about where to go. You just go. There's no having to stop and think about—OK what should I do—this or this?? *I'm not there*. The attunement is on a deeper level, where you're with them, right with them. So you're moving with them, and there's just a knowing. You're attuned in a way where—I'm attuned to everything I've learned in terms of theory and my understanding, but that's not foremost. That's sort of in the background. I'm really in tune to where they are emotionally in that moment. *With the information in the background and where they are in the moment, and me really being present, it's like ... you're so attuned it's almost like your self is there, but you're not caught up in yourself.*

P2: That's what I do in coaching—I help people to hear what they just said. What we do is reframe ... and then ask those profound deeper questions to get them to that spirit level to find out for them what it is they are looking for. To raise them to that Divine level. To come from that place of heart and being opposed to the head decisions. Transformation—totally. The transformation piece is exactly where you are going.

P6: Again, these two methods both assist me in sitting there as the quiet, calm, centering point in the triangle between the client and their family or their spouse, or the directee and God. And Centering Prayer is a method, then, that I can use in that process. I can come back to it at any moment when I am getting too caught up—getting fused again and need to sit back again and come back. My sacred word is just be. So I can just come back and zero into the solar plexus area, which is to me such a fascinating phenomenon—of being able to just see myself—an imaginative process of centering myself and coming from there. It's different than just being in my head. It allows a more general consciousness of my being.

Several participants related experiences of their contemplative practices helping them in managing difficult relationships with colleagues or work situations.

P3: I became the nurse who would get assigned to the mother who had lost a baby, had a stillbirth, and things were looking very... It's interesting because at first I thought, I can do this. And I did do it. And then I began to realize that no, even with the very best of managing my feelings, it's still very wearing and exhausting. And it's not helpful to not have other people learn these skills as well...

And so I would use the getting quiet and getting centered a lot during those times. It actually gave me the courage to stand up and say, it's not good for me to do this every time. It's not good for the rest of the staff. ... Probably at some earlier time in my life I might have whined a little and said I'm overwhelmed, I can't do this, assign someone else... I actually could look at it in this very... it is wearing, I'm aware that it accumulates and a break would be nice, but I'm also aware that it's not helping the skill mix within this workplace. It's really important that we get other people in so that they can learn the skills. ... I suppose what I want to say is that it enabled me to respond rather than react.

P1: But I really relied on my spirituality to guide me in the work as much as possible. Also in working with my colleagues, because there were a lot of us there. A lot of people on a daily basis to interact with in terms of staff. As you know, that's not always easy. Politics and everything. So, I thought, I don't know how to deal with all that—so I just still tried to come from my heart as best I could. I wasn't always good at it, but that was my intention. Just to not be unkind, and to try to hear them, and not get snarled up in disagreements they might be having with each other. Trying not to take sides. I mean, I'd have my own opinion, and I'd make my own judgments, too, but just really tried to hold the space. It doesn't mean I never got drawn in, but I tried not to get drawn in. Just hold the space and not be unkind towards them. There was a lot of unkindness amongst the staff, unfortunately.

P4: Again, the practice I think allowed me to know that it was an OK thing even though it wasn't... the director of care position was highly management and I'm not a manager. But I knew I could do something, and it ended up being an interim position even though they hired me permanently. As difficult as it was, it gave the board space for that time. And I realize that I was just constantly practicing letting go, trying to be with the staff that hated me, which is so typical. And being able to say this is normal behaviour from employees to management in the midst of chaotic change.

Related closely to some of the points under other themes was the experience of being a calm and stable presence in the workplace. This capacity to create and maintain an atmosphere of calm has particular relevance for counselling professionals.

P3: I know that I am more grounded, calmer, more thoughtful, more centered, less driven, less flappable. I was always pretty cool. The areas I've worked in have always been critical care. I haven't had a tendency to get very excited or get into a flap very much. It's very rare that I would do that. But I've certainly experienced sheer terror on a number of occasions in health care. And some of those moments have been definitely softened. Some of the bad stuff—I'm in a much more comfortable place about—the sad things that happen, the things that go sideways. I don't want to say more philosophical, because it's not that I don't care. It's just that I have it in a place that I can work with it, so that it doesn't harm me.

P6: I kept coming back in a calm quiet way, not intrusive. She calls it a quiet softness—which is so different from my own nature. ... So I just kept coming back and coming back and coming back to this calm center using Centering Prayer, using knowledge of anxiety and the subjective/objective dimensions. She walked her way through what she needed and wanted to do.

Participants mentioned being able to engage differently with clients when more deeply active with personal contemplative practice. Two participants commented on these differences.

P8: Yeah. Yeah. When I practice the contemplative prayer more, there's a difference, in that... Well, for one, I feel less in the head. Less trying to figure out something according to oh, what would this theory say, or how would that fit here... I'm still informed by that, it's in the back of my mind, but there's more centeredness. I feel more centeredness in

who I am and where I'm at. And in listening and allowing more for space in what's being said. I think if I were to tape some of the sessions, they would probably be going slower. Rather than be picking up speed—let's figure this out—how about this? Kind of racing... It's kind of grounded more, I think. I think too, that I practice from a place—I don't know how to explain—it feels like it's from a deeper place within, that I'm practicing from, that I'm hearing from and engaged in. There's more ... *being in the moment, more of a connection with the client.*

P2: I definitely know when I start to get into my headspace because I start to go to solutions.

Theme 5: Getting Self Out of the Way

The theme of getting oneself out of the way was articulated by each participant in different ways, but several used this exact phrase to express their experience of allowing themselves to be guided by intuition or some other subtle sense of knowing when working with clients or patients.

Most participants experienced instances of learning to follow their intuition or of feeling that they were led toward certain decisions or actions. Several described this experience in terms of being led by God, or making space for the sacred.

P4: I think that what my practice has really done. I don't know if it's increased my intuition, or... But helped me live in the moment more. I've just been amazed a number of times where I've been in the right place at the right time. ... The stories—I begin to realize—one after the other. All of a sudden you walk into a room, and you decide to you're just going to go see this person before you go home. And the family is there, and you know this person is going to be dying, but you're not expecting them to go. As you're visiting with the family, and they're appreciative, I see the person making that final change in her breathing.

One participant offered this insight about silence and allowing the client's process to unfold, but also commented that following intuition needs to be accompanied by engagement of cognitive processes in order to respond effectively to a given situation:

P6: But I would leave silence as a fertile, yeasting process whereas in my cognitive secular psychotherapy, I would be asking questions. To me, my responsibility would be to keep engaging the person's cognitions and their research functions. ... And this opens up that Divine, fertile, sacred place that I don't think that most of secular society recognizes. We judge it as sort of superstitious or magical. It's so amazingly fertile, and to me one of the qualities of it is the *surprise*. *There's always surprise—in a good way.* It brings us to a place of surprise where we're both in awe of where we've come to. Those are to me, some of the markers of if I've been allowing, and getting myself enough out of the way.

P3: So, it's not uncommon for me to actually just go to my office for a moment, shut the door, sit down. Go into a quiet space, sometimes ask for Divine guidance, show me through this. ... I sometimes will be faced with a situation I've never dealt with before and it's like "arrow prayers". And then, with the information, get quiet, get very quiet, go into a prayerful state, slow down your heart, slow down your breathing, and let inspiration come. It really works.

Some participants spoke of times where they had consciously worked at getting themselves out of the way, asking God or Jesus for guidance in difficult professional situations.

P1: Sometimes I would just ask Jesus to "help me now".

I know one example. A man was dying and his family was at the bedside. We didn't expect him to die right now, but we knew it was coming. We needed to give him a wash and just make him more comfortable, so his family went to the cafeteria. When we turned him, I thought, oh no, I think he's going to die now.

I didn't want to alarm the family needlessly, so I just sort of said—dear Jesus, let me know—should we get them back? Shall we go to the cafeteria right now and get them? Let me know what to do. ... And you know, just that feeling of rightness. We brought them back and he did die right then.

Closely tied to these two categories was experiencing the self as a conduit or vessel.

Several participants used one or the other of these words to express their sense of God working through them to facilitate client or patient care.

P1: When I think of being more "one with God" I think more of it being like a river. That's what came to mind right now, although I hadn't thought of that before. More like God's flowing through you like a river. And then my center is, I guess, in the center of the river. God's energy flowing through me, and a center to it.

P2: I've been doing that my whole life, but what I realized was that I didn't have the awareness of the deeper spiritual meaning. I knew when I was in that place of just pure giving. I don't even know where my questions come from. I've always known when I was in that place; I just had no way to define it. No way to define it and no way to recreate it, to hold onto that space until the Centering. An awful lot of what I've found in my field is that it is all about God. A professional coach is *all about being a conduit*.

...

I am only there as an instrument. I'm only there as a conduit. And I'm blown away sometimes by the questions that are asked—that come through me.

P8: If I leave that space in myself that's just open—the intuitive level, and I can be really open, then I can feel or reflect what's going on for them. I can pay attention to that without judgment. I can meet them at that place and be more aware at a deeper level of

what they are experiencing. Body language is part of it, but it's beyond that. Things that are subtle and you may not really notice. What seems significant and what isn't can shift—you're more aware of subtle differences.

Two participants talked about the importance of developing an ability to step back from their own experience in order to observe with a level of distance or objectivity, and of how contemplative practice develops this ability. They consider this practice important to their own personal growth and ability to live their lives to the fullest.

P4: That of course is a major part of growth, to be that sort of observer from time to time and hear what you are saying and be able to say “Oops! Let's move back in... Where in the world did that come from? You know you have been so present,

P4: I would think that that is part of that growth process. If people are open, or when they become open and reflective about their life experiences, and allow that to push them to a new level—... I think when in crisis—you either become bitter and encapsulate, or you use pat answers and learn to live with it—“Well, God can use this, and it'll be OK”, and it's kind of a resignation. Or, to really begin to experience the newness, and the wonderful transformation which doesn't negate the previous part of your life and doesn't negate everything. And still recognizes the pain. But it doesn't need to be labeled good, or that God willed this on me. All that kind of stuff. It's hard to talk about it—you really have to live it.

P2: The experiences as time goes on—I want to be able to create new experiences, memories as I walk on this part of my path with full awareness and full choice—as opposed to just doing. ... and it's the contemplative that helps me do that. Because I can see stuff with such calm. Seeing and feeling.

Theme 6: Openness to Others — Sense of Universality

The theme of openness to others, incorporating a sense of universality, was present in each participant's story. This theme incorporated both social attitudes and active engagement with the world. Some participants mentioned that this sense had always been a part of their experience, while others noticed it growing as they continued on their contemplative paths and their personal work.

One way in which this theme is characterized in participants' experience is in a desire to learn from many different faith traditions while maintaining their roots in Christian tradition. Contemplative practices from many different traditions were important for most participants.

P2: Coming into the contemplative world,—we're from all different Christian backgrounds. And also some Jungians as well as Buddhists—not even Christian necessarily, umm, Baha'i have dipped into it too. The exposure is amazing! And I take all of that into my practice—*all of it*. Because how could I not?

P3: I'm fascinated with places of worship—cathedrals, synagogues, temples, mosques. ... I had the opportunity frequently to have meetings at the Sikh temple. I was again in awe of the level of spirituality that's palpable when you enter their sanctuary. No one speaks in that sanctuary. You go in and it's silent, except for the person who's reading from the Holy Book. It's an energy you can feel. I'm fascinated by interfaith stuff; I'm fascinated by spirituality. Religions are just various routes we take to get there. It still remains this incredible fascination for me.

With an eagerness to learn from traditions different from their own, participants expressed experiences of being able to be a compassionate presence for people who held beliefs, practices, and even languages different from their own. Two participants spoke about finding great satisfaction in being able to be truly human with patients in palliative care and to be able to accompany them in their dying—a time when people are the most authentic and real.

P1: There are many times when you can connect with the patients in a real loving way and it's appropriate.

Because when they are frightened, and you are able to go to that place with them and speak. You know, we never spoke about God or any religion unless the patient did obviously, because it wasn't our job to be doing that. But I could bring that feeling of love to someone when they were in that crisis or frightened moment.

P4: One of the first things we were told was—you're not allowed to carry your Bible to visit people. *You* need to be able to come—you can't hide behind this. You need to be able to learn how to respond to anybody. And if you need to make an appointment, if you want to come back and use your Bible, that's fine. But you can't just walk in there because it's going to scare some people, and it's going to cut them off, and for other people, they're going to start talking about that, and that's not necessarily the issue. That was really good.

You're more than a role; you're a caring person. It doesn't matter if people don't want to see a chaplain. You say, fine—you don't have to. How's your day going? More often than not, the whole idea is that the conversation starts. You don't speak about anything religious, But they've had an experience that hopefully is comforting, that makes them feel not so lost, whatever it is. And then sometimes it really is amazing, you're at the right place at the right time. And you can be that way.

The final thread of this theme was the sense expressed by all participants that the contemplative journey they participate in is only one part of the human journey, and that every

human is on the same journey regardless of the language used to express that journey. I have labeled the category to try to capture the breadth of the concept being expressed—shared humanity comes first; categories/labels/titles/differing beliefs or practices, not so important. A deep sense of caring for the other was present in their stories, and this sense transcended any notion of dogma or agendas related to religion or belief systems. The idea resembles the Rogerian conditions of unconditional positive regard.

P2: One of the things I've found in doing this work and in this practice—it's like *putting a cloak on*—and it's like a coat of many colours. Different backgrounds and different cultures and different religious faiths, and we're all looking for the same thing. We're all looking for that inner peace, that inner calm, that understanding our purpose.

P7: More about social justice and commitment to good work. The values that we hold—any of the teachings of Christ or Buddha—they're all wonderful. What's not to like about the values in those teachings?

P4: But perhaps that's a lot of my role—to help bring us into an openness to spirituality that goes so far beyond our religious stuff. And yet not negating the religious.

P4: Merton—I read in one of his books. His experience with the Eastern spirituality—of wanting to leave behind his Catholic roots, and having a Buddhist monk tell him it's the same. Why move there? You might see something good here, but you've already got it there. Just stay. It's the commitment to be on *the path* that is important. ... So, you let that go, but you *live* following the way. And if you live following justice and all of those things... Again moving back to the contemplative prayer practice, it helps you let go of all those things that are not all that important.

For one participant, this openness to a less literal understanding of Christian theology presents problems when dealing with people who maintain more rule-based or rigid understandings of Christianity. The challenge for her is to maintain her own values and live them, without shutting down conversation with others, or disregarding their beliefs.

P4: Do I defend it? Knowing what to do with it. I don't want to react or defend it. People are curious about what I believe. Sometimes you say something, and you see the other person thinking "Oh, I don't know about her..." It's very interesting. You end up being on a bit of an edge. I guess we're doing something a little different. When it starts changing us, people notice the difference, but they don't like the explanation for the difference.

I say—I'm not the one who does the saving. I don't need the person to say anything to me in order to trust that God is working.

Theme 7: Embracing Life, Mystery, and Change

The final theme to emerge was of embracing life, mystery, and change. This theme was apparent in the participants' attitude towards life, and in their reflections on their practice, their work, and the wider world. In response to a question about what they thought people needed to know about the experience of contemplative practice in helping professions, participants reflected on how their professions might address spirituality differently, and on how there is much room for growth in terms of addressing this component of human nature in professional practice.

One aspect of this theme is participants' sense of joy and well-being that is deeply seated in their outlook and sustains them even when they are faced with difficult situations. All of the participants recognized that this outlook was not always easy to maintain when they were experiencing painful circumstances. Their comments also acknowledged that their disciplines of contemplative practice and Centering Prayer called them into a process of self-examination, healing, and growth that included both challenges and consolations. Keating (2002) writes about this examination process as one akin to having a search light revealing the dirt and cobwebs of an old attic. He describes the difficult process that people can experience, when everything is revealed to God and brought to one's own consciousness in a gradual process of healing. The participants' stories demonstrate this writing.

One participant's story gives an example of how this process unfolded in her life.

P8: Going back to the experience of contemplative prayer, one thing that comes to mind is joy. Just joy of being in life. In myself, but it feels like that can never stay just in here (only within myself)—it goes out.

A sense of awe—the joy and awe of life.

... There was, two or three years ago, a time when I became really ill. They couldn't find out what was wrong...

I remember going through that, and really shaking up my faith. Shaking up all I believed in. Belief in the medical profession, but also belief in God, and fairness, and fairness in all the world. It just turned everything on its head.

... *It was a time when I was at a crux, and entering into the contemplative prayer and just really letting go.* Just really offering that suffering up. Let go in terms of trying not to control it. Letting go—of course I wanted to be better, but not trying to make myself better, get better. Not even trying to understand it anymore—what’s caused it, or why it’s happening to me. Just let go of it completely and just offered it up.

And I remember the peace that came in to replace all that struggle. And the feeling of finding joy, still, in life—even in the midst of that. It was really powerful.

Trust is also a component of the next aspect of this theme, encountering unexpected or surprise events or turns. Most participants were able to identify events in their experiences that were too unexplainable to be coincidence, and that were pivotal points in their personal journeys. Being able to look for these occurrences, expect them, and trust them was a component of the experience of several participants.

P3: I thought I knew where I was going, but I didn’t have my directions quite straight, so I arrived at the meeting a little bit late... I tiptoed quietly over and sat down. The presentation went on, and then there was a break for coffee break.

I turned to the person next to me and said, hello my name is ..., and she said hello my name is ... and we’ve talked on the phone. It was the priest I’d been talking to!

So at break time and lunch time we talked a little bit more. And when I was going home I thought—that has to be some kind of a message *from the universe!* You’ve been waffling on this for so long and now here you are, and you are sitting *right beside the woman*—because you were late.

P2: You know how when you meet someone, and it’s like—Gee, I think I’ve known you my whole life? We probably have. We just haven’t met before. But we’ve been connected, and now we actually get to meet in the flesh.

I’m not surprised by any of that anymore. Before I used to think, oh, wow, what a neat coincidence. It’s not coincidence. I don’t believe in coincidences. And I don’t believe in accidents, nor do I believe in mistakes. I didn’t always feel that way, but I’ve come to that through having been more formalized in this practice.

P6: The next stage sort of happened simultaneously when I felt... I was praying hard about where to go to begin to integrate my faith life with my professional life.

Then, after sort of pounding on the table saying, “God, I’ve been waiting long enough!” the next Sunday, I went to church and there was a student speaking from (the

theology school). I'd never heard of it, I just knew that was where I was meant to go. So, I enrolled and was accepted. A miracle of the spiritual path.

- P1: Certainly the mystery and going with that, finding out that it was the right thing. The more you trust it and find out that it was right, that just builds your strength to keep doing it and to go with that mystery.

Half of the participants work or have worked closely with people at the beginning and end of life. They spoke of the sense of privilege and sacredness of seeing these aspects of life and death close-up and repeatedly.

- P1: I think part of it is that when people are dying, they have to be authentic. It's a pretty authentic thing to be doing. You can't really hide. They try to—there's all different ways of doing it. But to me it felt like a place where I could be real. It wasn't about surgeries and all of the other medical interventions we have. It was really about the humanity of nursing. And within that for me—was spirituality—that is part of our humanity.

- P3: I worked mostly in labour and delivery, so I was kind of on this edge of life and death. Fascinated by “nowhere, and now here”—That emergence of that whole little person who suddenly would have this big energy around them in the form of this tiny little baby and a whole family getting started. I was awestruck and, hmm, not overwhelmed, ... but it was a continuing source of awe and beauty, and it almost—I would describe it now looking back—it felt sacred. Every time when I was with a family giving birth and that beautiful person would come along.

- P3: Unexplained and unexpected deaths of babies during labour is a very hard thing to deal with. Being with families who know that their baby has an abnormality that is incompatible with life and being with them through whatever length of time it would take. The contemplative practices really allowed me to be there for these people, but only in a way that would allow them to do what they needed to do. ... Yes, and also just being able to let them know what all of their choices were and turning it over to them to make the choice that was right for them, whatever that was, and me playing the supportive role of honouring their choices.

Accepting uncertainty and letting go of control were two intertwined categories that were present in participants' stories.

- P5: Another thing it does, I think is I just *helps us be present in the moment*. This is the moment we have. I don't have any guarantees I'm going to live to even take another breath. But I have this moment, and I don't have to live in the past because that's not useful. So, *I'll live right now*. And there's a place of comfort in that, because I can enjoy what I have right now instead of be frustrated with all the things I want to get and all the things I never got.

- P5: When we take our hands off of something and something happens, then it's a beautiful thing. I know it's a deeper-rooted thing than just my ability to manipulate and manage.

Somehow for me it has a more grounded feeling to me, and a more grounded experience. More real.

P2: I used to ask God a lot and pray for this and that. Now I just say Your will be done—because that's all that matters. But then get ready! It can be very difficult.

P3: I started looking around and was really feeling at a loss. It was the contemplative practices that helped me really look around with a...

When I would start to feel anxious, the contemplative practices would be the things that would say... Take a breath, wait, the answer will come. Keep going back into your contemplative prayer each and every day. And eventually that's exactly what happened. Things began to open up. You run into people, conversations start. Before you know it...

Participants stressed the value of silence and stillness for their own self-development, for that of people with whom they worked, and for contemporary society in general.

P4: Again, the awareness, which is so important for me. I think we can't do that unless we take those times of silence. Of trying to practice that letting go. I think that's one of the things that really impacts me in the practices. That bombardment of thoughts never really ends, because that's who we are. It is the practice of not thinking about those thoughts, not getting hooked by those thoughts more and more. And then you see the results outside.

P5: So the silence for me became more of an acknowledgement of what's actually going on in reality 24/7, and I'm just taking 20 minutes or 15 minutes or whatever it was to just acknowledge that that's a reality. I don't have to do anything about it. I can just be there and let it be.

P8: For a lot of people, silence is not comfortable at all. And that's really telling—when they have to fill up every moment with something said because if there's silence there, the space—what could arise from that space? Or in it? There's something really fearful or anxiety provoking for them about that. I think of silence as this kind of potential space where something can arise that could be difficult, but really significant to know. But also silence is this place of just being—staying in that place of pure being, and connection with God. I think of silence and I think of stillness, too. There's a lot going on there.

P2: But I'm a firm, firm, firm believer that *if we don't slow down, and just sit quietly, and just be still and not even think*. And the practice is *not about voiding our minds*—it's about just being so still, and knowing there is clutter all around us, but we have a choice to close that out. Just move it over, honour it at the same time, and move it over. Until we can actually feel that place. It's quite neat! The colours, the sense of being completely removed.

Finally, when asked if they had any other thoughts they felt were important to include in their interviews, participants expressed observations about the world and some of their concerns.

Also, several offered thoughts on how to challenge their professions towards further integration of spirituality into practice and toward more holistic thinking.

P6: So, I think of religion in particular and spiritual practices as sort of the ancient way of trying to accomplish what contemporary psychology is trying to accomplish. I think that ancient spirituality needs some of the knowledge, some filling in of the factual details that the contemporary science of human functioning brings. But I think that contemporary psychotherapy needs the balance of the kind of whole person, whole being approach, and more of the understanding of the right-brain's contribution, the intuition's contribution.

One of the health professionals, recently retired, commented that having discussions of spirituality in the workplace would have been beneficial:

P1: I feel like if this type of thing had been brought into our workplace—people talking about how to bring this part of our beings into what we were doing, it would have helped. It would have helped people identify what they were already trying to do...

P7: So, the whole notion of working in the helping fields and not having tools, techniques, methods, some way to stay, to know who you are and remain who you are without giving yourself away to everyone. Because in this field, people will take, take, take and if you allow it, then you are no longer viable in your field. You can't help anybody anymore. You're done. So, if you are serious about your field, serious about the work in your field, you can't allow that, you just can't.

P5: Because we live in a world to me that is so accomplishment oriented. That is so self aware, so much about our own abilities to make things happen... And this *cuts clear across that*. It allows me to be in a place of truth, I think, that is not about me.

P6: But I certainly saw—I believe that human growth and development—If we're going to live the call to "build the kingdom". If we're going to live the call to embody the great principle of love of God, love of neighbour, love of self—I think that's partly why I was lead to psychotherapy as well. I knew it had to be an inner journey that then was manifested outwardly. If you just manifest outwardly without doing your inner work, then I think it may get short-term results but a long term, I think you get what's happening in the Church and what's happening in society. You don't have the inner ground to live the principles that you're professing.

P4: I know that when I was doing my counselling, there's so much more now that talks about how spirituality is part of who we are. We need to learn how to talk that language. It's just like many of us needed to learn how to talk the psychological or emotional language. And we've got that down pat now, but this is our next realm. It really is. And that's not religious. It's being comfortable with letting it be, but also knowing how to separate that. I think it's amazing how many people in counselling—you'd see people who have bad experiences with religion. And if you have a counselor who's going to agree with them, then there's not—you need to be an unbiased listener and help them examine that, but also be comfortable enough.

- P3: Until we can come face to face with the fact that there's spirituality that supersedes religion, and that to assess spirituality is not proscriptive or suggestive that one ought to have a religious practice, a faith tradition, or a spiritual practice—it's got to as a whole profession—it has to get there. ... By spirit, I'm not meaning my own particular concept of spirit, but I'm talking about the spiritual needs of the person... It's a bias in society, and its stigmatized in the professional world—because it's become about someone pushing an agenda. And as soon as you relieve all of that out of it. This isn't about pushing an agenda.
- P2: What I wanted to know was how closely are you grounded to what our roots are? How close are you grounded to your soul? How close do you know and have encountered your being? Because if they haven't, then there's no way I'll refer a client... If somehow your research could make it mandatory down the way that every single person who is in any profession that is helping people *must* have some kind of practice—it's got to be part of the certification or licensing process, I think it's absolutely essential.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Conclusions

When I began this research project, my hopes were to find a way to integrate the learning from my degree programs in theological studies and counselling psychology, and to explore the subject of Christian contemplative practice, which has received little attention to date in the counselling literature. As the project unfolded, I realized that the interviews and the reflective process I was undertaking were helping me in my own search for a way to bring all of my skills, learning, and experience into my developing professional identity. I am indebted to the participants for allowing me to benefit so much from hearing the stories of their experience of contemplative practice as it related to their personal and professional lives. Following is an examination of the study findings, some implications for counselling practice, and some suggestions for further research.

Many of the participants shared with me their personal spiritual journeys. These journeys were very much tied to who they had become as professionals. One participant commented, when considering the question of how contemplative practice is integrated into her work, “It’s pretty much all of it. It’s how I show up where the work is.” Another participant spoke about contemplative living, rather than contemplative practice, because the brief times of practicing silence during the day were just acknowledging what is going on at all times. What became apparent to me from these experiences was that contemplative practice is not so much a thing that is done, but a way of being that is learned over time. That way of being is part of who the participants are in their professional lives. The discussion will deal with themes related to both the personal and professional experiences of the participants, and consider the results in conjunction with the literature review.

The themes that emerged from the interviews outline the most salient experiences of participants as they considered their contemplative practice over time. Themes dealt with

changes to self, to relationships, to professional practice, and to perspectives on the wider world. Though each story was unique, common threads ran through all of the interviews. The experiences of the participants connect to the literature reviewed in many different ways, some peripherally, and some in more obvious ways. In many instances, the stories of the participants offer a different way of speaking about a process of change or learning that is present in the literature, but approached from a different point of view. This juxtaposition of different perspectives to describe experience is something I see as a benefit of this study —highlighting the complementary nature of spiritual practices and psychotherapy. This study offers a glimpse into a different way of understanding or interpreting our understanding of what it is to grow and heal and transform lives.

Identity studies and developmental literature. Each participant experienced changes in self-understanding and/or relationship with God over time. Many spoke about beginning contemplative practice and Centering Prayer at a time of crisis or transition in their lives, and about the practice's helping them to gain an understanding of a kinder, more relational and accepting God. Participants reflected that over time, through their contemplative and other personal work, they became much more self-accepting and experienced a transformation in their way of being and understanding themselves in the world.

This observation would corroborate the study by Kiesling and colleagues (2006), which found that for some individuals, encountering personal crises or traumas led to a shift in spiritual identity that was more accepting and gentle towards self and others. The study by Krause (2007) examined role saliency and changes in understanding of God in older subjects, aged greater than 66 years. The study found increased sense of closeness to God for a portion of subjects whose most salient roles were challenged by a crisis or loss and who experienced significant stress as a result. The current study also reveals experiences of people developing closer relationship with God as they worked through personal difficulties. However, it is interesting that the majority of

participants in the current study were 65 years or younger, yet described similar changes. The results of the current study expand on the Krause study by documenting the experiences of a different age range who demonstrate similar changes, and who hold a contemplative practice including Centering Prayer. The fact that people who have a contemplative practice experience shifts in identity and in relationship with God is not surprising in light of the writings of Keating (2002), who considers the practice both a spiritual tool and a way of achieving psychological healing.

Marion's (2000) writing on the inner work of Christian spirituality also highlights that intentional engagement with spiritual practices and other personal work propels people towards these shifts. Both Fowler (1981) and Marion describe the higher levels (listed in the literature review p. 24-25). of their theories with similar phrases—integration of self and deep inner self-awareness, commitment to justice and compassion for others, and a sense of universality. These phrases bear similarity to the themes emerging from the experiences of the participants in this study as they reflect on their lives.

Contemplative practice, spirituality, and healing. Many of the participants spoke about their contemplative work and Centering Prayer assisting them in learning to understand and work with their own thoughts and emotions. The literature on Centering Prayer (Bourgeault, 2004; Keating, 2002) outlines the relevant methods of recognizing and releasing thoughts, and of learning to observe and release strong emotions. The participants in the study related experiences that exemplify this process. Many participants' experiences included going through losses or transitions in their lives that propelled them into a search to find meaning in the experience. For some, the contemplative practice was combined with other forms of self-exploration such as psychotherapy, reading and self-reflection. The contemplative practice was named by several participants as being important because it led them into discovering a relational and accepting God—a necessary component for the healing work that some participants described.

The Grant (2001) article, discussing the trauma and the spiritual journey, also connects a renewed understanding of God with the healing process. In his article, Grant highlights the presence of deep spiritual struggle that can be brought on by trauma. He notes the ability of a traumatic event to “throw into question or destroy beliefs about self, God, and humanity” (p. 48). He describes how people may have their image of a protecting God destroyed when experiencing an event or act that would amount to a blatant betrayal by a God who would allow such an event to happen. Grant suggests that as a result such people can develop rigid approaches to life, spirituality, and religion in order to create a sense of control over their lives. Others develop addictive or destructive patterns of behaviour. For those individuals, repair to the ruptured relationship with God is a necessary step towards fully healing from the trauma. The current study and the Grant study both indicate that examining and redefining an understanding of God is a part of the healing process for some individuals whether dealing with trauma or other difficult life events.

Another personal characteristic that many participants cited as having been strengthened through their practice was their ability to become and remain more grounded or centered, and therefore less likely to be triggered or upset by ordinary unexpected circumstances or the heightened emotions of others. Several participants mentioned physical sensations of calm and relaxation associated with the sense of being grounded. Many of these same qualities are described by Siegel (2010) as functions that the brain can be trained to perform more efficiently. He describes, through scientific knowledge and expertise, how the skills of emotional regulation, response flexibility, and others can be developed. Contemplative practice and Centering Prayer methods work on developing the same skills, but use different approaches and language to accomplish similar outcomes. The two ways of looking at the same human potentials are one example of how contemplative practices based in ancient wisdom traditions can be seen as complementary to contemporary science and psychology.

Integrating counselling and spirituality. An area where this study touches on a topic not discussed extensively in the literature is the ways in which participants integrate their contemplative life and other spiritual elements into professional work. Two studies cited in the literature review outline integrated therapeutic models (Benner, 2005; Sperry, 2005). Benner comments on the current increase of interest in spirituality by saying, “if we are really interested in spirituality, let us start with a renewed commitment to our own spiritual journey” (Benner, 2002, p. 360). The current study provides many examples from the participants’ experiences that show how their personal quest for deeper spirituality is brought naturally into their work. For several participants, their contemplative practice, their desire for deeper engagement with clients and patients, and their integration of their own spiritual sense into their work happened together as a part of their own personal and professional growth. Knowledge of contemplative practice and specific techniques for calming, grounding, and focusing themselves was brought into professional work with clients and patients for several participants. One spoke about the dual sources of information available to her from her psychotherapy training and her spiritual direction/Centering Prayer training. Another spoke about having her psychotherapeutic theories and training in her mind and informing her work, but of being in a place of deeper connection with the client by being in tune with her own contemplative grounding. Another participant spoke about recognizing that professional titles and qualifications are far less important than connecting with patients on a “soul to soul” level. Two more participants spoke about recognizing differences in their work with clients when they are maintaining a regular contemplative practice vs. when they have gotten sidetracked from it. These comments from participants raise issues about how the person-of-the-therapist develops, and how for these particular participants, contemplative work is extremely important in their professional work. They are talking about how to *be* differently, rather than talking about *doing* their work differently. Certainly some of the work of Buddhist psychotherapists (Brazier, 1995) and the

writings on Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) discuss the way-of-being of the therapist, but few look at this issue with contemplative practice as the focus of the discussion.

Similarities between contemplative studies. Kuiper (2005) completed a study on people who practice Centering Prayer, using methodology similar to that of the current study. Her findings bear significant similarity to the current study. She found that for her participants, Centering Prayer contributed to new understandings of God, greater peacefulness, personal growth, and ability to embrace life changes. While her study did not focus on helping professionals specifically, the resemblance of the themes is quite striking. Two themes in particular emerge both in the Kuiper study and in the current study—those of an openness or sense of universality toward others, and a sense of joy or well-being coupled with a desire to embrace life with all of its uncertainties. These qualities would contribute to sustaining an individual through stressful or difficult times, and may suggest a resiliency against fatigue or burnout. It is interesting to note that these qualities resemble some of the most profound goals of many different psychological theories and paradigms, those of assisting individuals to reach their full potential and find meaning in life.

Counsellor self-care and development. These themes are important when considering counsellor self-care and the high-pressure atmosphere in which some professionals work. One participant commented that if a person in these fields does not maintain some kind of formal practice aimed at self-care, they can become depleted and cease to be viable in their field. Other participants commented on how their contemplative practice provided them a means to step out of stressful work environments, to refocus, ask for divine guidance if necessary, and return with renewed calm and energy. Closer examination of the constructs of burnout, counsellor self-care, resiliency, and self-compassion in conjunction with contemplative practice would be an area for future research. Each research area seems to have significant overlap to the current study in terms of how people cope with stressors and maintain a balanced outlook on life and work.

The theme of embracing life and the sense of joy expressed by participants went far beyond a simple result of self-care practices. Each of the participants interviewed expressed an attitude that reflected an acceptance of whatever circumstance might present itself, along with an understanding of themselves as imperfect and ultimately not in control of all aspects of their lives. Their ability to let go of circumstances beyond their control allowed them freedom to embrace the unknown and welcome challenges. At the same time, they said that this attitude is not always easy to maintain, and that it was sometimes a struggle. This sense of well-being is seen in Kuiper's (2005) study, and also described in Bourgeault (2004), and Keating (2002).

Literature exploring spiritual issues in professional work. In the final portion of each interview, I asked participants if they had any further thoughts they felt were important to bring into the study. Their comments from personal experience and their views on their professions reflect some of the views found in the literature. The Rose and colleagues (2001) study found that clients with higher levels of spiritual experience were more likely to want to discuss these issues in counselling, and to think that the issues should be included. In general, participants from the current study agreed with these findings. Two spoke about very positive experiences of a counsellor and psychologist who had been open to their spiritual concerns. One participant spoke about feeling discouraged and frustrated on encountering therapists who were unable to address spirituality, and who did not seem to have addressed their own inner work and spiritual issues. One also commented that she never felt comfortable bringing the spiritual element of her personal struggle with grief into counselling because she felt it would not be understood or validated. All of these comments support findings from the literature (Eck, 2002; Hage, 2006; Rose et al., 2001).

Results from this study contribute to the ongoing discussion in different fields about the need to learn more about spirituality and its role in human functioning (Eck, 2002; Hage, 2006; Rose et al., 2001; Stock, 2006; Walach & Reich, 2005). It also demonstrates the value of

considering the ways in which spiritual issues are intertwined with psychological issues that are brought to counselling (Grant, 2001). In his article on contemplative life and the humanities, Stock (2006) says that meditation is something that should be seen as normal and unremarkable.

Implications for the Counselling Profession

New perspectives from old traditions. One way in which this study benefits the field is that it provides insight into a practice that is not well understood by the secular world or by contemporary psychology. One participant spoke about how contemplative practices based in centuries-old wisdom traditions are addressing many of the same problems in human functioning that secular psychology addresses, but using a different language and a more “right-brained” approach. Looking at spiritual practices from ancient wisdom traditions will promote a balance between these ways of thinking and the thinking of contemporary psychology. This study looks at one tradition, Christianity, and one type of spiritual practice within that tradition, contemplative prayer. Building on work that is already being done to bring the wisdom of Buddhism and other traditions into the realm of counselling and psychology, this study adds a slightly different perspective, one that can serve to enrich the dialogue between disciplines and between traditions. More studies that look specifically at different traditions and different practices would also be beneficial to the field.

Trauma and spirituality. The connection between relationship with God and responses to trauma or crisis (Grant, 2001) holds potential for looking at ways counsellors work with trauma. Having an awareness of the religious and spiritual woundings that may accompany more outward problems exhibited by trauma survivors may help the field explore and develop ways to address these concerns. Even if counsellors themselves do not have the training or experience to work with these issues, an increased ability to recognize and honour their existence would heighten their ability to refer to professionals with the proper training and experience.

Potential for dialogue. Another benefit to the field of this study is simply that of contributing to dialogue. Christian contemplative practices do not have a high visibility in the literature compared to practices such as mindfulness or other forms of meditation. Additionally, this study describes the practice of Centering Prayer, and gives the counselling audience a better understanding of what this practice is and what it is not so that they are better able to recognize it. As mentioned in the literature review, spiritual practices can be barriers to psychological growth (Welwood, 2000). Having an understanding of the experience of contemplative practice is one small part of a wider knowledge base related to spirituality.

A further benefit of this study is its contribution to a dialogue related to the formation and way-of-being of people in helping professions. Several participants commented that thinking and talking about how they brought this part of themselves into their work was a good process that they rarely do with colleagues or in professional situations. I hope that the study also inspires others to engage in reflection and dialogue. Contemplative practice, in the experiences of these participants, is a part of their identity, and one that is integral to their work. This commitment to a personal discipline to promote deeper self-understanding and compassion for others is a way that these participants have found to meet those they work and interact with first as fellow human beings with the common desires for peace and well-being. Regardless of the type of discipline, or the language used to describe it, the benefits of such work are apparent.

Concluding thoughts. Is spiritual nurture a part of holistic care of persons? I believe that the answer is most certainly yes. In the experiences of these participants, spirituality is an essential element of their lives, and one that both enriches and informs their professional work.

Do contemplative practice and spirituality belong in counselling and psychotherapy environments? I believe the answer to this question is less clear. As noted in the literature review, the counselling profession is far from united on its opinions on how to integrate this type of work into its mandate. I agree with Benner's (2002) idea that the starting place for integrating

spirituality into professional work is a willingness on the part of the individual professional to engage in one's own spiritual exploration. The literature reviewed for this project was largely in favour of finding a place for spirituality to be included in counselling, but these are not the only voices expressing ideas on the subject. Not every person entering counselling has a wish to enter spiritual work and transformation to the depth described by the participants in this study. Nor does every person feel the pull towards spiritual growth or relationship with God that was described by some of the participants. However, I believe that those persons who do feel drawn towards this kind of transformative work should be able to find professionals who will support, respect, and understand the quest in whatever way is most appropriate for them. In addition, I think that those with roots in the Christian tradition can benefit from being made more aware that there are contemplative practices native to Christianity that use language familiar to them, and that have the potential to support them in their search for a mature spirituality. As evidenced by the participants in this study, though, the language used is ultimately insignificant when one realizes the common elements of the human and spiritual journey shared by persons of all traditions. I think that being sensitive to one's own spiritual self, and being sensitive to the spiritual life of the client, however it might be expressed, is an appropriate stance for professionals to take.

What is the importance of understanding the experiences of those in helping professions who hold contemplative practices including Christian Centering Prayer? I think these voices present a view of a mature spirituality based in both experience and knowledge that is underrepresented in the current literature in counselling psychology. I think their experiences voice a particular vision of care and compassion for our fellow human beings that can only benefit our profession. In conclusion, I think that professionals who feel drawn to this kind of integration should be encouraged to speak about their work, because by speaking, we contribute to the richness of dialogue available to us all.

Suggestions for Future Research

The current study was focused on conveying the experience of contemplative practice and Centering Prayer from within the Christian tradition. One of my thoughts at the beginning of the research was that by more fully understanding the experience and language of one particular tradition, other people from different traditions could benefit, and dialogue could begin. Other studies focused on contemplative practices from within different faith traditions would further contribute to this potential conversation, all with the intent of informing counselling practice. Studies that attend to gender and spiritual practice might also prove informative by looking at the different ways that men and women engage in and express their experience of spirituality and contemplative practice. Another exciting area of research to continue would be to explore the quantitative ways in which contemplative practice and Centering Prayer affect the body and brain. Several participants commented on the physical sensations they notice during their practice and as a result of it, but exploration of this subject was beyond the scope of the study. Another interesting area of potential research would be to look at clients' experiences of professionals who hold practices such as these. Participants in this study commented on their experience of practicing differently when they feel more or less attuned to their own spiritual practice. A study of the quality of therapeutic relationship when client and/or counsellor have a contemplative practice would also be interesting.

Limitations

This was a small study with all participants from one geographic location. There were eight participants, which is a good number for a phenomenological study. There was a gender imbalance because the study participants included seven women and one man, and there was a lack of cultural diversity amongst participants. Studies with equal gender balance, or diverse cultural representation might yield variations in results. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology that attempts to explain the lived experience of a phenomenon. Van Manen (1990)

says that “phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (P. 9). The role of the researcher is to engage fully with the experiences of the participants and bring personal experience to consciousness. The resulting summary of experience is a collaborative process with researcher and participants together engaging in making meaning of the experience. One potential limitation of phenomenology is that the researcher’s own understanding is limited by the level of personal development and insights, and may not necessarily be at the same level of understanding as the participants. Particularly in a study of spirituality, where there are so many differing definitions and understandings of a difficult to define topic, the process of making meaning is challenging. A different researcher, examining the same data and engaging with the same participants in conversation and hermeneutic process, might find slightly different ways of interpretation and explanation. I bring to the current research my own set of eyes and the experience and insights available to me. In order to substantiate the trustworthiness of the findings, member checks, self-reflection of the researcher, and outside expert review were all carried out during the course of the research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

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Recruitment Poster

Are you employed in a helping profession such as counselling, nursing, medicine, ministry, psychiatry, or social work?

Do you have a contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer?
Have you had this practice for at least one year?

Are you willing to share your personal and professional experiences of contemplative practice as a study participant?

Research in the field of counselling psychology indicates a growing interest in spirituality, spiritual practices, and the ways that these might be more fully explored in counselling. Many studies explore the nature of spirituality in relation to health, coping, aging, and identity. More literature explores meditative practices and their potential benefits to counselling practice. However, few studies look at contemplative practices within the context of their religious and spiritual contexts in order to understand more about the role they may play in healing and growth. More research into specific forms of contemplative practice such as Centering Prayer would allow for greater understanding of the practices themselves and the people who use them.

This study's purpose is to explore the experiences of people in helping professions who have a contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer. Participation in this study will involve engaging in personal reflection and an interview process. The time commitment will be approximately 3 hours in total.

If you are interested in participating in this study or in obtaining additional information, please contact Eleanor Rogers at 604-833-5052 or at erogers@telus.net.

This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology.

Appendix B: Invitation to the Study

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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The Experience of Christian Contemplative Practice in Healing Professionals: A Phenomenological Study

Invitation to the Study

Purpose

Research in the field of counselling psychology indicates a growing interest in spirituality, spiritual practices, and the ways that these might be more fully explored in counselling. Many studies explore the nature of spirituality in relation to health, coping, aging, and identity. More literature explores meditative practices and their potential benefits to counselling practice. However, few studies look at contemplative practices within the context of their religious and spiritual contexts in order to understand more about the role they may play in healing and growth. More research into specific forms of contemplative practice such as Centering Prayer would allow for greater understanding of the practices themselves and the people who use them.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people in helping professions who self-identify as having a Christian contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer. The aim is to reveal more about the contemplative experience, so that both counselling psychologists and those working or training in Christian ministry might gain deeper insight into contemplative practice in general, and into the Centering Prayer practice more specifically.

Basic Eligibility Criteria

- You are an adult employed in a helping profession (counsellor, psychiatrist, nurse, psychologist, social worker, etc.).
- You currently practice Centering Prayer and have done so for at least one year. You may have other practices in addition to Centering Prayer.
- You consider Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices to be an important aspect of your life and work.

Potential participants who contact the researchers will be asked several questions to ascertain that they are eligible for this study.

Study Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to reflect upon your experiences and participate in two interviews. The total time commitment will be approximately 3 hours.

Contact Information

If you are interested in participating in this study, have any questions, or require more information, please contact Eleanor Rogers (Co-Investigator) at 604-833-5052 or erogers@telus.net. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology.

You can also contact Dr. Susan James (Principal Investigator), Department of Counselling Psychology at 604-822-6664 or sjames@interchange.ubc.ca.

Version 1 July 14, 2009

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Appendix C: Consent Form



Department of Educational and Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2517-2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V6T 1Z4
604-822-6664; Fax: 604-822-3302

The experience of Christian contemplative practice in helping professionals: A phenomenological study

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. Susan James, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, 604-822-6664.

Co-Investigator: Eleanor Rogers, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, 604-833-5052. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people in helping professions who self-identify as having a Christian contemplative practice that includes Centering Prayer. The aim is to reveal more about the contemplative experience in people's personal and professional life, so that both counselling psychologists and those working or training in Christian ministry might gain deeper insight into contemplative practice in general, and into the Centering Prayer practice more specifically.

Study Procedures: If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to reflect on your experiences with contemplative practices and journal about them as you feel comfortable. If you feel comfortable doing so, you will be asked to give basic demographic information. You will then participate in an initial one-hour interview where you will be asked to speak about your experience of contemplative practices including Centering Prayer. The interview will take place at a location of your choice or at the University of British Columbia. During a second interview, you will review a transcript of the first interview, and make any desired changes to ensure the transcript accurately reflects your experience. The interviews will be audiotaped and will be used for the interviewer's purposes only. The total time commitment will be 3 hours.

Potential Risks: There is minimal risk involved in this study. However, you may find that sharing your experiences promotes strong emotions. You are free to decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer, or may stop your participation in the interview at any time, without penalty.

Although you may already have resources, you will be provided with a list of counselling services that you might want to use in the event that our interviews trigger a need to further process or explore arising issues with a trained mental health professional (please

see Community Resources sheet).

Potential Benefits: You may find that participation in the study and sharing your experiences of contemplative practice is personally and professionally beneficial. You may gain new insights through articulating your own experiences or reviewing the compiled data at the conclusion of the study.

Confidentiality: The interviews are confidential, and steps will be taken to protect your identity. Only my supervisor and I will review interview data, transcripts, and audiotapes. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used when reporting findings. All tapes, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Research information will be kept in locked files at all times. After the study is completed and all data has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be held for five years and then destroyed.

Remuneration/Compensation: You will not receive monetary compensation for your participation in this study.

Contact for information about the study: At any time during the study, if you have any questions with respect to the study, you may contact Dr. Susan James at 604-822-6664 or sjames@interchange.ubc.ca. You may also contact Eleanor Rogers at 604-833-5052 or erogers@telus.net.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598, or if long distance, e-mail: RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent: Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate in this study or withdraw your participation at any time without negative consequences.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study. Your signature also indicates that you consent to be audiotaped during your interviews. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature _____ Date _____
Research Participant

Signature _____ Date _____
Interviewer

Appendix D: Preparation for First Interview

The experience of Christian contemplative practice in helping professionals

Suggestions for preparing for the first interview:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I would like to be able to gain a thorough understanding of your experience of Centering Prayer, and other contemplative practices if they are a part of your experience. In preparation for your interview, I invite you to spend some time journaling about your experience, if you feel it would help you focus your reflections. You may include anything in your journal that you find helpful, including your own writing, any other writing you have found particularly resonant with your own experience, poetry, drawing, or other creative processes. In the interview, you may want to share information directly from your journal, or simply use it as a reference to guide your own thoughts. If you prefer to reflect on your experience without use of a journal, that is equally acceptable. I'd like to hold the interview about a week from now, in order to give you time to consider what you would like to share.

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

The Experience of Christian Contemplative Practice in Helping Professionals: A Phenomenological Study

Interview Protocol

Orienting Interview Question

I'm interested in hearing about your experience of Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices that you hold. In a very general sense, I'd like to hear about your life and the role these practices have held in it since you began them. I appreciate that it might be difficult to capture in words your thoughts on the experience of contemplative practice. You are welcome to share any of the material from your journal if it feels comfortable for you. If you have used poetry, drawing or other creative processes in your exploration, you are welcome to share these, too, although you do not need to share anything that does not feel comfortable for you. I would like to hear about and understand your story as fully as possible. There might be times when I ask you more about a specific situation, but you can always choose to not answer a question or choose to stop the interview. This is your choice about what you wish to share.

Please feel free to take all the time you need to think about and answer the questions.

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to answer questions or discuss topics that you do not feel comfortable with. You may also ask me to turn off the audio recorder at any time or end the interview at any time during our conversation.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Let's begin the interview now.

Main Interview Question

Please tell me about your experience with the practice of Centering Prayer.

Possible Facilitating Questions

1. As you consider your practice over time, what have you noticed about yourself in your personal and professional life?
2. Are there times you can remember when your practice stood out as particularly important in your personal or professional life?
3. Have you struggled with the practice at times? Could you tell me about those times?
4. What other contemplative practices do you have (if any) and what is your experience of them?
5. Is there anything else about your practices that you would like me to know, or that you think is important to talk about?
6. Are there other questions I may have forgotten to ask you?

Appendix F: Ethics Approval Certificate

<https://rise.ubc.ca/rise/Doc/0/D3ML5D80DB04T4JN8C591S3TCE/fromString.html>

10-01-20 10:34 AM



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Susan James	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	UBC BREB NUMBER: H09-01603				
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:						
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Institution</th> <th>Site</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>UBC</td> <td>Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>			Institution	Site	UBC	Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)
Institution	Site					
UBC	Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)					
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Interviews may be held at subjects' homes, offices, or suitable place of their choice.						
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Eleanor Rogers						
SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A						
PROJECT TITLE: The Experience of Christian Contemplative Practice in Helping Professionals: A Phenomenological Study						

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: August 12, 2010

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: August 12, 2009	
Document Name	Version	Date	
Protocol: The Experience of Christian Contemplative Practice in Helping Professionals: A Phenomenological Study	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Consent Forms: Contemplative Practice Consent Form	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Advertisements: Contemplative Recruitment Poster	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests: Contemplative Interview protocol	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Contemplative Counselling Resources	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Contemplative Preparation for first interview	N/A	July 14, 2009	
Letter of Initial Contact: Contemplative Invitation to the Study	N/A	July 14, 2009	

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair