Healing in the None Zone: The Role of Spirituality
for Survivors of Domestic Abuse in the Pacific Northwest

by

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Abstract

Domestic abuse is a prevalent issue within Canadian society; despite this fact, research in the area of healing from domestic abuse is still relatively limited. Meanwhile, research on the topic of spirituality and healing from domestic abuse is still in its infancy. A number of studies on the connections between spirituality and physical / mental health, and spirituality and trauma, suggest the importance of further research on the connections between spirituality and healing from domestic abuse. The purpose of this study is to add to the limited literature on this topic through the exploratory methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, with a critical feminist modality. This study is unique as it was conducted in Vancouver, British Columbia, and its suburbs, and considers the research question in the cultural and spiritual context of the Pacific Northwest – considered by some authors to be the none zone - which includes the province of British Columbia, and the states of Washington, Oregon and Alaska. By exploring the participants’ experiences of spirituality in relation to healing from domestic abuse, the study adds to the argument for further education in this area for service providers. Six themes emerged from the interviews with the 8 participants. These themes were: (1) Letting go and moving on, (2) Finding comfort and support, (3) Reconnecting to self and the outside world, (4) Building self-confidence, (5) Gaining a sense of empowerment, (6) Regaining hope. A final subsection entitled Call to action: Suggestions for service providers, was included in order to provide participants with a chance to send a message to service providers about their needs in relation to healing. The study offers new insight into women’s experiences of healing from domestic abuse, especially in relation to diverse forms of spirituality. The study also explores clinical implications of the results, as well as areas for future research.
Preface

This research was conducted with ethics approval granted by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board on September 16, 2010 (number H10 – 01878).
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This Project is dedicated to courageous women around the world who make the choice to leave and heal from abusive relationships, and to those service providers who support them through this journey.
Chapter 1 Introduction

Motivation for the Study

This study grew from my own work as a women’s support worker at a local transition house (TH) in the Pacific Northwest, as well as my past studies in spirituality and my more recent studies in counselling psychology. As I had previously completed graduate studies in spirituality and theology, I understood that this was a lens that I brought to my role as a women’s support worker and that made me more aware of whether spirituality was included at the TH. During this work, I was conscious as well that since the support provided at a TH came from a feminist perspective, our work was to be neutral and accepting, avoiding any possibility of further oppression of an already disempowered group. As such, workers gave resources, provided support in the form of active listening, and suggested approaches to self-care such as deep breathing, walks in natural settings, nutrition, and yoga. Any reference to religion, and/or spirituality, possibly due to its assumed connection to religion, was avoided overall; it was my impression that these words were not considered to be safe to use in this feminist environment due to their possible connection to patriarchy and any possible disempowering of the residents. For instance, there was no identification of spirituality or religion as a possible resource in the intake literature provided to the women, although a space to fill in other possible resources was provided.

Meanwhile, I was aware that my observations did not simply emerge from my own suppositions about the value of spirituality; I noted a number of instances when some of the residents drew upon spirituality as a resource during their stay at the TH. I also was aware that spirituality was sometimes raised with residents when the staff on duty had some interest in it, or if the resident raised it herself. With these observations in mind, I began to wonder if
some of the residents might benefit from the chance to talk with staff about their own range of experiences with spirituality. I also began to wonder if, in not explicitly leaving a door open for residents to talk about their spiritual experiences and struggles, this in turn was another form of oppression. These wonderings increased my desire to understand the residents’ range of experiences of spirituality in the phenomenon of healing from an abusive relationship. It is this curiosity and desire to explore these experiences that has led me to this research, and, fitting with the feminist theoretical lens from which I have addressed this phenomenological study, to the hope that this research might influence future work of counsellors and agencies that provide support to this population.

Research Problem

The term *domestic abuse*, which will be defined in more detail later in this thesis, is not simply limited to physical abuse by an intimate partner, but also might include sexual and emotional abuse, as well as other psychological factors such as harassment, financial control, and psychological games (DirectGov, 2009). A recent report put together for Statistics Canada (Taylor-Butts, 2009) on spousal violence utilized as its primary data source the Incident-based Crime Reporting Survey and described spousal violence as “violent behaviour that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm between persons in an intimate relationship” (p. 24). This survey covered information on approximately 94% of the Canadian population collected from reports to police during 2007. Of the 75,800 incidents of family violence reported to police during this year, 40,200 of these were against a spouse, and 8 in 10 of the victims were female, 5 times higher than the rate of male victims. In other words, the rate for female victims of spousal violence reported to police was 305 in 100,000 population. Meanwhile, the data from this survey is a limited representation of women’s
experiences of spousal violence due to how often spousal violence is not reported to police: another recent Statistics Canada report (Mihorean, 2005) based on information collected in Statistics Canada’s 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization found that only 27% of victims of spousal violence report this abuse to police. Considering the 2007 survey used the term “violent behaviour” to define spousal abuse, this might also have affected the reporting of abuse, and led those surveyed to not report if they had experienced, for example, psychological manipulation. As well, researchers have found that specific cultural groups, such as women from South Asian communities, are less likely to make official complaints against their partners (Preisser, 1999). In other words, the statistical report of 305 in 100,000 only represents a portion of the abuse currently occurring in Canadian domestic relationships. Meanwhile, in the United States estimates have found that as much as 30% of couples, both married and unmarried, experience some form of intimate partner violence during the period of their relationship (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007).

Although what often gets reported in the media are the mortalities related to domestic abuse, there are many other serious consequences for women who are abused by their partners. In her meta-analysis of 18 studies on mental health problems among women who have experienced domestic abuse, Golding (1999) found that depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicidality are all commonly found in this population. Notably, Golding found that across these studies depression had a weighted mean prevalence of 47.6% in the population of women who have suffered abuse, much higher than the 10.2% to 21.3% found by other studies of the general population of women. Similarly, PTSD was found to have a weighted mean of 63.8% across 11 studies of this population, much higher than the 1.3% to 12.3% found in other studies of general
populations of women. Meanwhile, other studies have named low self-esteem as particularly evident in populations of women who have been abused by partners (Cascardi & O’Leary, 1992), and still others have found for this population connections of lowered self-esteem with the use of ineffective coping strategies and a sense of self-blame (Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004). The state of domestic abuse in Canada, let alone the world, is often daunting to consider; similarly, the adverse effects on these women’s lives are almost unfathomable.

Somehow, however, organizations such as those that manage transition houses attempt to provide support to women who have experienced domestic abuse so that they can find the strength to leave these relationships, and hopefully to heal from these experiences.

It is my impression that the support that women find in services such as transition houses, as well as counselling and advocacy services, is a form of support that has the potential to change these women’s lives forever. Meanwhile, studies have found that there is a form of disconnect going on between this population’s needs and the services actually being provided. A recent empirical study of Canadian hospital emergency departments (EDs) found that only 31.9% of the 118 EDs surveyed had any form of domestic abuse policies and procedures (McClenann, Worster, & MacMillan, 2008). Likewise, another Canadian study found that when medical personnel have found out about a woman’s abuse, they might not offer any form of support or referral, and might not even ask the woman about the abuse that she suffered (Moe, 2007). Studies have also found that even when organizations try to provide support, they are not always successful in addressing the needs of the women.

Postmus, Severson, Berry and Ah Yoo (2009) explored in their quantitative study the experiences of 423 women who had utilized support services in an effort to survive abusive relationships. The researchers had each of the women rank order a list of 24 possible services
from most to least helpful, and also had them rank which of these services they received most to those that they received least. Aware of the irony, the researchers noted that the services least often received, such as day care, education, job training, and food, were the services that the women found most helpful. Alternately, the services most often received, such as emotional support from family and friends, self-help groups and counselling, were found to be less helpful in comparison to the tangible services. This is clearly an area that needs additional work, with the exploration of appropriate and helpful supports also needing to be considered.

Similarly, researchers have also found that despite a recent growth in literature on domestic abuse, there is a clear absence of studies on the topic of healing from abusive relationships (Smith, 2003; Landenburger, 1998). Landenburger, in her article on the dynamics of leaving and recovering from an abusive relationship, pointed out the common misconception that once a woman has left an abusive relationship the difficult work is over. Based on her existential-phenomenological study of 15 women’s experiences of recovering from domestic abuse, Smith found that recovering from domestic abuse involved much more than leaving the abusive relationship. Smith found that, for the participants, the beginning of the recovery process included the need for women to free themselves from the abusive relationship through leaving physically, ask for and accept help, feel a sense of freedom, grieve past losses, confront regrets, and struggle with painful feelings. The participants then needed to undergo a process of healing and growth, including letting go of the past, finding a new voice, building their self-reliance, rediscovering themselves, forgiving themselves and others, and finding a purpose. Similarly, in her book on recovery from trauma, which was based on her 2 decades of research and psychiatric clinical work with victims of sexual and
domestic violence, Herman (1997) found that people recovering from trauma had to go through a lengthy healing process that is “inherently turbulent and complex” (p. 155). In other words, women in this situation have a lot of work to do in order to undergo any healing after they have physically left their relationship. It is this healing, according to Landenburger, that “is essential for a woman to move on with her life and, if desired, to become involved in a healthy significant relationship” (p. 705). The area of support for women, and even more recently of support of healing for women who have experienced domestic abuse, is forever maturing as more studies are conducted and the experiences of these women are explored in more depth.

Definitions

Before going any further, it is important for the sake of this research that a number of terms be defined. The terms that will be explored here are spirituality and religion, and domestic abuse. These three terms have been widely considered in the literature with a variety of definitions; for the sake of this thesis we will consider these terms in some depth with the understanding that their breadth of these terms could be explored in individual theses themselves.

*Spirituality and religion.* Spirituality and religion are two terms that many researchers have struggled to define. While some researchers have left the definition up to their participants, some have also combined past literature in order to have within their study some semblance of the terms’ past operational definitions. For the purpose of this thesis some sense of the common definition of these terms in past literature will be gathered in order to aid readers to consider the researcher’s original understanding of these terms; however,
ultimately the definitions were left up to the participants as is appropriate with the phenomenological method, and their definitions will then be explored further in the study’s results.

The challenge with defining the term spirituality is that in past literature writers have each presented slightly different definitions of this term (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Humphreys, 2000; Seybold & Hill, 2001). There have, however, been several elements that are common to these writers’ definitions: in many of these definitions spirituality involves a sense of relationship with the sacred, which might be described as God or a transcendent force, and this affects one’s sense of meaning and purpose in life. Writers have also commonly included in their definitions that spirituality involves some form of personal transformation, a search for the sacred, and/or a search for an ultimate truth.

Meanwhile, in her doctoral thesis on people who draw upon spirituality for healing, Gockel (2007), with an intention of including within her thesis traditional and non-traditional experiences, described spirituality as a “…vivid, vital and personal, lived experience of the divine and one’s relationship to it” (p. 4). In these definitions of spirituality there is clearly the somewhat baffling challenge to somehow include openness to the personal experience of something beyond oneself, while also defining what is characteristic of that open experience.

Meanwhile, the term religion is frequently described by these writers as being included within the construct of spirituality, but not assumed to be an expected part of that construct – for the purpose of this thesis the term ‘religion’ will be defined in relation to the term spirituality. Humphreys (2000) clearly outlined this difference: “[spirituality is]… defined as a sense of relationship with a higher power and a feeling of wholeness…”
spirituality is more than religion and may or may not incorporate religious rituals, behaviors, or association with religious organization…” (p. 273). This is the understanding of these terms that I as the researcher have brought to this thesis and to my research with the participants. Fitting with the phenomenological approach of this research, room was left for the focus to be on the participants’ experiences of spirituality. Additionally, religion was only included within the understanding of spirituality if the participants described it as part of their spirituality.

*Domestic abuse.* There are several terms used to name domestic abuse in the literature. These include, but are not limited to: domestic violence, intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, relationship abuse, battering, spousal abuse and partner abuse. For the purpose of this thesis the term domestic abuse will be used instead of more common terms such as *domestic violence*, which is often associated with men beating women (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). It is my opinion that since domestic abuse frequently involves more than physical violence, the term domestic violence, or any other terms that use the word *violence*, fails to communicate the complex array of factors involved in domestic abuse.

In their exploration of the literature on domestic violence written in the 1990s, Johnson and Ferraro (2000) outlined the nuances of power and control that can be found in abusive relationships. These writers explained that, based on the literature that they reviewed, there are four types of abuse against partners, including “common couple violence” (CCV), “intimate terrorism” (IT), “violent resistance” (VR), and “mutual violent control” (MVC) (p. 949). CCV includes one partner lashing out physically at the other, but this “lashing out” does not usually escalate and is often mutual. Likewise, VR and MVC more
frequently than IT have been described as involving both partners. VR more specifically has
been frequently attributed to women as it involves some form of fighting back against the
abuser; however, Johnson and Ferraro found little research on either of these phenomena and
suggested these might be areas for more exploration.

Meanwhile, IT, which is the primary abuse focused on in this thesis, is very different
from MVC, and especially from CCV: “The basic pattern in IT is one of violence as merely
one tactic in a general pattern of control” (p. 949, Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). IT includes more
instances of violence than CCV, and yet these instances of violence can be less severe than
those found in CCV. What notably distinguishes IT, however, is that it also involves
nonviolent behaviours, including emotional and psychological abuse, as part of the general
motive to control. These nonviolent behaviours are listed thoroughly in the Power and
Control Wheel (P&CW, see Appendix A), a resource commonly used in transition houses
throughout the world to help women name their experience of abuse; as a women’s support
worker I have often found that women who come to the house have difficulty describing and
conceptualizing everything that was abusive about their relationship. As mentioned earlier,
usually physical abuse is what most people, including abused women, think of when they
consider abuse.

The P&CW was created by The Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in 1984,
and was based on input shared by 200 women who had experienced domestic abuse (Pence
& Paymar, 1993). The Duluth Model, which grew out of this research, was meant to expand
the former concept of abuse to a “pattern of behaviors rather than isolated incidents of abuse
or cyclical explosions of pent-up anger, frustration, or painful feelings” (¶ 10). Although
there might be few violent outbursts by the abuser, these few outbursts each hold more power over the woman because they serve to reinforce the other elements of the abuse, such as “minimizing,” “denying,” and “blaming.” For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to understand that this is the meaning of the term domestic abuse that I, as the researcher, bring to the work; however, like with the definition of spirituality, the definition of domestic abuse was left up to the participants during the research. As well, as was pointed out by Johnson and Ferraro (2000), domestic abuse is not limited to heterosexual couples, and so this research was open to women who might be in abusive same-sex relationships.

Rationale

As mentioned earlier, domestic abuse is a prominent concern within Canadian society that has dramatic and debilitating effects on the women who experience it in their relationships. As well, these effects do not simply go away when a woman leaves a relationship; this is only the first step of many for their healing process. Meanwhile, service providers are still learning about which supports are helpful to provide to women who are trying to recover and heal from these relationships. In their study, not only did Postmus et al. (2009) discover that the services that were found by the women to be most helpful were those that were the least often received, but also that “religious and spiritual counselling” was listed as the second most helpful service received (p. 860). Meanwhile, a number of studies (e.g., Humphreys, 2000; Senter & Caldwell, 2002) have found that survivors of domestic abuse value their spirituality; for instance, in a study of 151 African American survivors of domestic abuse, Gillum, Sullivan, and Bybee (2006) found in their quantitative study that 97% of participants found “spirituality or God was a source of strength or comfort for them… with 76% reporting ‘a great deal’” (p. 245). These researchers suggested from these
results that more extensive investigation needs to be done in this area, and acknowledged that staff members in many domestic abuse shelters often avoid this subject with residents. Boehm, Golec, Krahn, and Smyth (1999), who look in their book at the spiritual and cultural needs of women healing from domestic abuse, suggested that shelter staff might avoid addressing the topic of spirituality due to: limited time and resources, the perception of spirituality as personal, the vast diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs in Canada, and the possibility of misunderstanding or of intruding on a woman’s privacy. With this literature in mind, there should be no surprise that research in this area has grown in recent years (e.g., Fowler & Hill, 2004; Gillum et al., 2006; Potter, 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002; Yick, 2008). It appears that there is a desire to somehow address the subject of spirituality for women who have experienced domestic abuse, but also a disconnection between this desire and the knowledge of how to accomplish this. The intention of this research is to add to this limited body of knowledge, and to authentically describe from the point of view of the women involved what has been their experiences and what they perceive as their needs from service providers.

Further research in this area is also suggested by the fact that numerous empirical studies have found associations between spirituality, and physical and mental health (e.g., Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Seybold, & Hill, 2001; Westgate, 1996). For instance, connections have been found between low rates of depressive symptoms and positive religious coping, which was defined to include spiritual support, congregational support, benevolent reframing, the use of rituals, and a sense of agency or control (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001). As well, in this study, self-esteem, a sense of quality of life, and life satisfaction were also consistently associated with positive religious
coping. In their meta-analysis of the literature on religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress, Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) found, upon examining 49 relevant studies, that:

Individuals who used religious coping strategies such as benevolent religious reappraisals, collaborative religious coping, seeking spiritual support, etc. typically experienced more stress-related growth, spiritual growth, positive affect, and had higher self-esteem, etc. (p. 473)

These authors similarly found in the results of their explorations of the literature that positive religious coping was overall negatively correlated with depression, anxiety and distress.

Also noteworthy are the few studies that have specifically explored spirituality and healing from domestic abuse. In their phenomenological study, Senter and Caldwell (2002) considered a very similar topic to the one for the current study: the researchers focused on the spiritual experiences of 9 women who had undergone healing from an abusive relationship and had successfully stayed away from that relationship. The authors found that the participants’ healing was aided by their spirituality, and in turn their spirituality was deepened by their healing process. For instance, some of the participants in Senter and Caldwell’s study found support through their faith in God, while a number of participants found their relationship with God deepened as a result of their struggles resulting from the abusive relationships. Also significant was the fact that 3 of the participants experienced anger at God, in particular for unanswered prayers, and that this reflected feelings of abandonment, powerlessness, and despair. The authors explained that they found that for the participants the leaving and healing processes were complex, and that they led to “new perspectives of self, life, God, and others” (p. 543). It can be determined from the literature,
therefore, that it could be helpful to include some possibility of recognition of spirituality, or even spiritual support, within the services offered to women who have experienced abuse. It is also important to note that it might be helpful for women to have somewhere to talk about their feelings towards God, and / or the effects of the abuse on their spirituality.

Seybold and Hill (2001) caution that spirituality, with or without the inclusion of religion, can also be pathological, including: “authoritarian or blindly obedient, superficially literal, strictly extrinsic or self-beneficial, or conflict ridden and fragmented” (p. 22). Although there have been positive correlations of mental and physical health with spirituality, there have also been correlations of some forms of spirituality with mental health challenges. For example, Exline, Yali and Sanderson (2000) found a high correlation of depression with religious strain, which includes feelings of alienation from God. As well, these authors found in their study an association between suicidality and religious fear and guilt. Harrison, et al. (2001) had similar results, finding that depression, anxiety, and distress were positively correlated with use of negative religious coping, including spiritual discontent, punishing reappraisal of God, and passive religious deferral. In other words, survivors of domestic abuse might experience spirituality in positive or in negative ways. These articles, among others, suggest that spirituality needs to be looked at in more depth with regards to the support for women who have experienced domestic abuse. These studies explain that spirituality should not be avoided as a possible support, while also noting a need for caution in considering this area with this group. As well, these studies suggest that avoidance of spirituality could result in a missed opportunity to address a positive or negative influence on women’s lives during the healing process; avoiding addressing spirituality, therefore, does not mean an absence of its effects. Most of all, these studies and the variety in
their results suggest how important it is for researchers to understand better the range of experiences of these women.

I feel that there are several compelling reasons to have approached my research, as well as my thesis, from the modality of critical feminist theory. First of all, the critical feminist theory lens is especially appropriate in working with any group who has experienced oppression; one of the focuses of this theory and approach to research involves extensive work on the part of the researcher to try to avoid inflicting further exploitation or subordination through the research approach or representation of the research findings (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). Secondly, feminist theory is one that many organizations and counsellors who support women who have experienced abuse use to frame their work; therefore, any research done with this lens will hopefully speak more directly to these groups and more readily communicate to them potential benefits of change in their approaches. Similarly, the benefit of this theory is that it helps to “unmask taken-for-granted social practices that reinforce hierarchies and exclusions, while revealing new social change strategies” (p. 25, Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009). In fact, the critical feminist approach as a form of the critical emancipatory paradigm calls the researcher to somehow act for change; it is my intention to distribute my finished thesis to appropriate organizations in hopes that this work might suggest some changes that these organizations and individuals can make.

Thirdly, feminist research is done with the intention of the results being for women, rather than simply about women (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). As we have seen in the literature so far, with the exception of the qualitative articles considered, much of what has been done on this topic has been focused on women, without leaving room for the voices and points of view of these women on this particular topic. It has been my intention with the
phenomenological approach, which will be explored in more detail later in this thesis, to do just that. Meanwhile, I have been aware of Hesse-Biber and Leckenby’s caution that the feminist researcher must “not ignore the power that is inherent in her own assumption of ability to grant voice to the ‘othered’… [and] this speaking-to requires the feminist researcher to be a represented presence within the research endeavor…” (p. 215). In other words, it is important for the feminist researcher to be aware of the power that exists in her role as researcher and in her decision to write about the experiences of oppressed people; in order to minimize some of the power imbalance inherent in this role, it is important that the researcher include some of her own experience in the written results as well. Other methodological as well as design elements that have been affected by this particular modality will be explored in more detail in the methods chapter of this thesis.

While I have approached this work with a phenomenological methodology, which traditionally calls for minimal consideration of context when exploring a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990), I also used the lens of critical feminist theory modality, which calls for an inclusion of that context. Hesse-Biber and Leckenby (2004) explained the dilemma that feminist researchers face: “Feminist research walks a fine line between balancing the efforts to seek knowledge that is capable of making generalizations about women as a group and the recognition that all knowledge is socially situated” (p. 214). While reading most of the articles that have considered the topic of spirituality and women who have experienced abuse, I was quite aware of the fact that they were primarily done somewhere in the United States, and frequently done in southern, central, and eastern areas of the United States (e.g., Gillum, et al, 2006; Senter & Caldwell, 2002; Postmus, et al., 2009). Unlike these other studies, my study was done in the Canadian city of Vancouver, British Columbia, as well as
in the suburbs of Vancouver; this region is also called the Lower Mainland and is considered part of the Pacific Northwest. In consideration of this specific context, I was distinctly aware of its relative uniqueness in comparison to the contexts of these other studies, especially as it relates to spirituality and culture; therefore, I included consideration of this context when exploring the results of my study.

This unique context was described in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, where editors Killen and Silk (2004) gathered articles written about a range of data collected for the purpose of a project entitled “Religion by Region” by the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Data for this project was gathered on the religious demographics in the United States, including information on experiences of individual religious identities, and the make-up of religious bodies’ memberships. This information was then put together with United States 2000 consensus data in order to form a picture of the religious climate in the United States. From this data specific religious regions were defined, including what was labeled the *none zone*, which includes the states of Oregon, Washington and Alaska. Definitive of this region is the fact that “more people claim ‘none’ when asked their religious identification than in any other region of the United States” (Killen, 2004, p. 9). Although the data from this study did not include any numbers from British Columbia, later research has shown that British Columbia’s results are similar (Todd, 2009). Killen explains that in this region religiousness often tends to be individual and intense, often including some form of individual spiritual quest that draws from multiple traditions. Meanwhile others who live in the Pacific Northwest tend to gravitate towards a sectarian focus amidst the confusion of such religious fluidity. Similarly, Douglas Todd, a Vancouver Sun journalist, has suggested in his
book entitled *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* that the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia, is unique in that its residents are frequently secular but also spiritual. As well, Shibley (2009) whose article appears in Todd’s book, noted that this region’s spiritual make-up is dominated by spiritualities that in other parts of North America would be considered counter-culture. British Columbia, as part of the Pacific Northwest, has its own spiritual identity, and this identity might in turn have a unique effect on local women who are fleeing domestic abuse.

**Research Question**

With all of these studies and books in mind, it becomes clear that not only is this an important area of knowledge, but that this specific area of knowledge, which is based in a unique spiritual culture, is one that needs to be filled with more research. It is my hope that the research for this thesis will not only stand to fill a gap in the information found by the past studies on this topic, but might also help to convince secular organizations in this region, like the one that I work for, to look at how they might appropriately address spirituality in their support of the healing of women who have experienced abuse. Since this is a unique and new area of knowledge, and since this study engaged with women who have been previously disempowered, It was my sense that a phenomenological approach to the research was most appropriate in order to give the participants the chance to have a voice and share their experiences. As a result of the culmination of this information, these hopes, and these plans, my research problem was the following:

**How do women survivors of domestic abuse utilize spirituality to heal?**

It was my hope that the openness of this question would not only encourage a general receptivity to both the range of experiences of the women in regard to spirituality, but also
would allow room for the complexities of the phenomenon of spirituality in relation to healing from an abusive relationship.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

Spirituality in relation to domestic abuse is a research area still in its infancy. Because of this, my research for the Literature Review section of this thesis was limited. My exploration here includes 11 articles that specifically look at this topic, as well as 9 articles and 1 book that focus on related topics, and which ended up connecting domestic abuse, or sometimes simply trauma, with spirituality. I will then explore some of the literature that applies to spirituality as it relates to this study’s cultural context.

_Spirituality_. An interesting difference between the studies that I have considered here is how they each defined spirituality for the purpose of their study. As previously mentioned, spirituality has been difficult to define, as evidenced by the literature; as a result, some writers have decided to put together short outlines of definitions found in the literature in order to give some sense of the definitions already established (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Yick, 2008). Other writers instead chose a specific previous definition as the one that they used for the purpose of their study (e.g., Fowler & Hill, 2004; Potter, 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Meanwhile, there was a range of how clearly the writers linked spirituality with religion. For instance, although Potter appeared to link religion and spirituality almost interchangeably throughout her article, she then took one paragraph to caution that spirituality and religion should be distinguished from each other. Similarly, Gillum, et al. (2006) in their article also appeared to use the terms interchangeably; there was an absence of any explicit description of the two terms in this article. Clearly the debate over the definition of spirituality continues, with even the language of articles speaking to the different conceptualizations of these constructs.
Similarly, it is important to consider how each of these studies defined spirituality for the sake of their participants. This is particularly important to consider since whatever definition the researchers brought to the studies would have influenced selection of the participants, as well the results of each of the studies. A range of quantitative studies has been done on the topic of the importance of spirituality in the lives of women who have experienced domestic abuse. Humphreys (2000) chose to examine “the relationship between spiritual beliefs and psychological distress in sheltered battered women” (p. 273). For the purpose of measuring the participants’ spirituality, including the extent to which they held certain spiritual views and participated in specific spiritual activities, the researchers administered Reed’s Spiritual Perspectives Scale (as cited in Humphreys, 2000). Similarly, Gillum et al. (2006) explored this topic using a quantitative approach: as part of their research they administered 3 items designed specifically for the study – one item related to spirituality or God as a source of strength and two related to frequency and level of involvement in spiritual or religious institutions. Watlington and Murphy (2006) also used a number of scales in order to measure levels of religious involvement as well as aspects of spiritual day-to-day life; for the purpose of measuring spirituality they used the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Each of these studies suggested some preconceived understanding of spirituality through the specific scales used to measure this construct; for instance, the DSES included items such as: “I feel God’s presence,” “I feel God’s love for me through others,” and “I find strength in my spirituality” (p. 842). This scale suggests a form of theistic spirituality rather than a more nature- or spirit-based spirituality; therefore, scales such as this might exclude certain views, ultimately affecting the data collected. Looking at these studies, it is possible to argue that quantitative
research risks limiting the breadth women’s experiences of spirituality. This argument fits with feminist theory, which, although supportive of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research, emphasizes a critical look at how research questions are framed (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). Counter to the feminist stress on seeking voices that have been traditionally silenced, these quantitative articles risk silencing the diverse experiences of spirituality.

Alternately, qualitative research has frequently been chosen by feminist researchers as it includes an openness to the range of experiences of the participants (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004); it is less likely with qualitative research that women’s experiences of spirituality would be figuratively boxed in within the research process. This appears to be the case with Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) phenomenological study, where the authors named one definition of spirituality as a guide for their study, but they ultimately left the definition of spirituality for the purposes of the study up to the participants: “The nine participants were given the opportunity to use their own words to independently define spirituality and religion” (p. 547). Unfortunately, qualitative research includes its own dangers with the construct of spirituality: Senter and Caldwell did not explain specifically within their article, perhaps due to limited space to do so, how this description was elicited, and so it is not clear whether the questions asked of the participants to establish this definition in any way affected the participants’ responses. All of these studies, both qualitative and quantitative suggest the importance of establishing with the participants a way of defining the much-debated construct of spirituality, and clearly outlining this approach within the research results.

Experiences with religion. Although religion as an element of spirituality has frequently been found in empirical studies to be positively correlated with physical and
mental health, with the added benefit of religious involvement being congregational support (Pargament, Ensing, Falgout, Olsen, Reilly, Van Haitsma & Warren, 1990), it also has been connected with unique concerns raised by the researchers. It is important to note that within the literature a general caution has been raised by researchers in regard to religion as potentially oppressive for women who have experienced domestic abuse (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Yick, 2008). These researchers have raised the concern that religion is often involved in women staying longer in abusive relationships. For example, in their literature review of 3 decades of research on why women stay in abusive relationships, Rhodes and McKenzie (1998) found that one resource commonly associated with convincing women to stay was that of counselling from clergy members.

Similarly, a range of articles found that the definitions of gender roles by religions influenced women to stay (e.g., Berkel, Vandiver, & Bahner, 2004; Yick, 2008). Yick, in her metasynthesis of 6 qualitative, peer-reviewed studies found that religious gender role definitions and expectations of submission and obedience were connected by some women in these studies to why they stayed in an abusive relationship for a longer period. In her theoretical essay, Nason-Clark (2004) argued that women who are religious are more vulnerable when abused; Protestant women, for instance, must grapple with the Christian notion of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, and the possible implied connection of their abuse with a form of cross that they have to bear. Hassouneh-Phillips (2003), found in her qualitative study that a similar dynamic happens with Muslim women. Two participants in this study described how their religion’s gender role definitions influenced them to stay: “Allah will reward women who suffer as they strive to keep their families intact” (p. 688).
Meanwhile, a range of studies found that religion has been used by abusers to influence their partners to stay in the abusive relationship (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). In their article entitled “Spiritual and Religious Abuse: Expanding What is Known About Domestic Violence,” Bent-Goodley and Fowler engaged three focus groups, including 122 religious leaders and congregants, based in three diverse African American faith communities to explore how their views of spirituality and religion relate to domestic abuse. In this study, the researchers found that a number of themes emerged, including the general understanding by the participants that “spirituality and religion have been negatively used to manipulate women in domestic violence relationships” (p. 291). Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) found, similarly, that Muslim women were influenced by their abusers through the use of religious texts to stay in the abusive relationship.

**Spirituality and trauma.** Spirituality also has been addressed in a few studies on trauma, and more specifically on healing from trauma. To begin with in her prominent text entitled *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Judith Herman (1997) outlined how trauma, including trauma from domestic abuse, creates many forms of disconnection for the victim:

> Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis (p. 51).
Although the focus of Herman’s book was not on spirituality and trauma, there were a number of instances where she indicated that it was part of victims’ experiences, including in her description of the effect of trauma on their religious or spiritual beliefs in God:

In situations of terror, people spontaneously seek their first source of comfort and protection. Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God.

When this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered (p. 52).

In other words, trauma not only shakes the victim’s trust in the workings of the universe, but it also shakes her trust in others and ultimately, if she holds theistic beliefs, her trust in God.

Herman (1997) went on to describe how victims of trauma recover; she did this with the implied understanding that each stage plays a part in the recovery from the many forms of disconnection, including spiritual, experienced by the victim of trauma. She explained that there are three key stages that one must move through to heal from trauma; the victim does not necessarily go through these stages in any linear or clear order, and they may oscillate between them. In the first stage, the main focus, and most important task in the recovery process, is on establishing a sense of safety. Here the person needs to be able to establish a sense of their own power and control, including control of body, such as through diet, exercise and sleep, and control of environment, such as through establishing a safe living situation and financial security. From this task the person is then able to move towards further healing work. The second stage is that of remembrance and mourning, where the victim needs the opportunity to engage with and feel their emotions in order to review in a safe space, free from judgment, what happened in the traumatic experience. At this stage Herman explained that mourning is not the same as forgiveness:
Revolted by the fantasy of revenge, some survivors attempt to bypass their outrage altogether through a fantasy of forgiveness… The survivor imagines that she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love. But it is not possible to exorcise the trauma, through either hatred or love… the fantasy of forgiveness often becomes a cruel torture, because it remains out of reach for most ordinary human beings (p. 190).

Herman explained instead that once the victim has been able to mourn the trauma, she might be able to experience sorrow and compassion for the abuser, but that this is quite different than forgiveness.

Finally, Herman (1997) explains that the third stage that the victim must go through is that of reconnection; the victim has now mourned the “traumatic past” and is able to turn towards creating her future. In this stage the victim reconnects with herself, as well as with others, and is able to incorporate into her life those lessons learned from her experience of the trauma. A unique element of this stage is that some victims will turn towards “finding a survivor mission,” with the intention of “transform[ing] the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action” (p. 207). Survivors may do many things as part of their survivor mission, such as pursuing justice and reporting the crime, or educating others about their experience. Herman explained that being able to do these things for others is especially powerful for survivors of trauma, and might even be particularly spiritual:

In this sense of reciprocal connection, the survivor can transcend the boundaries of her particular time and place. At times the survivor may even attain a feeling of participation in an order of creation that transcends ordinary reality (p. 208).
In other words, some survivors are able to transcend their individual pain and look beyond themselves to a bigger picture, to help others through their experience.

A number of writers since have taken up the challenge of writing about spirituality and trauma, especially in relation to trauma treatment (e.g., Grant, 1999; Smith, 2004; Taylor, 2001). In Taylor’s article, which argued for the inclusion of values and spirituality in trauma treatment, the author explained that there is “little evidence of many clinicians taking religious factors seriously in the treatment of trauma” (p. 115). Taylor shared through reflections on his “occasional experience with disaster casualties” (p. 111) from natural disasters in three separate communities - in Manihiki, Tuvalu, and Fiji - and how the people in these communities used religious beliefs to recover from the trauma of their experiences. The author reflected that for all three communities that their “religions were a source of personal strength,” and that the victims found that “prayers and scriptural teachings helped them to put their traumatic experience into context and gave them some hope for the future” (p. 115). Bolstered by these findings, Taylor argued that organizations, such as the World Health Organization, as well as clinicians and trauma workers need to include consideration of belief systems within the complex factors involved in trauma treatment.

Smith (2004), through an examination of empirical literature, looked at how spirituality and trauma each impacts upon the other, and in turn what effect they have on treatment. Smith, like Herman (1997), found that trauma throws everything in a person’s life into question; she added that some of the significant things that come into question might include the person’s understanding of the balance between good and evil, and even “a sense of life’s meaning and purpose” (p. 233). Smith argued that for those with theistic beliefs anger might develop towards God, and that this anger might then lead to feelings of guilt and
shame. Despite these negative effects, Smith also explained that results on spirituality can be positive: “processing a traumatic event almost always leads to a search for new meaning and purpose as well as a need for the soul to expand enough to contain the trauma” (p. 233).
Additionally, Smith argued that spirituality could have an effect on trauma recovery. She explained that religion and spirituality have the potential to provide tools that the victim can use for their recovery, including that they can be “tool[s] of empowerment in situations where personal control is absent” (p. 234). She added that strength and courage might be garnered from the perception that there is some form of support or guidance from a divine source, and that support might also be experienced through help from clergy and a religious congregation. She cautioned, however, that spiritual and religious beliefs can also be detrimental, for instance when victims try to emulate religious figures that are considered perfect. She also cautioned that spirituality can have a detrimental effect by suggesting some form of blame for the victim, for instance if the spiritual or religious beliefs include an understanding that the traumatic events somehow were as a result of punishment for sins.
Smith argues, however, that given the range of positive effects of spirituality on trauma treatment, trauma workers and therapists need to engage in further spiritual training, and even cautiously to connect with local clergy in order to better help victims.

In his essay on spirituality and trauma, Robert Grant (1999), a psychologist who works in the areas of trauma, spirituality and cross-cultural issues, drew attention to what he saw as the potential gifts of trauma. He explained that once people have experienced trauma, they may not realize that through this experience they have tasted of the “fruit of knowledge”:

They have made contact with aspects of reality that are outside the parameters of
social consciousness. The innocence of the ‘taken for granted’ has been lost forever. Old ways of understanding are exposed as inadequate… (p. 8).

Grant explained that experiences of trauma have the power to either “displace” or “obliterate” the ego. As victims are thrust into deeper consciousness without warning, they are forced to walk a path that spiritual seekers, such as mystics and shamans have chosen to walk for centuries; the difference is that victims of trauma do not have the choice to simply leave this path. Grant added that the power of the trauma ultimately can result in deep spiritual realizations:

In essence, traumatic experiences are one of the few things powerful enough to get the ego to release its tyrannical hold over the transpersonal dimensions of consciousness. In displacing the ego trauma creates access to the spiritual core of victims (p. 10).

Grant argued that with appropriate care through recovery from trauma, victims could not only break through the negative impacts of trauma, but also essentially grow to become “more soulful and compassionate beings in the process” (p. 10).

*Spirituality and healing from domestic abuse.* In those articles that I was able to find specifically on the subject of domestic abuse and spirituality, the writers gave a range of reasons why they chose to write on this topic. Just as I have done here, a number of writers included references to previous literature that had found positive correlations between spirituality and psychological and/or physical wellbeing (e.g., El-Khoury, Dutton, Goodman, Engel, Belamaric, & Murphy, 2004; Gillum, et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2000; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). These writers argued that as spirituality has been associated with positive physical and mental health in the past, it might therefore be an important resource to consider
for women who have experienced domestic abuse. Meanwhile, a number of other writers included concerns about how spirituality might affect this population of women negatively, and made reference to previous literature that found some women had negative experiences in relation to spirituality and/or religion (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Potter, 2007; Yick, 2008). For instance, these writers noted how, in the past, spirituality and religion had been used to encourage women’s prolonged suffering and silence within abusive relationships. These writers argued that spirituality should not simply be considered idealistically due to its reported positive correlations found in the literature, but rather that the complex role that spirituality plays in women staying in, leaving, and healing from abusive relationships should also be considered.

As previously mentioned, research specifically on spirituality and domestic abuse is still in its infancy. A few quantitative studies (e.g., Fowler & Hill, 2004; Gillum et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2000; Watlington & Murphy, 2006) have been conducted in an attempt to measure the role of spirituality in the lives of those women who have experienced domestic abuse. For example, in her study on the relationship between spirituality and distress in women who had stayed in a domestic abuse shelter, Humphreys interviewed 50 ethnically diverse women using measures to quantify the women’s experiences of battering, psychological distress, and spirituality. Humphreys found that these women had experienced “significant psychological distress that was highly correlated with the frequency and severity of battering they had experienced” (p. 277). Eighty-two percent of the women in Humphreys study reported that they found their spirituality helpful. Meanwhile, 80% reported feeling “very close to God or a ‘higher power,’ that their spiritual views had influenced their lives, and that their spirituality was a significant part of their lives” (p. 277). Humphreys argued
that the women’s experiences of distress were affected by their spirituality; however, she noted that it was difficult to determine whether spirituality had influenced the participants’ perception of the abuse, or their response to those events.

Meanwhile, a number of qualitative studies (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Potter, 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002) have recently been conducted with the intention of exploring this issue in more depth. Many of these studies focused on the experiences of a specific group of women, such as the experiences of Muslim women, or black women. Despite these differences between the studies, Yick (2008), in her article, “A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Findings on the Role of Spirituality and Religiosity Among Culturally Diverse Domestic Violence Survivors,” was able to extract nine themes across similarly diverse articles on six research studies on this topic. Noteworthy is the fact that Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) and Hassouneh-Phillips’ (2003) studies, which are also mentioned in this thesis, were among the articles included in this metasynthesis. The studies considered by Yick included participant samples with diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, Caucasian, African American, and a variety of spiritual or religious orientations, including Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and a few Buddhists. The nine themes included both positive and negative experiences with spirituality or religiosity: “Strength and resilience stemming from a spiritual or religious base,” “tension stemming from religious or spiritual definition of ‘family’ and reality of abuse,” “tension stemming from religious or spiritual definitions of gender role expectations and reality of abuse,” “experiencing a spiritual vacuum,” “reconstruction as part of the spiritual journey,” “recouping (or recovering) the spirit and self,” “new interpretations of definitions of ‘submission’,” “forgiveness as healing,” “giving back – social activism” (pp.
The themes described in Yick’s metasynthesis represent quite thoroughly what exists on this topic in the qualitative literature.

**Spirituality and culture.** According to a number of the studies explored here, culture plays a prominent role in women’s experiences of spirituality and domestic abuse (El-Khoury et al., 2004; Fowler & Hill, 2004; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001 & 2003; Potter, 2007; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). In her article, Potter raised the concern that a large extent of research on domestic abuse has been done on Caucasian women’s experiences, or on women as a whole without considering the distinction of culture. Potter argued that research on some cultures, such as that of African American women, is not complete without a consideration of the “mutual interests and concerns [that] link members of the African American community, including… embeddedness in religion and spirituality” (p. 263). Similarly, Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) argued in her article on American Muslim women’s experiences of marriage and spousal abuse that understanding the problem of abuse within this population requires “attention to the cultural context in which it occurs” (p. 927).

In articles that have explored African American women’s experiences of domestic abuse, emphasis has been placed upon the importance of spirituality and religion in the lives of the participants involved (Fowler & Hill, 2004; Potter, 2007; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Frequently found within these articles was that African American women gravitated towards spiritual and religious coping in life in general, and more specifically in relation to coping with their abusive relationships. For instance, in Potter’s qualitative study, of the African American participants interviewed, 70% were religiously affiliated, and “the vast majority of the women [religiously affiliated or not]… relied on their spirituality to help them get through and get out of the abusive relationships” (p. 271). Meanwhile, conversely,
Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) found in her interpretive phenomenological study of 7 American Muslim women’s experiences of abuse that part of the suffering that participants felt in relation to domestic abuse was quite unique to their culture. Participants expressed unique expectations of marriage:

…views of marriage as an ideal lifestyle wherein both husbands and wives follow religiously prescribed roles for the enactment of spiritual harmony and for the greater social good… when participants suffered abuse, they experienced sorrow and confusion at the failure of what should have been their ‘perfect’ Muslim marriages.

(p. 932)

In other words, not only was culture important in these women’s experience of the abuse, but also to their experience of suffering inflicted by the abuse. Further exploration of how the inclusion of the participants’ individual cultures applies to this phenomenological study will be covered in the Results section and Diversity issues subsection of this thesis.

As previously mentioned, another important area to consider in relation to culture and this thesis is that of the spiritual culture of the Pacific Northwest. Killen (2004), explains that the fact that the largest portion of the Pacific Northwest’s population is “unchurched” is nothing new; reports as far back as the early 1900s exist of symposiums convened by religious leaders in order to address this particular issue (p. 9). What is particularly unique about this region is that no one faith has dominated in this community’s history. As a result, there is little influence to conform to any one religious or spiritual belief-set and so each person is left to define this for himself or herself amidst an awe-inspiring environmental context:
This physical and spiritual environment confronts all who enter the region with a set of religious tasks that involve clarifying individual religious identity, constructing social relationships, and making sense of the land itself. (p. 11)

Notable in this quote is the reference to the individual, which is often found as a primary focus in Pacific Northwest culture and spiritual climate. What is also characteristic of this region is a notable diversity of cultures and religions, ranging from a multitude of rich aboriginal cultures that existed long before Europeans first came to this region, to those of the later European settlers, followed by immigrants from all over the world (Killen, 2009). These later settlers and immigrants brought with them their distinct religions, including Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, and later Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Hinduism, to name a few.

Shibley (2009) outlined in his theoretical work that there appear to be 3 primary spiritualities found in Cascadia, a region that is frequently seen as synonymous with the Pacific Northwest, but by many definitions excludes Alaska. One cluster of spirituality found within the Pacific Northwest is that of the “apocalyptic millennialism,” which includes patriotic, anti-government, and survivalist groups, for instance those that followed Christian radio host Harold Camping’s prediction for the end of the world on May 21st, 2011; these groups are more frequently found in the US than in Canada. The second cluster is made up of a “constellation of New Age spiritualities” that include neo-paganism, channeling, metaphysics and spiritualities related to “New Spirituality” literature, including books like Vancouver resident Eckart Tolle’s *The Power of Now*. Finally, the third and most central form of spirituality within this region is “Earth-based spirituality,” which is “expressed in a variety of ways in the regional literature, in the secular environmental movements, in rituals
of leisure, in indigenous cultural traditions and even in conventional religious institutions” (p. 35). Shibley explained that unlike other areas in North America where these approaches to spirituality would be considered counter-culture, these forms of spirituality are considered dominant within the Pacific Northwest.
Chapter 3 Methodology

Research Method

Hermeneutic phenomenology. The goal of this study was to explore in depth the experiences of spirituality by women who have been through healing from domestic abuse. As this study engaged with an oppressed population and in a minimally researched area, hermeneutic phenomenology with a critical feminist modality was an appropriate approach to use. I feel strongly as did Davis (2002) when she explained that: “Phenomenology is the method best suited to providing women with a voice about their experiences” (p. 1250). In the past, as social sciences have followed the positivistic approach, women’s voices have been lost amidst the drive for replicable data. Meanwhile, the everyday lived experience of those whose voices have been traditionally silenced is the focus for many feminist researchers (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). van Manen (1990) explains in his book, Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy, that the focus of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding of a person’s unique lived experience, and then to represent the nature of that experience in a way that informs better understanding and action for the larger community.

Additionally, appropriate to an oppressed population is van Manen’s (1990) argument that phenomenological research is “a caring act” that allows the researcher to gently explore the unique experience of the “other,” and to do so with “loving responsibility” (p. 5-6). van Manen explains that phenomenology influences the researcher not only to be open to the other person’s lived experience, but also always to act in a way that contributes to the good of that person. Likewise, as previously mentioned, feminist researchers also focus on the good of the person: feminist research often focuses on research for women, rather than
simply about women, and aims to change situations for women (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). Phenomenology, which helps create a stronger understanding of a number of individuals’ shared experiences of a phenomenon, has through this communication the possibility of informing the development of new policies and practices (Creswell, 2007). van Manen explains also that the principle that guides the phenomenological researcher’s work is that of “a sense of the pedagogic Good (van Manen, 1982b),” while the researcher remains sensitive to “the uniqueness of the person in this particular situation” (p. 6). As previously mentioned, part of my intention with my research has been to bring my findings to local THs and service providers and, hopefully, to influence the creation of new policies and practices with regard to how these organizations address spirituality.

As part of loving responsibility to the other, however, feminists caution that when the researcher listens and gives voice to the other, complex issues arise (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). As previously explored, feminist researchers must be aware of their own power in the research, even when doing a phenomenological study. As part of the acknowledgment of their involvement in the research, the presence of the feminist researcher should be represented somehow within the resulting writing. This fits well with the research approach of hermeneutic phenomenology, which is self-critical in that it involves continual reflection on the goals and methods of the research; for example, the phenomenological approach of bracketing involves the researcher making explicit their own assumptions, beliefs, biases, presuppositions and theories so that they might put these to the side during their research (van Manen, 1990). Meanwhile, according to feminists, not only should the researcher be self-critical, but it is essential that they also not take on the role of a completely removed observer of the participant (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). The researcher not
only works for social change, but is open to change in themselves as a result of their conversations with the participants.

According to van Manen (1990), “the hermeneutic interview tends to turn the interviewees into participants or collaborators of the research project” (p. 63). *Hermeneutic* used here is a term based in philosophy that means an interpretation done through a form of ‘text’ (p. 25). In the case of hermeneutic phenomenology, this interpretation means an attempt to point to the meaning underlying a lived experience. When researcher and participant have a hermeneutic conversation about the participant’s experience, they have a dialogic exchange in which they co-interpret the meaning of the experience. Through this shared pointing towards meaning, the participant becomes co-investigator in the study. This is why, in the hermeneutic phenomenological method, collaborative hermeneutic conversations are key, especially after data from the first interview has been transcribed and analyzed. These conversations allow the participants to reflect on the analysis provided by the researcher and to submit their own co-investigation, through comments, clarifications, and additions to the results. This co-investigation fits well with the feminist belief that to build knowledge is political. Not only do feminists seek to challenge the dominant positivistic attitude towards knowledge, but also feminists are constantly looking for ways of “breaking down and building up new forms of empowerment and knowledge co-construction” (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 222). In other words, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a research method that aids in the empowerment of participants by including their co-investigative voices in the written form of the research results.
Recruitment

I used purposive sampling in order to reach a variety of participants. I sent out my recruitment poster (see Appendix B), as well as my invitation to the study (see Appendix D), to local Stopping the Violence Counselling Programs in the Lower Mainland, and asked the workers in these organizations to post these notices for their clients. I had responses from a number of these programs stating that they would display the notices. I also posted my recruitment flyers in public spaces around the Lower Mainland, such as in the University of British Columbia (UBC), community centres, coffee shops, and libraries. I also had a sign displayed at the “South Asian Community Champions Against Domestic Abuse Forum” and flyers emailed to some counsellors who work with women from the South Asian community. Finally I had them placed in a few church houses, including a number of Christian churches, as well as the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. These signs invited participants who had experience of this phenomenon to contact me by phone or email regarding possibly being involved in the research. These signs also promised financial remuneration for participation in the study. After a couple of weeks, I also posted a notice (see Appendix C) on vancouver.en.craigslist.ca.

The Sample

The sample included 8 participants from a variety of different cultures and professions; Table 1 outlines the demographic information for the different participants. Each of the women, with one exception, fit in with the study criteria that they must (a) be 18 years of age or older, (b) have experienced domestic abuse in the past 5 years, (c) have been out of an abusive relationship for at least 6 months, (d) have lived in the Pacific Northwest during the past 6 months, (e) have had some experience of spirituality in relation to healing from
Table 1: Demographic Information

*Demographic Information Using Pseudonyms for the Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religious / Spiritual affiliation</th>
<th>Time in abuse</th>
<th>Time since abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>~ 1.5 yr.</td>
<td>~1.5 yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>3 yr.</td>
<td>7 mo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Wiccan</td>
<td>7 mo.</td>
<td>3.5 yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>- background Christian</td>
<td>21 yr.</td>
<td>2.5 yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Native / Canadian</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>7 yr.</td>
<td>4.5 yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Wiccan</td>
<td>&lt; 6 mo.</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Common</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>First Nation</td>
<td>9 mo.</td>
<td>5 yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>German- Jewish religions / studied</td>
<td>Most world religions /</td>
<td>13 yr.</td>
<td>9 yr.</td>
</tr>
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*Note.* All responses using participants’ own words from demographic questionnaire.
that abusive relationship, (f) are free from serious mental illness, (g) are able to speak
English well enough to describe their experience. One participant was ambiguous about how
long she’d been out of the relationship: she stated that she and her ex-partner stopped living
together 9 years before, but that the abuse had continued until within the past 5 years due to
her continued dependency on his help, as she was physically handicapped, and due to the fact
that her ex-partner continued to abuse her when he was visiting their son.

The Interview

Once contacted by the possible participants, I conducted a selection interview by
phone in order to purposefully choose participants who had experience of the phenomenon
(Creswell, 2009). At the time of the phone conversation, the participants were informed
about the process of the research interview and the key question that would be asked. My
research included meeting with the participants individually for interviews in appropriate
spaces for them. Choice of the appropriate space included consideration of safety and
confidentiality, as well as travel expenses that might be incurred in order to reach the
interview location. This meant that I ended up meeting with most participants at UBC, but
that I also met with one participant in her home, and another in a public space where she felt
comfortable. Interviews were conducted with enough time after the initial telephone
agreement – approximately 1 week – to allow participants a chance to reflect on their
experience of the phenomenon and what they would like to share of that experience.

The first and second interviews for each participant lasted approximately 1 hour per
interview. The first interview began with a clear explanation of the consent form, limits to
confidentiality, and demographic questionnaire, followed by the participants signing the
appropriate forms. During the first interview, participants were asked to fill out the
demographic questionnaire (see Appendix G) to the extent that they felt comfortable. The interview included scripted, open-ended questions in order to fully explore participants’ experiences of the phenomenon. For the purpose of the first interview a printout of the primary research question - “Please tell me about your experience of healing from domestic abuse” - was placed in front of the participant throughout the interview. The possible facilitating questions (see Appendix F) were more specific, and included exploration of how spirituality related to the participants’ healing. I also included minimal additional questions that were geared towards the individual experiences of each participant, as well as simple clarifying questions. The additional questions included, for instance, if the participants mentioned religion as part of their definition of spirituality, how they had experienced their religion in relation to healing from domestic abuse. I also asked each of the participants if there was anything they would like service providers, such as counsellors and TH workers, to know about their experience of spirituality and healing from an abusive relationship. Although participants were encouraged to share in depth about their experience, they were not pushed to share beyond that with which they were comfortable. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

At the end of the first interview, participants were informed that they would be contacted for a second interview after a minimum of 1 month; at this time I encouraged them to journal or draw about their experience as a form of reflection, and asked them to bring either or both of these to the next interview if they want them included in the data. It was made clear to participants that journaling or sharing of the journal was not required. I also explained to the participants the process of the second interview and made it clear to them that I would send them a copy of the transcript of their first interview before engaging in the
second interview; the exception to this being that I brought one participant a printout of the first interview transcript due to the fact that she did not have email. The second interview began with a review of informed consent. During each of the second interviews a printout of the thematic analyses from the first interview was reviewed thoroughly by the participant and interviewer together to further the co-interpretation; the participants were encouraged to add to, change or take away, anything from the text. All participants’ changes to the thematic analysis were honoured; I put together a final thematic analysis, including all changes from the participants and confirmed with all but one of the participants via phone or email in a third short interview that the thematic analysis was accurate. For the other participant I confirmed these changes explicitly during the second interview due to the fact that the participant did not have email. I then spoke to her in a follow-up phone conversation to confirm that the changes had been made and that they were accurate.

Data Analysis

After each of the first interviews had been completed and audiotaped, I transcribed each interview in its entirety. After the first interviews, I conducted a phenomenological thematic analysis on each of the transcripts by coding statements throughout and creating “clusters of meaning” from these statements (p. 61, Creswell, 2007). These clusters of meaning then formed the themes that I took from each of the interviews and in turn these themes informed the larger “textural description” that I put together for each participant for the sake of this study (p. 61, Creswell, 2007). I based this analysis loosely on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) article, which outlines the stages of a thematic analysis. I was conscious throughout, however, of van Manen’s (1990) description of the use of thematic analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology:
Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning (p. 79).

In other words, I tried to avoid using Braun and Clarke’s method prescriptively, but rather used it as a general process for my thematic analysis. As previously mentioned, this textural description was reviewed in depth with the participant in order to give them the opportunity to add to, comment on, or clarify the account of their lived experience. The comments, additions, and clarifications of the participants were used to create a final textural description for each participant. These descriptions were then used together to create a final larger thematic analysis across the 8 participants’ experiences; this analysis can be found in the Results section of this thesis. Following with the critical feminist modality, I also included some description of each participant’s cultural and religious context, while also being cautious to protect each participant’s confidentiality and safety.

Establishment of Rigour

For the purpose of doing rigorous qualitative research for my thesis, I considered the criteria listed by Koch (1994) in her article entitled “Establishing Rigour in Qualitative Research: The Decision Trail.” Koch explained in her article that in order to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study the criteria of credibility, transferability and dependability must be fulfilled. For my study, I established credibility by including elements of self-awareness, or reflexivity, through using a field journal in order to be aware of my own subjective understandings and assumptions. Garko (1999) mentions how bracketing fits well with critical feminist research methods as:
Feminist researchers believe that, if they are to challenge the taken-for-granted male-oriented values of society and transform societies’ institutions, themselves, and other women, they must suspend their own taken-for-granted beliefs and presuppositions about the world as they attempt to explore and expose the meaning of women’s lived experiences. (p. 171)

Also to establish credibility, I consulted with the participants after each of the interviews, and after the written description and analysis of themes had been completed after each of these interviews, in order to confirm that each thematic analysis described accurately the participants’ experiences. I also brought my Results section to an expert reviewer who has worked as a manager of a local TH for 4 years, and prior to that had worked as a counsellor for 12 years with clients who had experienced abuse. The expert reviewer confirmed that the themes that had emerged in the Results section of this thesis fit with what he knew of women’s experiences of healing from domestic abuse.

In order to establish *transferability*, I worked with the understanding that transferability relates to the similarity between two contexts (Koch, 1994); in other words, results from one study may only illuminate the experience of another group in a similar context. As previously mentioned, since traditional phenomenological research does not include a study of culture, an in-depth exploration of specific context is not appropriate. However, in working from a critical feminist modality some form of context is essential to the research; therefore, the unique spiritual context of the Pacific Northwest has been included in this study, as well as consideration of the participants’ individual cultures. Further exploration of considerations of culture will be explored in the *Diversity issues* subsection of this thesis. I have described in some depth the characteristics of this context
with the understanding that this makes the research more appropriately feminist, while also
honouring the phenomenon-focus of phenomenology. The exploration of this context should
also add to local professionals’ awareness of how the results might illuminate the experiences
of the population with which they work.

What also is helpful to establishing rigour of the research is the establishment of
dependability, which, according to Koch (1994) means that the researcher needs to establish
a decision trail. The decision trail “entails discussing explicitly the decisions taken about the
theoretical, methodological and analytical choices throughout the study” (p. 978). From even
before my submission of my research proposal, I began this decision trail through journaling
of ideas for the purpose of the research and writing the thesis; I then continued journaling my
ideas and my reasoning for specific decisions throughout the research process. The decision
trail fits well with the concept of reflexivity, an approach that many feminists employ in
research (Koch, 1994). Reflexivity involves the researcher reflecting on their experience of
the research, and helps the reader understand the researcher’s “awareness of herself, her
methods, and her analysis” (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 220). In feminist research this
is also intended to help the researcher explore their assumptions (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). I
have made this reflexivity clear in my Researcher’s reflections subsection of this thesis, and
will also provide further reflections on the decision trail throughout the rest of the thesis.

Ethical Issues

In order to be cognizant of the specific ethical issues that arise in domestic abuse
research, I worked from Ellsberg and Heise’s (2002) outline of the World Health
Organization’s (WHO) guidelines for domestic violence research, which are outlined on the
WHO website, but were originally taken from Ellsberg and Heise’s article. According to
Ellsberg and Heise, the main ethical issue to consider in domestic violence research is that of *non-maleficence*, or minimizing harm. The authors explain that participants might be in danger of physical harm from their partner if that partner finds out about the research, and so the importance of the participants’ safety, privacy, and confidentiality is paramount. Likewise, interviewers should be aware of potential effects that their questions might have on the participants, including the possibility that they might increase the participants’ distress. In the case of my study, safety and confidentiality were considered in detail, including with the choice of location of the interview as well as an exploration during the telephone interview of the participant’s situation, and if she had any concerns about safety. Likewise, confidentiality was considered in depth, for instance the storage of any data pertaining to the participants, including any audiotaped data, was given numbers rather than connected to names and the files were locked away when not being used for writing. Confidentiality was additionally honoured through allowing those participants who so chose to approve their quotes that would be used in the thesis. As well, when any writing was done about the participants, careful consideration was taken to not include any identifying details.

Also included within the ethical consideration of non-maleficence is the consideration of minimizing distress for the participants (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). Ellsberg and Heise explain that interviews related to domestic violence have the potential to cause women to touch on painful and frightening experiences. These authors recommend that researchers be trained in how to identify the participants’ distress, and how to respond to these symptoms appropriately. The authors also suggest that at minimum researchers provide “respondents with information or services that can respond to their situations” (p. 1600); therefore, at the beginning of all of the first interviews, I provided the participants with a list of local low-cost
and free counselling resources. Also, for the purpose of my study, participants were asked only clarifying questions about their experiences of abuse; the focus instead was on their experiences of healing from the abuse. There was, however, always the possibility that women might enter into exploration of this subject themselves. I did find that a number of participants were challenged by sharing about their experiences of the abuse; therefore, when this appeared to be the case, I would encourage them to focus on their experiences of healing. I was also aware that as a trained counsellor I might unintentionally elicit from participants more than they wanted to share about their experience, and understanding this, I was very careful to not reflect or probe too deeply during the interview. Due to my work as a women’s support worker in a domestic abuse shelter for the past 4 years, I felt that I was able to adequately work with the women and support them appropriately if they became distressed.

Ellsberg and Heise’s (2002) next focus was on the ethical issue of *beneficence*, or maximizing benefits. They include here the importance of assuring scientific soundness, as well as the study results being used for social change. Scientific soundness and the use of the study results for social change have already been explored particularly in the first chapter, and *Establishment of rigour* subsection of this thesis. Ellsberg and Heise also focus on the ethical principle of *respect for individuals*, which includes “respect for autonomy and protection of vulnerable people” (p. 1602). The authors explain that this principle is addressed through procedures such as informed consent, as well as mandatory reporting. In line with these principles, no deception or covert activity was included in the study, and participants self-selected to participate. Informed consent was introduced to the participants as soon as they contacted me about the study; I informally explained informed consent over the phone when speaking to the participant and then went over it, as well as the restrictions to
confidentiality, in more detail during the first interview. The consent form included the proviso that participants could withdraw their consent at any time. They were informed of the possible benefits of the study as well as any possible challenges that might result, such as remembering the traumatic experience. Participants were also informed of the time commitment required, the requirements for remuneration, as well as the possibility of transportation costs. It was my hope that through following the ethical guidelines as outlined by Ellsberg and Heise, I minimized any harm to participants in my study, while also maximizing benefits, respecting each participant individually, and balancing possible benefits to the larger community of women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Diversity Issues

As previously mentioned, although traditional phenomenological research does not include context, this study was conducted from the lens of critical feminist modality, as well as using the research methodology hermeneutic phenomenology, and so included contextual elements of the Pacific Northwest, as well as the individual cultures of the participants. Although this does not fit with traditional phenomenological methods, it does, however, fit with hermeneutic phenomenology, a form of American phenomenological research method that tends to be more focused on the participants’ experiences rather than on an objective reality (Caelli, 2000). Caelli explains that in traditional phenomenology culture is seen as unhelpful, as the goal of this form of phenomenology is to reach the “universal or unchanging aspects of phenomena as free as possible from the cultural context” (p. 371). The American approach to phenomenology, which encompasses a range of variations, includes culture due to the belief that it is impossible for humans to extricate their thoughts from their culture:
As a result, contemporary interpretive phenomenology seeks to understand the situated meanings of phenomena in the sense that such knowledge is to be understood within the specific environment or problem domain of the participant. (p. 371)

Caelli acknowledges other scholars’ concerns that this approach eliminates the phenomenological reduction altogether, but argues that this form of investigation allows for deeper investigation of the experience itself. Ultimately, Caelli argues that this form of research is particularly appropriate in research areas that focus on the care of people as it honours the depth of their experiences.

A range of issues is raised when culture is addressed within research; I tried to be cautious of these in my research work. First is the issue of openness to another’s culture. Shweder (1991), who writes on how we might “think through cultures,” explains that astonishment is important in encountering other cultures. Astonishment includes the affects of “surprise, curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm, sympathy” when encountering the differences of others, and aids in the ability to be open to differences in culture that might otherwise be shocking or confounding (p. 1). In other words, what might appear rational to me, might not to a person from another culture, and vice versa; Shweder argues that we need to be open to a range of realities beyond just our own. It was my hope to approach the phenomenological exploration of the participants’ experiences of their realities, including those related to their cultural experiences of spirituality, with this openness and astonishment.

The problem of misunderstandings across cultures arises as well, and it is no surprise considering the differences in realities that Shweder (1991) described. In another article, Shweder (2008) explained how misunderstandings across cultures can take place, especially
in relation to meanings behind words and concepts. Shweder cautions that “shared understanding can be an illusion” (p. 64), and calls for intentional attention to how the other person might understand the meaning of a specific word or concept. Similarly, Krause (1995) argues that it is especially difficult to communicate the different understandings of relationship and personhood across cultures. Krause clearly outlines helpful guidelines for therapists working cross-culturally, and in my opinion, for researchers working cross-culturally:

Cross-cultural therapy requires that therapists are sensitive to and curious about their clients’ views and alert to the implicit cultural themes which influence and inform the experiences…while it is important to check things out with families and clients at specific points in time it is equally important to have some notion of the great range of variety in behaviour, thought and feeling expressed by people in different cultures. (p. 378)

With these concerns in mind throughout the research process, it was my intention within this study to include, along with my own openness to the participant’s individual experience and reality, intentional inquiry about the participant’s culture during the initial phone interview. During the in-person interviews, I also tried to approach any matters of culture with curiosity and openness, asking for clarification and further explanations. As well, during writing the thematic analyses, I would research any cultural references so that I could understand them better for the purpose of communicating at an even deeper level during the second interview. I also checked with participants regarding their understandings of specific terms. The participants were also provided the opportunity in the second interview and the final phone or
email communication to correct any possible misunderstandings of their culture that I might have written into the thematic analyses.

Researcher’s Reflections

Before any data was collected, I engaged in the phenomenological approach of bracketing through a bracketing interview as well as reflective journaling on the assumptions and pre-understandings that I as the researcher brought to the research. The purpose of the bracketing interview, where another researcher asked me the same questions as those that are included in the Interview Question Guide, was to determine what my expectations were regarding the participants’ answers to the questions. In other words, I answered the questions as I imagined a participant would answer. For the purpose of reflection, I audiotaped and reviewed this interview. I also used the reflective space of the journal to continually consider throughout the process of the research how my research fits within a critical feminist modality, including how the research or my part in the research might have been in any way further oppressing any of the participants.

From these bracketing exercises I determined that as a Caucasian, liberal Unitarian1, who has lived most of her life in the Lower Mainland, who has studied spirituality and theology at a local Christian theological school, and who at the time of the interviews was employed as a spiritual director at a local Christian theological school, I brought certain pre-understandings to my role as a researcher. For instance, I was aware later in journaling that when I interviewed a Christian participant I brought some pre-understandings that possibly affected how much I delved into her understanding of her experience in relation to her

1 Unitarianism, which goes by the name Unitarian Universalism in the United States, does not include any creed or dogma; Unitarians follow diverse faith paths and draw upon many different theological sources.
religion. Therefore, during the second interview I made sure to clarify anywhere that I felt that I had brought my own assumptions of her experience of her religion. I was also aware that when some participants expressed desire for certain spiritual connections, or despair at certain elements about a religion, that I had to prevent myself from recommending spiritual resources, or offering any of my knowledge about a religion, as I would naturally as a spiritual director.

I also was aware that as a women’s support worker in a TH, where I worked with women from this population, I also brought pre-understandings from my work experiences. For instance, I tried to be aware of when a participant reminded me of former residents; with this awareness I tried to make sure that this did not influence how I conducted the interview, or how I was open to their individual and unique experience. As well, I was aware that I felt concern with certain forms of spirituality due to my experiences of witnessing the helpful and harmful effects of residents at the TH utilizing the teachings from Rhonda Byrne’s self-help book *The Secret*, which focuses on positive thinking creating change in a person’s life. As a result, I was aware that this was my experience, and not necessarily that of the participant, and I consciously focused on staying open to their experience. As a result, I was pleasantly surprised to learn how a few of the participants had taken similar beliefs and made them part of their positive healing experience.

When I engaged in the bracketing interview some more of my assumptions became clear. The woman I imagined answering the questions had experienced abuse for a number of years, but since divorce was not accepted due to the Christian beliefs of her family, she hadn’t considered leaving for many of those years. At one point, she approached her priest for help, but was told to stay in the marriage for the sake of the family; she was reminded that
women must be like Christ for their family. The abuse became worse, and the turning point for her leaving was when she found that her husband was abusing the children. When she left, she found that fellow church members rejected her. She stopped going to church, and due to feeling angry with God she also stopped praying. She stayed with a friend, who encouraged her to go to counselling. This friend also told her about another church, which was quite different and more accepting. She began to reconnect with her Christian faith, and to slowly begin to pray again, she also began to put together her new life (e.g., a new job and apartment). Prayer gave her hope, and helped her be aware of her own strength. Her new Christian community helped her feel valued and helped her be aware that she does not have to put up with the abuse. Looking back she later realized that God had been there the whole time, even when she’d had trouble seeing God’s support. She wished that service providers, such as counsellors would receive more education in helping women talk about their spirituality, since for her the whole experience of abuse was intertwined with her spirituality. Her spirituality had played a role in keeping her in the relationship, and it also ultimately helped her to heal from the abuse and move on.

I feel that fitting with Hesse-Biber and Leckenby’s (2004) description of feminist research, that I as the researcher was not a completely removed observer of the participant, and that ultimately I was open to being changed by the research. Despite my years of experience in both spirituality and of supporting women healing from domestic abuse, I was still surprised and incredibly moved by the participants’ experiences. I had come into the research with my own understandings and suppositions of what the participants might share, and was pleasantly surprised to find my pre-suppositions and understandings replaced with more complex and deeply rich stories of courage and healing. From my experiences in these
interviews, and through the analysis of the participants’ words, my profound respect has grown incrementally for women healing from domestic abuse. As well, my hopes for spirituality, in the multitude of ways that the participants described it in their lives, as a potential tool for healing has grown more than I had ever expected it would.
Chapter 4 Results

An examination of the transcripts of the interviews with the 8 participants revealed six themes that were consistent across all 8 participants. Each of these themes represents some part of the participants’ experiences of spirituality as part of their healing from domestic abuse. The questions used for this section of the interviews were broad and left room for the participants to talk about their experiences in whatever way they felt was most appropriate for them. Following their exploration of the themes, participants were also asked specifically about their own suggestions to service providers who work with women who have experienced domestic abuse. Although this is not a theme in the phenomenological sense, this section represents a chance for the participants to speak from their experience and to affect possible change within the helping system. Participants also continued to answer this question by talking about their own healing; this information was also used in the phenomenological thematic analysis when appropriate.

As it was suggested to the participants that they might talk about their experiences by describing them from the point where they did not feel healed, to later how it felt to be more healed, they often began by describing their experiences of the abuse first. It is important to note that pseudonyms, which were approved by the participants, were used in order to create a smoother narrative representation of the findings. It is also important to note that the order of the themes represented in this thesis is not meant to suggest any chronology of the healing process.

Participants’ Backgrounds

As seen in Table 1, this study included participants from a range of ages and spiritualities, and a variety of ethnic backgrounds. During the interview most of the
participants described their spirituality through the course of answering the interview questions; those who did not describe their spirituality in detail through the first questions of the interview were then asked: “how would you describe your spirituality?” Only 1 participant asked what the researcher meant by the term spirituality, at this point – during the selection interview – the researcher explained simply that for some people spirituality means a sense of a connection to God or a force larger than themselves, but that ultimately personal experiences of spirituality really varied. Two of the participants struggled to describe their spirituality in depth. Four of the participants made it clear that even though they defined their spirituality by one religion’s name, for instance Wiccanism, this was simply a way of describing their individual spiritual path and that their spirituality was not restricted to the structures of that religion; 3 of the participants described drawing from other spiritualities as well.

Molly, Sarah, and Kathy spoke of Judeo-Christian backgrounds, although only Sarah continued to attend a Christian church and described Christian beliefs as central to her spirituality. Meanwhile Molly and Lisa described their spirituality as unconnected with any specific religion; Molly spoke about her spirituality in theistic terms, describing her belief in God, and Lisa described instead a belief in the energy of the universe rather than any deity. Sandy and Pam shared about their Wiccan beliefs and how they drew upon Wiccan rituals; Sandy described her spirituality as more theistically based, while Pam’s spirituality, like Lisa’s, was more focused on the energy of the universe. Tamara drew upon her Mohawk First Nations spirituality, which was also theistic, and which included distinct rituals from her culture. Kate’s spirituality was similarly theistic, and drew upon nature-based eco-spirituality from her childhood, combined also with religious philosophy, and spiritual beliefs
from many religions, including Paganism, Druidism, Shamanism, Judaism, Krishna, Lutheranism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism. Most of the participants shared that although they are spiritual they are not connected with any spiritual or religious community, the exceptions being Sarah who attended a Christian church, and Kate who regularly connected with a range of different religious communities. Although Lisa did not attend any community in person, she connected with her spiritual community online.

As well as differing in spiritual approaches, the participants also varied in length of time in the relationship, length of time since the relationship ended, mental health experiences, as well as ethnicity and cultural background. As is clear in Table 1, the length of relationships also varied, with the shortest being less than 6 months, and the longest being 21 years. As well, the participants had been out of the abusive relationship for a range of time, with the shortest time since the relationship being 6 months, to the longest being 9 years – although this particular relationship was marked by an unclear ending. The women described a range of mental health experiences through their abuse and healing process, including 2 mentioning experiences of diagnosed PTSD and several mentioning experiences of depression. Although the women in the study came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, only two shared that their ethnic background had any influence over their experience of the abusive relationship, or on their experience of healing from the relationship. Tamara shared that reconnecting with her Mohawk spirituality had a profound influence on her healing, and she also explained that for many women who are aboriginal it is common to have missed out on learning about healthy relationships while growing up. Kate described growing up in the ethnic and cultural environment of a German-Jewish family; she explained that she grew up with European paganism that had been passed down through her family for generations, and
that this in turn influenced her own attraction to and spiritual comfort with nature, and later her draw to eco-spirituality. Conversely, other participants did not connect their culture and ethnicity explicitly with their experiences of the abusive relationship, nor of healing from that relationship.

**Theme 1: Letting Go and Moving On**

*Abuse made it difficult to let go and move on.* The first theme to emerge from the participants’ experiences was that of letting go of the experience of the abuse and moving on toward healing. Each of the participants shared about how difficult life had been during the relationship as well as how difficult it was to finally choose to leave, and to move on. Most of the participants experienced challenges in acknowledging the fact that they were in an abusive relationship to begin with. A number of participants experienced more psychological and emotional abuse, rather than physical abuse, and this made it especially difficult for them to pinpoint what was really going on. For instance, Molly compared the abuse she had endured from her husband to a “bad smell” that would sneak up on her slowly. Some participants even expressed continued doubt during the interview as to which behaviours had been abusive and which had not. A number of participants had also experienced abuse as a child, or witnessed domestic abuse between their parents, or both; for these participants, finding themselves in an abusive relationship was especially difficult to accept. Tamara explained that as she had grown up with constant violence in her family home, she found it especially difficult to be aware of the warning signs of abuse:

[I had] no really clear boundaries for my own safety, and what I was willing and not willing to put up with, because I’d already witnessed a lot of violence growing up, my tolerance level was probably way up there.
Most of the participants found that it took awareness of the abuse to begin to let go, and that even once they had accepted this fact, they needed to acknowledge that the partner was not going to change before they could actually leave and move on. Often the catalyst for the participants leaving the abusive relationship was a physical or sexual assault that left them fearing for their physical safety, or an action by the abuser that left them worrying for the safety of their children.

*Trust in God / universe.* Most of the participants’ trust in God or in the universe helped in their ability to let go and move on from the abusive relationship. A couple of participants shared that their ability to let go was aided by their Wiccan belief that whatever one puts out into the universe comes back to them three-fold. Pam explained that this belief helped her to let go of a desire for retribution towards her ex-partner and to move on:

> That helps me to let go of any kind of wrongdoing that I wanted, so it makes me feel like ‘okay, you know what, if you step aside and you focus on getting yourself better, it’s going to get taken care of.

Similarly, Sarah, who had gone to a church camp in order to facilitate her healing, had faith through her Christian beliefs that God would give her the strength to let go: “The whole time I was at camp I was just praying, Lord just help me let go.” Lisa and Molly, whose spiritualities are more characterized by focus on the manifestation of energy in the universe, trusted that the energy that they put out into the universe would come back to them, thus allowing them to let go and move on to better things.

*Forgiveness of self / the abuser.* Many of the participants found that being able to forgive themselves, and for some even the abuser, helped them to let go of the abuse that they had experienced and to move on. Kate, whose spirituality had evolved from a pagan
eco-spirituality to include a more Judeo-Christian and Buddhist focus on compassion, explained that she needed to have compassion for herself: “for being in such a situation in my life.” Sarah felt that she needed forgiveness from God for herself, as well as the strength to be able to forgive her ex-partner:

I knew that for me to fully let go, I had to forgive him, but also I wanted forgiveness from God for what I had done, because I still felt some guilt and shame… I felt that if I didn’t, I’d still think about it and always think how can I get back at him… I didn’t think that would be healthy for me…

Similarly, Tamara drew from her First Nations spirituality, which had helped her recover from her own addictions, in order to feel empathy for her ex-partner:

I remember doing a lot of praying for Tom (pseudonym) - what a miserable human being to have to beat up a woman. And, I knew that by near the end that he was also a cocaine addict, which I hadn’t known from the beginning, so by then it was just like ‘wow,’ and knowing what I went through in my lifetime to get to that place where I became a drug addict and an alcoholic, made me realize that he’d gone through those same things as well, so I could find some empathy for him.

Pam explained that her Wiccan belief in the instinctual level of human beings helped her to avoid blaming herself for what happened to her:

…people can be animals, and when it comes down to it, that’s how it is, and there’s only so much you can challenge with an animal… I think [this belief]… stops me from internalizing anything, and kind of re-victimizing myself, and just being like ‘no, this is on the other person’
Letting go of emotions / anger. Most of the participants shared that they found it helpful to let out and let go of their emotions through some part of their spirituality, including through prayer, exercise, meditation, journaling, or art. For example, Kate used art techniques that she had learned from Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical art therapy\(^2\), in which she had engaged as a young adult to heal from her childhood abuse. She found these techniques helpful, since, as she put it, they “purposefully limit or prohibit focusing on detail or pictorial imagery and allow only expression of feeling.” For other participants, releasing emotions was part of a spiritual ritual. For example, Sandy, as part of a Wiccan ritual, would symbolically release her feelings:

I’ll write it down until I have nothing left to write, I’ll read it once more and then when I’m ready and I feel like I’ve really released all the disgusting things that I’m trying to get rid of onto the paper and it’s out of me, it’s out in the open, then I’m going to burn it.

A few of the participants felt that they especially needed to be able to let go of the emotion of anger in order to be able to move on. Tamara explained how her First Nations spirituality, with the use of prayer, as well as the cleansing process of *smudging* and using an eagle’s feather, allowed her to do this:

What I did for myself then was I just let it all come out, I cried and I prayed, and I looked at his picture, and I cried and I prayed, and I smudged myself, used my eagle feather… I really really purged the last little bit of that anger, and it was pretty intense.

\(^2\) Anthroposophical art therapy is based on the principal that “illness has its roots in the soul and that artistic work is an expression of the soul” (¶ 3, Alexander, n.d.). The goal of anthroposophical art therapy is to bring harmony to the whole person, and therefore to resolve illness.
Tamara found that the smudging ritual helped her let go of any negative energy left from the abuse.

_Loss of hold on her._ For a few of the participants a benefit of letting go of the effects of the abuse was that the abuser then no longer had hold over them anymore. Sarah explained that through prayer and calling on God’s help, she could let go and that in turn he would no longer have any hold on her:

Because I knew that if I let go, then he has no hold on me anymore, because I can’t pray for him to let go, because chances are it won’t happen, but if I decide for myself that I don’t want this anymore, I’m not going to go back into the cycle, then no matter what he says, no matter what he does, he’s not going to get to me anymore.

Similarly, as part of a Wiccan ritual, Sandy cast a _binding spell_ in order that her ex-partner wouldn’t have any more hold on her:

…we call it a binding and it basically states that by performing this spell… I’m not allowing myself to feel those emotions anymore, I’ve dropped them off for good, this person is to never affect me again…

Tamara’s primary experience of healing from the abuse took place at Round Lake Treatment Centre, which is a First Nations treatment centre for drug and alcohol addictions. She explained that following this treatment, which she described as quite spiritual, when she later saw her ex-partner in court for the assault, he had no more effect on her:

We went in for the actual court proceedings and then afterward I remember him calling my name as I was leaving, like he wanted to talk to me and I was like ‘Oh, hell no! Been here done that,’ you know, ‘see you later,’ (laughs) so I just remember
walking away from him and just waving to him, you know, he’s looking at my back and I’m just waving as I’m walking away…

*Some still struggling to let go.* During the interviews, a number of the participants shared that although they felt that they had been able to let go of some of the abuse, there was still more that they needed to let go. The participants showed this through how challenging they found it to talk about their experience during the interviews for the study; a number of the participants expressed sadness that they still felt affected by the abuse, or even triggered by retelling their experience. Lisa explained that in the past she had returned to her ex-partner multiple times due to not being able to let go:

I couldn’t fully let go of him, so that even though I was with somebody else I still longed for him… even though I knew he wasn’t good for me, I couldn’t let go of him, so somehow I would pick up the phone and I would go and see him.

Kate shared feeling how the complication of years of childhood abuse made it even harder to let go of the pain from her more recent experiences of domestic abuse. For other participants, the abusers’ continued attempts to reconnect with them made it difficult for them to ultimately let go. Sarah shared that her ex-partner continues to contact her through manipulative means, such as through creating new Facebook accounts and trying to connect with her, and that this makes it difficult for her to let go of her anger towards him:

God helped me let go of the pain, because now I don’t feel pain, or hurt, or anything, it’s just anger now, because it’s like he manipulated me, he did all this, and still he can’t leave me alone, you know, and I think it would be easier if he left me alone.

A number of the participants also mentioned how the residual effects of the abuse affected their ability to enter into new romantic relationships and to trust new partners.
**Theme 2: Finding Comfort and Support**

*Abuse left her feeling fearful and alone / unsafe.* The second theme that emerged from the participants’ experiences was how their spirituality aided them to find comfort and support during their healing from the experiences of abuse. Many of the participants found that the abuse they had endured had left them feeling unsafe and alone, and that this had in turn affected their ability to heal from the relationship. A number of the participants expressed feeling unsafe both psychologically and physically from their ex-partner’s abuse. Molly explained, for instance, that although she was afraid at times of her partner physically, the effects of the psychological abuse were what really worried her:

The big fear for me was that every day I heard that I was a bitch and that I was no good or whatever, one day I would really really truly believe it, so I guess that was the biggest fear for me. I mean there were times obviously where he was out of control that I thought oh my God this guy’s a freak, but he wasn’t out of control all the time. The fear in me was that I was really going to believe it one day; I might fall into this hole that I couldn’t get out of.

Conversely, Kathy’s greatest fear was of physical violence from her ex-partner; she believed that her ex-partner had arranged an attack, which had almost killed her, by a man with a machete. A number of participants also felt alone and abandoned as they endured the abuse and tried to escape the abusive situation. A couple of the participants shared that this was especially the case as they tried to seek out support from service providers. For example, Tamara found that when she made the report of assault against her ex-partner, she was surprised by how unhelpful the experience was for her as the victim:
I think that the whole court experience is really unforgiving to the victim, he was [about 5 feet away]… in court, and I could hear him going ‘ffffft, tssss’ like this when I’m telling my story, right on the stand. I just wanted to reach down and ‘judge, can you smack him for me? Cause he’s being really rude.’ And I was just like ‘wow, so this is the system that’s supposed to protect me?’ And it just made me feel worse.

Not alone. Through either their connection to God, or through their connection to other people through their spirituality, a number of the participants felt they were less alone in their healing from the abusive relationship. Lisa found it helpful to go onto the website powerfulintentions.org, where people share their beliefs in the law of attraction; she shared that having an opportunity to connect with people with similar beliefs and experiences helped her to feel less alone. Meanwhile, Sarah felt that her connection with God was central to her healing; she explained that she felt comforted all her life knowing that God would be there no matter what:

God was always the one constant thing I could rely on. Because things with my parents were not good. So it was always that I was scared, what if I wake up and my dad has killed my mom, cause so many times he tried. But the one thing I always knew was when I wake up God will still be there… that’s my one fall-back, no matter what.

Feeling cared about / receiving guidance. Most of the participants who believed in some form deity felt comforted by the belief that they could go to God for support as they would with a parent or counsellor. Sarah was comforted by her sense that she could confide in God, and that when it was especially difficult to put her experience into words, God would understand:
I’ve never told any one person one hundred percent of what happened. So for me, it was like God was the one person who knew without me even telling him, and even when I would pray, it’s not like I would say everything, because sometimes I couldn’t find the words to express what I was feeling… but I would just pray and be like ‘you know how I feel, just help me through this,’ and I didn’t have to explain myself constantly.

Sarah added that it was much easier, therefore, to share her experience with God than with friends and family, because she did not have to explain that experience in words. Kate also felt supported and comforted by the “great creator,” but on a more visceral level:

I had learned meanwhile through all the Pagan reclaiming work worldwide that there’s the Pangaia, the big mother, and I would just, when I was really breaking down and lonely, away from my community in Europe, I would just feel in moments of greatest despair, I would feel arms around me rocking me…

Some of the participants also found it helpful to seek out their connection with God or the universe for guidance. For instance, Sandy explained that when she needed support and comfort she would seek out the help from the deities Isis and Osiris, with whom she had created a relationship:

It’s kind of like when you’re a little girl and you run to your parents and you tell them about your horrible day at school… and there’s part of the feeling of the deities being a parent, or a figure that kind of gives you advice, is there for you when you are in an awful place.

Tamara also looked for guidance from the universe through the results of prayer:

You’re asking the universe for some help and it does happen, it might not come
immediately, but it comes in the right time, and then in the right way the teacher shows themselves, or you know people show up or situations show up and help you to choose a better way, and to resolve something within yourself.

Tamara explained that as part of looking for guidance from the universe, it is important for one to keep her “eyes open” and to be open to possible guidance.

_Sense of safety._ A number of the participants found that their spirituality helped them to feel safer while healing from the abusive relationship. For Kate, her feelings of safety related to what had felt safe during her experiences of abuse growing up. She explained that as a child she had found safety in nature:

I have to say that where I find human relations very frightful at times, or at least when I was younger, they were quite overwhelming and frightful, I just used to love being with animals, I could be more instinctual with them and there’s less cruelty, because there’s less choice in the minds of animals or plants.

Kate explained that she connected with feelings of safety through nature later while healing from the abusive relationship. For both Wiccan participants some element of safety was created within the rituals they used. For instance, Pam explained that when she was feeling unsafe, she would cast a “circle of protective light” around herself so that she might feel “safer” and “more grounded”:

I think it would just kind of remind me that there are good things in the world and just to give myself some positive energy, and to remember that, and to also remember that there are bad things, but if you give them less power they also affect you less.
Theme 3: Reconnecting to Self and the Outside World

Abuse left feeling disconnected. The third theme that emerged from the participants’ experiences was how their spirituality enabled them to reconnect to themselves as well as to the outside world, after the disconnection resulting from the abuse. Most of the participants shared experiencing some form of disconnection during the abusive relationship, whether from themselves, from family and friends, or from the outside world. Several of the participants experienced a disconnection from themselves; Molly compared the disconnection that she experienced during her abusive relationship to the disassociation experienced by survivors of childhood abuse: “It’s the same thing, because you’re being violated over and over every day, you really really disconnect.” Some participants shared struggling to look after themselves during the abusive relationship; Kathy explained that: “I’d stopped doing housework and that, my house was always messy when I was in an abusive relationship.” Sarah, like a number of other participants, experienced a disconnection from her family and friends due to her ex-partner’s controlling behaviour and the fact that she lied to friends and family to hide the abuse:

He put a wedge between me and my mom’s relationship… my mom would want me to come home and then he would be like ‘no, you’re not going home today’ and then he wouldn’t let me go home, but obviously I can’t say to my mom ‘Oh, he’s not letting me come home,’ because in my head I feel like it’s silly. So I would just kind of make up an excuse to her.

Also, like a number of other participants, Sandy experienced disconnection from the outside world; she explained that in her case her time in the abusive relationship meant increased focus on superficial things, and less time in nature: “During that whole relationship it was all
plastic, it was all city, bars, clubs, just city life.” While Tamara found that during the abusive relationship, due to her abuse of drugs and alcohol, that she lost her spiritual connection to nature: “when you’re drinking and you’re drugging the last thing you think about is going for a walk in the woods.”

Making time / space for healing. For many of the participants, an important part of their experience of reconnecting related to the fact that following their spirituality helped provide them with a time and space for healing. Sarah went to a church camp outside of the Lower Mainland expressly for the purpose of healing:

I got to think a lot, because my phone doesn’t work there, there isn’t Internet there, and he had no way of getting in touch with me there, and because I had already decided that I didn’t want this anymore, so when I went it was because I wanted healing.

For Sandy, the engagement in Wiccan rituals helped her to create an intentional space and time for her healing:

I’m sitting down, I’m comfy, I’m relaxed, I’ve lit all my candles…sometimes I just lay there and stare at them and I do it that way, and when I’m ready and I’m focused, I’ll draw out a circle for my space that separates me from the rest of the world and kind of like my sacred space, it’s my safe zone, for me to not be disturbed by anything, for me not to be harmed by anything, it’s where I leave my negativity at the door to focus on creating a solution.

Alternately, Molly found exercise to be especially spiritual and found that going out for a run would create a time when she could heal:
To be able to be on my own, and experience just the pure joy of life, simplifies it so much, the sound of my breathing and the sound of my feet on the pavement is almost like a mantra for me, and to just be. To feel good about being. And not worrying about what everyone else is doing, and to just experience being me, because I’ve never had that.

*Reconnecting to self.* For most of the participants, being able to reconnect with themselves was an especially powerful part of their healing work. Pam explained that for her reconnecting with herself through her Wiccan values and beliefs of “getting back to basics,” rather than getting caught up in the busyness of life, meant an opportunity to hear herself again:

> You really discover that if you allow yourself that quiet you can start hearing yourself again, and sometimes that’s hard to do, because I know there’s been times in the healing process where I haven’t wanted to hear that, but I think that if you don’t give yourself that time it’s always there and it just yells at you louder, and you try to dampen it… it’s important, tough but important.

Some of the participants found it helpful to reconnect to themselves through self-care; Kathy cared for herself by keeping a clean home, while Lisa engaged in self-care by reading self-help books. Molly shared that she found it spiritual to connect with her body through exercise, and to reconnect with herself through self-exploration. She shared that a profound and spiritual turning point for her was when she wrote a love poem to herself for a Valentine’s Day contest:

> The love of my life is caring and sweet,

> The love of my life makes me complete,
The love of my life never talks back,
Good companionship, we never lack,
We laugh and we pray to the light of day,
We garden and grieve, no others we need,
The joy we feel is new every day,
We love each moment in every way,
My love is me and my soul, discovered this year,
After years of abuse, I have no fear,
I’m free to love myself at last,
I’m the love of my life and we’re having a blast.

For some participants reconnecting to themselves included reconnection to their spirituality. Sarah had distanced herself from her church during the abusive relationship, but began to attend again after leaving the relationship:

> When I went back it wasn’t hard actually. It was very easy because there’s just this feeling I get every time I go to church that I’m where I’m supposed to be.

*Reconnecting to the outside world.* Many of the participants shared also that their healing included reconnecting to others and the outside world. For many of the participants this reconnection was through opening up their awareness to nature, and was significantly spiritual. Pam found this reconnection through slowing down and really paying attention to the world around her:

> For me I think it’s getting back to the principle of something and really being tuned in with what’s happening in the world, and what’s happening around you, and what’s happening in nature, so you really kind of feel an energy or vibrations
Similarly, Sandy shared taking quiet time in nature:

I spent a lot of time in places that didn’t involve people or very few people. So, I’ve spent a lot of time at the beach… with a little fire and I’d just camp out there and watch things, feed the crows… I spent a lot of time under trees, I had particular trees that I would go and visit. I spent a lot of time just sitting in the park or sitting anyplace where there were trees, nature…

A number of participants also connected once again with others after the abuse had left them isolated. Since she’d left the abusive relationship, Kathy began to reconnect with family from whom she’d been estranged. Sarah shared how much she valued how welcoming her congregation was when she returned after the abuse. Kate shared that her Judeo-Christian and Buddhist beliefs on compassion drew her to connect with and help others:

I work with children and seniors, that’s been part of my healing path too, part of my spirituality is this… to work with the community, and the community is those who are marginalized, seniors, children, I work with a lot of love and I’m very good at it.

*Becoming grounded / centred.* A number of the participants used the terms grounded or centred to describe the results of reconnecting to themselves and the world around them. They each shared that being grounded or centred somehow helped them to weather the challenges they faced during their healing from the abusive relationship. Tamara described how it felt when she did not feel grounded: “it’s just a general feeling of unease, when you feel you’re not quite yourself.” A profound experience during a dream one night at Round Lake Treatment Centre helped Tamara to reconnect to her spirituality and feel more grounded:
I woke up and I was tingling from head to foot and I felt really good again, and I just conked out again, so in native spirituality I would say that I got doctored that night. So, the spirits came and visited me and just took care of my physical body... So, all of that process would have, in my mind, been getting me grounded. Starting to prepare me for the work to come.

Pam shared that for her feeling grounded connected to her Wiccan beliefs, and meant having more stability through the turmoil that sometimes happened with healing work:

I value my connection with the earth and with the force of the wind, and just all those things, and that helped me stay grounded... it really helped me cement myself in, helped to let things pass around me, so whenever I had an overwhelming feeling or a very stressful time then I could just kind of sit back and remember to connect to that again and that would help me realize that these things are just passing and that it's all just part of cycles, and that's how nature works...

**Theme 4: Building Self-confidence**

*Abuse causing loss of self-confidence.* The fourth theme that emerged from the participants’ experiences was their sense of gaining strength and self-confidence through their spirituality. All of the participants experienced some form of struggle with feelings of low self-confidence or weakness due to the abuse they endured during their relationships. For many of the participants the constant criticism, manipulation, controlling and blaming that they received from their partners left them doubting themselves and losing a sense of their own self-worth. For example, Lisa shared how the subtleness of the abuse from her partner left her doubting it even happened:

I think you get used to it, at first you’re attracted to them, and then somehow they
will say things to you, and then you’ll brush it off, and it will be small things, and
they see that oh, okay, you’re not really responding… and they’ll just increase the
abuse, and then you start questioning yourself. You’ll think: ‘Oh, did that really
happen?’

Sandy shared that the abuse she experienced during the relationship harmed her self-
confidence:

He was never physically abusive, but he was very emotionally abusive, he was
manipulative, financially, he always expected things, he’d get me to give him money,
he kind of drained my resources, drained my energy, my self-esteem… He just made
me feel so worthless, all his negativity was just eating me alive, it was still with me
after the relationship had ended.

Those participants who grew up enduring childhood abuse had extra difficulty disentangling
from the compounded effects on their self-confidence and sense of their own strength. For
example, Tamara shared that childhood sexual abuse, and domestic violence between her
parents, had left her with low self-esteem and difficulty figuring out appropriate boundaries:

I missed it when they handed out the book on what is right and what isn’t, what’s
acceptable and what isn’t… I mean, it’s a fine line, what people will accept and
what they won’t accept, and how they deal with that, so I just had no clue, how to
stand up for myself, how to take care of myself, keep myself safe from unsafe
people.

Many of the participants also shared feeling shame for ending up in an abusive
relationship. Kate expressed disappointment that after years of education and training to help
her heal from the abuse she’d endured as a child, she ended up in an abusive domestic
relationship. Sarah expressed feeling ashamed that she had ended up in an abusive relationship after going through a challenging childhood and after witnessing the violent domestic abuse of her mother:

I was just ashamed, because growing up I’ve always had to be strong, because a lot happened in my life, I’ve always had to be strong and this was the first time I’ve ever been weak. So, it was just weird for me, because I was like, this is not who I am.

Sarah also explained that feelings of shame related to her Christian belief in no sex before marriage, and that being raped by her partner influenced her into staying longer in the relationship:

He raped me, so then after that my whole mind set was ‘okay probably the first person I’ll sleep with will be the person I marry,’ so then when that happened I was like ‘okay well I have to make it work with this guy because I don’t want to end up being like one of those people who’s slept with so many people.’ So then I was like ‘well I’m just going to have to make it work.’ And I think he knew that he had that power over me after that. So like at that point he would just do whatever he wanted…

Gaining a sense of own value. Many of the participants found that in some way or another their spirituality helped them to build their feelings of self-confidence through helping them connect with their own worth. For Molly, simply connecting with nature was highly spiritual and helped her to be aware of her value:

Being somewhere that is not fabricated, that’s not manmade, that’s awe-inspiring, that’s something so beautiful, you can’t deny it, you can’t say it’s not beautiful… it’s there, and you’re enjoying it, so you must be worthy.
Sarah did not attend church during the abusive relationship due to feelings of shame; she felt like a hypocrite attending church while knowing the lifestyle she lived with her partner. She shared that when she returned to her church after the abusive relationship had ended her pastor’s sermon on perfection helped her to build her self-confidence and let go of some of her shame:

Jesus, when he was here, he surrounded himself with everybody, he didn’t discriminate, Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and he was around thieves… he was with all those people. Being a Christian is working at becoming closer to what Jesus was like, because [the pastor]… was saying if we were perfect we wouldn’t need Jesus, we wouldn’t need God, but because it’s hard, we need to come to church and pray for each other.

_A sense of being valued._ Many of the participants also found it helpful to feel valued by others, or by God, in order to build their self-confidence. Kate experienced being valued for herself when others helped her manage with her physical disability:

I would say that because I’m a spiritual person and I’m very kind, I always managed to attract people, not just boyfriends, but people, fellow students, around me who were willing to literally carry me, they had to carry me piggyback to the bus… people would help me cook, they’d haul my stuff home… it was a miracle

Similarly, Molly experienced feeling valued for her spirituality:

I’m a really intense person and really make a lot of positive energy… I always had that sunshine, I always felt it in here, but I think… he broke my spirit, time and again. It was a little flicker, but now it’s intense and bright. My spirituality is bright, and I know I bring a lot of people joy, and I am spiritual.
For Pam, an experience of feeling valued was pivotal in her healing. Pam shared that after being assaulted by her ex-partner she sought help at the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in Vancouver; she explained that she found the female staff’s treatment of her profoundly helpful:

Because the medical staff understood the situation and they really treated me with respect and they saw me as an equal, that made a huge difference on how I felt about everything, I really started to feel like I was coming back into my own, and it really prompted me to want to take care of myself.

Pam explained that the workers at the CDC had made it clear that she could return for further support, and that simply knowing this also helped her to feel better: “it really, really helped, it made me feel like I have people on my side.”

Learning own needs. A number of the participants found that building a sense of self-confidence meant connecting with their own needs. Some of the participants were able to connect with their own needs through their spirituality. For example, Molly and Lisa engaged in self-exploration by reading self-help books, which they noted were spiritual for them, as one way of connecting with their needs. Lisa shared that, as part of her belief in the law of attraction, she had originally created a list in her mind of all the attributes that she wanted in a partner, and that this energy that she’d put out into the universe had brought her ex-partner to her. She explained that now, with better knowledge of herself and her needs, she’d simply added to the list: “I think now I realize kindness and patience is above appearances.”

Similarly, some participants used prayer to help them grow in self-awareness. Kathy used prayer as a way of listening to herself: “it helped me see things clearer. If you’re praying, you hear it yourself, what you’re saying and it, and you just learn.” Kathy added that she believed
that for this reason prayer would be helpful for anyone, even those who do not believe in God.

**Theme 5: Gaining a Sense of Empowerment**

*Abuse and the helping system – feeling powerless.* The fifth theme that emerged from the participants’ experiences was how their spirituality helped them to feel empowered after feeling powerless as a result of the abuse and trying to seek help. All of the participants shared at one point or another feeling powerless due to the abuse that they experienced during their relationships. For instance, Sarah’s partner would often control what she could do:

> He would not allow me to do stuff, like if I say I’m going to the movies with my friends or something, he’ll be like ‘no you can’t go,’ and he would stop me from going by holding me on the couch and not let me get up, or stand by the door, and he was bigger than me, so obviously I can’t jump out the window.

Some of the participants who had endured abuse as a child found that their feelings of powerlessness were only compounded by the domestic abuse later in their lives. For instance, Kate explained that because of the disability she sustained from neglect as a child as well as serious ailments due to years of stress, she needed extensive support in later life, and that this influenced her ability to leave the abusive relationship. Kate explained that she felt in some ways dependent on her partner because he provided physical support, such as driving her around and cooking, and he was knowledgeable about “shamanism and skilled in complementary medicine” and so was able to provide some of the care that she needed to live a healthy life.
A number of the participants also experienced feeling powerless when they sought support from services meant to help them. Both Pam and Tamara experienced feelings of powerlessness when they tried to make police reports about their assaults to the police. Tamara experienced racism from officers and this left her feeling re-victimized by the system. Pam shared that when she had tried to make a report of sexual assault in the past a number of things that the police had done, such as interviewing her in a room that was clearly used to interview criminals and not providing a female officer to conduct the interview, left her feeling like she was the one being blamed for the crime. As a result, Pam explained that she waited for longer than she would have liked to seek help from services despite her ex-partner’s threats to hurt her: “I felt really bad and dirty and shameful and I felt like I was about to get stigmatized again for what someone else had done to me.”

Choosing to heal. A number of the participants shared that they began their healing process in earnest when they made the conscious choice that they wanted to heal; for many of the participants this conscious choice involved drawing on their spirituality. For Sarah, this meant going to church camp with the express desire to heal from the abuse and move on. For Sandy, her conscious choice came in the form of taking responsibility for her healing process through a Wiccan ritual:

It doesn’t work for people that are a little lazy, unless a person can fully accept responsibility, then it’s probably not going to work… for me, if I didn’t put my whole heart into it, it probably wouldn’t work because the only person I’m lying to is me…

Kate had done a lot of healing work as a young adult, through her spirituality, to move on from her childhood abuse. This healing work included drawing on her feelings of connection
to nature, and spending a lot of time in anthroposopical healing centres in Europe: “I remember in the anthroposophic hospital they don’t medicate the patients, they heal them on all levels with nutrition, spiritual conversations and using faith.” She shared that she made the conscious choice to take what she had learned from this healing time, and what she valued in her eco-spirituality, and implement it into her healing during and after the domestic abuse:

I could actively keep on doing my healing work… I would just [include it in] everything, the way I grew my herbs and looked at them, saw them flourishing and that would just give me a little bit of anchoring, cause I felt very ungrounded and unanchored being in a frightening situation, an illogical situation, being with an abuser is never about logic.

_Gaining strength_. Many of the participants experienced that being able to believe in themselves, to have confidence in their own abilities, was needed for them to have a sense of being empowered to leave the relationship and to later heal. Some of the participants sought out a sense of strength through their spirituality. For Molly this meant having faith in herself and her own ability to weather the abuse for her children, so that they wouldn’t have to suffer the financial struggles of being raised by a single mom, and then later faith in her own ability to get out of the marriage and survive:

You know what, I wasn’t that strong, I think through the marriage I did go to church a few times, to draw not from going to church, but that core knowledge of

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3 Anthroposophic healing centres follow a holistic approach, including modern medicine together with homeopathy, natural remedies and artistic therapies. Anthroposophic medicine focuses on the body, as well as soul and spirit (Hinderberger, 2011).
faith. To draw from faith period. So I had to really have faith that I was strong enough.

For other participants it meant believing that they could draw on strength from their beliefs. Sandy, as part of the Wiccan rituals in which she would engage, drew upon the “corners of the world” for strength. Sandy also shared how at one point after much meditation she felt especially empowered:

I came to this point where I felt like, I felt like God, that’s awfully strange (laughs), definitely awfully strange, because I’d meditated so much and spent so much time and quiet and in thought that I could find an answer to practically anything anyone asked me, so I felt all wise, all knowing, at that particular point.

Some of the participants found that prayer in particular, and a sense of strength from God, gave them the strength to leave. For example, Kathy explained where she found the strength to leave: “believing in God, and I prayed a lot, and I got out of the relationship, it gave me strength.”

*Sense of ability to affect change.* Key in many of the participants’ experiences of building empowerment was a sense that they were able to somehow affect change, giving them back some sense of control over their lives that had been taken away through the abuse. For some of the participants this experience was particularly spiritual. For instance, Pam was able to make a domestic abuse report through *third party reporting*, which allows the victim to make a report through a Victim Services worker rather than a police officer, and which meant for Pam that if her ex-partner assaulted anyone in the future his information would be flagged. Pam found that being able to make a difference in the community was both very empowering, and very spiritual:
It makes me feel like I’m being a responsible citizen, I think that there’s a lot of hurt in the world, and there’s a lot of things that you can go about and not be really conscious of what you’re doing, and I think that’s my way of really being connected into the planet, and while I’m here I’m doing the best that I can, and putting the best intention out that I can, and I think that helps everything.

For those participants who believed that what energy one puts out into the universe returns to them, being able to put out positive energy into the universe gave them some sense that they can affect what happens. For example, Lisa believed that she could influence what kind of man she would meet in the future: “I know that as long as I focus on the different points that I want in the man, I know with the heart that I would find the specific guy.” Similarly, the Wiccan participants both expressed belief that what one puts out into the universe returns to them. For instance, Sandy explained that she believed that this energy comes back to a person three-fold:

I believe it’s taking responsibility for yourself, you actions, your directions, so you have a lot of control over the world and around you, and when you make good choices that world is a pretty happy place, when you make bad choices it usually comes back to you about three times.

Learning from the abuse. As part of their experience of empowerment, a few of the participants also found learning helpful, both about the abuse, and from it. For Sandy learning from the abuse through reflection during the meditation portion of a Wiccan ritual helped her to feel that she hadn’t simply wasted the time she spent with her ex-partner:

Was the relationship worthless? It’s only worthless if you don’t learn something.

And I did learn quite a few things. I learned about shallowness, I learned that
visual isn’t everything, and I learned a little bit more about self-esteem and where my direction was going.

Sandy also shared that through reflection on the relationship she had learned what kind of people to avoid: those that “drain you of your feelings of self-worth, they drain you of your money, and your resources… they leach off you, because they have nothing of their own.”

For many of the participants learning about the effects of abuse was particularly empowering, and for a number it was also spiritual. Lisa found reading the book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, by Patricia Evans, both spiritually and psychologically helpful, and that it helped her to learn about the subtleties of verbal abuse and therefore feel more empowered.

Molly shared how reading self-help books, which she also found spiritual, was helpful for self-exploration and helping her to learn why she found it so difficult to disentangle herself from the relationship.

*Choosing better.* Most of the participants shared a sense that they would not enter into the same situation again, and that in the future they would choose better. Many of these participants shared that this sense of empowerment resulted from the spiritual work that they’d done to heal since the end of the relationship. For Sandy, creating a binding spell during a Wiccan ritual helped her to be sure she would never go back to her partner again, or even be affected by him in the future:

We’re doing a binding, then it’s saying it’s staying garbage. So, if this person was to call me up in the future, say he was to call me tomorrow and he said he was sorry or he had some more awful things to say… yea I’d tell him where to go and how to get there.
As a result of her spiritual healing work, which began with her trip to church camp, Sarah explained that she would no longer put up with abuse in the future:

I know I will never let someone treat me like that again. At the first sign of somebody being like that I know I’ll just leave. Now I’m very vocal if someone’s not being respectful, I’m like ‘no, you know what, I don’t have to listen to this.’

Tamara shared that through the healing work she did through her First Nations spirituality, and the reconnecting with herself that was a part of this, she had already chosen a better partner: “I didn’t choose that type of person again, and I wouldn’t ever tolerate that type of treatment again. I’m actually, I would say, the strongest I’ve ever been.”

*Helping others / the earth.* A final piece of empowerment that a number of the participants experienced was that of helping others. For most of these participants the simple act of helping others was strongly spiritual. Kate, who had spent years training in and learning about holistic healing methods, found it profoundly spiritual to be able to help others in whatever ways she could, including using the knowledge she’d acquired about healthy nutrition. Kate explained that she helped others as part of a form of *working prayer,* which, she explained, is also practiced by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and his fellow monks: “they actively go in the community and do acts of prayer, they cook for sick people, take care of them.” Kate described how helping others helps her pull out of despair and gain another perspective:

In the second that I turn my attention from my own suffering, I can be half dead, I could have been contemplating suicide… in that second, when I go out and look in someone else’s eyes and love them, and give them my compassion as a healer, and I do have considerable knowledge, and if I help them, if I find out what it is they need,
it can be anything, if I commit acts of… working prayer, bang I’m no longer just in
my subjective experience of suffering, I’ve created a slight objectivity… and so even
though this man was horrendous to us, I was able to not succumb to it totally.
Pam found as part of her Wiccan beliefs that it was empowering to help people in her
community, and also to be able to help the earth. Pam explained that following these beliefs
was especially powerful, and helped her to focus beyond the immediate experience of what
had happened to her:

   Another thing that helped me was just remembering and really looking at my life, and
   being connected to nature and reminding myself of what is important and what I
   value. I value the connections I have built with my trusted friends… I value being
   connected to the earth, I value things I do to help the environment, I value my
   connection with the earth and with the force of the wind and, just for all those things
   and that helped me stay grounded, and it helped me remember why I was here, and
   you know, what my purpose is.

**Theme 6: Regaining Hope**

The sixth theme to emerge from all of the participants’ interviews was that of
regaining hope. Feelings of hope, as well as times where hope seemed fleeting, underlay all
of the interviews at one point or another. For all of the participants their spirituality played
some role in their healing from the abuse and having hope that things would get better.

*Trust in God / universe.* A number of participants found that their trust in God or the
universe not only helped them to let go, but also gave them hope that they could heal from
the abuse and that the future would be bright. Sarah explained that because of a time when
she almost died, and instead shocked doctors and lived, she believed in God’s power to heal
her: “so for me it was always an affirmation that there is a God and if he can make me be alive, when science says I shouldn’t, then I’m pretty sure he can heal my broken heart.” For those participants who included prayer as part of their spirituality, the belief in the power of prayer was especially powerful. Tamara shared that for her prayer is something she can depend on:

The one thing that still keeps coming up is prayer is the only thing that really changes anything, and it doesn’t always happen in our time, it happens in the time that it’s supposed to happen, and I always need to remind myself that when it gets difficult to be a mom (laughs), it’s tiring, and the demands are constant, but when you start to feel fatigued or a little bit down, or something, then the prayer is always there, the help is always there.

Kate prayed with many religious communities, including Jews, Krishna, and Lutherans, and believed that prayer had the power to transform:

One of my mentors… said we now have proof that by prayer, by simple prayer… prayer will transform on a cellular level how any nutrient goes into your body, and it will transform it from something toxic and tainted into something that you can flourish from, now it sounds very difficult and not everyone can do this… but I’m just saying that’s what I’ve learned now… I’ve been studying religious texts for years and years, and one simple thing that I know is, also because of the physical healing work that I’ve done, the power of our prayer will change anything that we experience.

Kate also explained her belief that prayer could ultimately change our perception of pain, including physical and psychological struggles. Similarly, those participants who believed
that what energy they put out into the universe would return to them shared trusting that as long as they put positive energy out into the universe good would come to them in return.

Finding joy. For a number of participants, including joy in their lives had been helpful in their healing, and with their sense of hope. For most of these participants joy was somehow connected to their spirituality. Molly shared how seeking out what gave her joy was particularly healing and spiritual for her:

I think for a lot of damaged people like myself, I spent about a year wanting really pretty smells around me, like think senses, touching really nice things, and candles, and smells. Doesn’t have to be expensive, but just things you really enjoy, senses that give you joy. A lot of people don’t realize what gives them joy, but if you start with the basics, of pretty pretty smelling candles, or body creams at the clearance centre, that basic element will give you joy.

For Sandy, she found that including joy in her connection to nature helped her heal and look to the future:

So, I would go out just for fun, just to go out onto the beach and with a bottle of wine, and a blanket, you know comforts, picnic comforts, and have incense, my favourite incense, and I would just lay under the tree, and stare at things, watch things, think, try and be inspired and the more I did that the more I grew in appreciation for life, and appreciation for myself, and regaining a direction and appreciation for everything.

Making plans for the future / creating a new life. Many of the participants felt hopeful about their futures and what was to come in their lives. For these participants this hope related to their spirituality. For example, Kathy shared how things had changed since the
abusive relationship: “Oh lots of things. Like I’m starting school. My artwork is much better. And I still pray, I still believe in God. And things are just better.” Sandy shared that at the end of the healing work she would do through Wiccan rituals there was space made for looking to the future:

After the binding, usually just relax, eat, and start to think about, ‘okay, so this is over, exciting, let’s do something else,’ and make plans for life, and looking into the future.

 Meanwhile, Sarah shared feeling that it was a miracle that she escaped the relationship and that this was a sign that she could heal:

You know that you survived it. If you’re strong enough to survive it and choose to walk away like you’ve done, then you know you’re strong enough to heal from it and forgive the person even and move on from it as a better person.

Call to Action: Suggestions for Service Providers

Spiritual resources. Each of the participants shared at the end of the interview what they might suggest to services providers who help women to heal from abusive domestic relationships. Some of these suggestions related to how service providers might include spirituality in the services they offered to women. A number of the participants suggested that it would be beneficial for service providers to help women to connect with their spirituality. Sarah suggested that a spiritual retreat for women who have experienced domestic abuse. Pam cautioned that service providers should be “gentle” in broaching anything about spirituality and that spirituality is not generalizable, but that it is still an important area in which, and through which to help women:
I think what’s really important is that whatever kind of faith people have… for example I doubt that any of the service providers that I’ve had contact with would have any real huge grasp of my spirituality, but it’s important that you know if I needed that help, kind of finding my way again, that that would be available for me and that they would know where to send me to that, that there’s something out there like that…

Sandy shared her belief that spiritual resources would be helpful for women:

If the woman is a person of faith then maybe resources on religion and spirituality… so it could come in the form of books… and just information, info on where these groups might meet, and that’s a great chance for them to be able to make friends or make connections for the future, even job opportunities, networking… access to, for example some people might go to a priest when they’re having a problem, so being able to have access to a person of that particular faith if there’s any way there’s a [religious counsel] volunteer.

A number of participants shared their concerns, however, that spiritual or religious groups might have secondary agendas, or potentially be abusive themselves. Sandy shared how when she was young she had witnessed judgment towards her mother by Christian parishioners when her mother had reached out for help during an abusive relationship.

Similarly, Kate shared how abuse was denied in the Orthodox Jewish community in which her father grew up. Pam explained her belief that service providers need to be cautious in what resources they provide:

Making sure I guess that they get the right people because there’s some people who would probably… I’m not knocking anybody but I know that this happens, that it’s
really easy to get manipulated when you’re that vulnerable, so it would have to be done carefully, obviously.

*Creative and emotional expression.* Many of the participants also spoke about their belief in the importance of creative and emotional expression for women who are healing from domestic abuse. Kate explained that she believed that anthroposophic art therapy, which is much more common in Europe, would be particularly helpful for women to express and work through their emotions. Sandy described the many ways that she believed women might engage in creative expression:

Mediums to express oneself, so that medium could come in any particular form that that person feels is useful to them, for some people it’s art, for other people it’s music, it might be reading, poetry, playing a sport, or an activity that induces creativity…

Pam explained that creativity could be part of spiritual rituals:

Sometimes even in spell working there are certain things that you can do… some people incorporate drawing or colouring in a mandala, and they focus in on something that they want to try to achieve.

Many of the participants also spoke about other ways of expressing emotions, such as through counselling. Kate stated her belief about how important it is to have a diverse and spiritual counsellor who is interested in connecting with the woman, rather than in being the “expert.” Molly explained that having something natural, like the flow of water in a fountain would be helpful for releasing emotions:

The sound of water, the sound of something natural, the sound of something grounded, the sound of something… water’s very spiritual, it’s very cleansing,
hearing that, and they would, they could sit there and cry. I would find that very very soothing.

Tamara shared that for her getting in touch with her anger was especially important, and something that she believes women need to be encouraged to do:

When I was at treatment, I was really connected to my anger, and knew that I would never let anybody treat me like that again, but when I was listening to other women there they were still stuck in the victim role, I knew they would end up going back to those same situations and having those same experiences over and over again.

Exercise and nutrition. For a number of the participants exercise and nutrition were particularly important factors in healing, and for some of the participants these were also especially spiritual. Kate shared how nutrition and healing foods were especially spiritual for her, and that she hoped that women who were healing from domestic abuse would at least have access to nutritional foods like those that she’s been trained to make:

Sometimes people just need to be fed so that the brain even works properly, and that’s a huge thing too, I work with nutrition… they need to be nurtured to the point where they can even think straight again, so they need to be handed food, that doesn’t happen these days, I mean I can’t be everywhere in all the millions of households that need healing food, I don’t mean junk food, most people who are in these situations are often very poor, they’re getting lower than what a family needs to survive.

Molly, who had deep spiritual experiences through connecting to her body through exercise suggested that women healing from abuse be encouraged to do the same: “I think honestly the best healer is exercise, whether they walk, run, if you can do yoga classes, great, but
exercise is the best healer.” Lisa also suggested exercise as a means of expressing emotional pain, and working off stress.

_Compassionate services._ Many of the participants shared wishing that there were many improvements to the services provided for women healing from domestic abuse. For a number of participants this meant that the services needed to be easier to find, quicker to access, and with clearer information on how to receive help. However, for a couple of the participants, there was hope that the inclusion of _compassion_ might add a spiritual side to services. For instance, Kate explained her belief that services focus too much on the woman figuring things out, and not enough on helping her:

They need to be hand-held, it’s not ‘you have to take the first step, honey.’ Often people go slip through the wheels, slip through the cogs, because no one was there to take their hand, some people are worthy of help even if they’re not able to make the first step.

Kate explained her belief in the importance of service providers caring for these women with compassion, and that service providers, whether religious or not, can approach helping women from what she described as the point of view of Buddhist working prayer:

‘We want to help, we believe that you are a very worthy person and we are here to help, and we are doing this because you are a loveable and good person, you are a diamond inside’

A couple of participants also stressed their belief in the importance of encouragement and communicating hope for women, that women need to be reminded that the abuse was not their fault, that ending up in that situation does not mean that they are weak, and that they will get through it.
Chapter 5 Discussion

Conclusions

My purpose in undertaking this research topic for my thesis was ultimately to bring light to a subject that has not received very much attention. With my background in supporting women healing from domestic abuse, combined with my education in theology and spirituality, I felt instinctively that there was a natural connection between these two fields, but I had limited literature to back up this sense. Therefore, it was my hope to add to the existing literature that has explored women’s experiences of spirituality as they underwent healing from domestic abuse. I am grateful to each of the participants who engaged with this project and contributed to furthering knowledge in this area; I feel honoured that they trusted me with their personal stories. I found that each woman’s description of her experience was even richer than I ever could have imagined; I have endeavored in this thesis to do each participant and her experience the justice they deserve. In the following paragraphs the research findings will be explored, including the results in relation to the existing literature, novel contributions, implications for practice, limitations and future directions.

The results found in the previous chapter clearly answer the research question: What is the meaning of spirituality for women who have experienced healing from domestic abuse? Throughout each of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, it was clear that they felt that spirituality, in a variety of forms, played a significant role in their healing from domestic abuse. Each of the participants described in their interviews what it meant to feel unhealed, and in turn what it meant to feel healed. As well, in all of the participants’ experiences of healing from domestic abuse there was some element of their lives that
changed for the better as a result of their spirituality. All of the participants described somewhat different spiritualities, with the common theme among most of them being that their spiritualities were not restricted to the rules of any particular religion. Participants described how their spirituality helped them to let go and move on from the abuse, to find comfort and support, to reconnect to themselves and the outside world, to build self-confidence, to gain a sense of empowerment, and to regain hope. A number of the participants shared how their experiences of spirituality, including those things that might not be as obviously spiritual, such as exercise and nutrition, were helpful in their healing. All of the participants described in one way or another how their spirituality played a role in their experience of healing from domestic abuse.

**Connections to the Existing Literature**

This study adds to the limited existing literature on this topic and in so doing suggests that this study has explored the phenomenon that it was intended to explore. Numerous connections were found between the current study and the existing literature, including: the experience of domestic abuse, spirituality and mental and physical health, healing from domestic abuse and trauma, spirituality and healing from domestic abuse, and finally spirituality and the cultural context of the Pacific Northwest. There were, however, some interesting ways in which this study differed from some of the existing literature.

*The experience of domestic abuse.* The participants’ experiences of abuse fit quite closely with those described in the literature. For instance, most of the participants’ experiences of abuse mirrored Johnson and Ferraro’s (2000) description of IT: for many of the participants violence was rare, and the characteristics of the abuse they endured was more that of a “general pattern of control” (p. 949). The abuse they experienced also frequently
paralleled what is described in the Duluth Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), including the abuser blaming, manipulating, and denying the abuse. As well, the participants’ experiences corroborated the negative mental health effects that a range of studies have found when looking at the effects of domestic abuse. For instance, a number of the participants reported that they had experienced depression or PTSD, which fits with Golding’s (1999) description of mental health problems among women who have experienced domestic abuse. Several of the participants in the study reported experiencing low self-esteem and feelings of self-blame as a result of the abuse, which also corroborates the results of a range of studies (Cascardi & O’Leary, 1992; Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004). Finally, the women in the current study also shared that they struggled to receive the support they needed in their journey of healing from the abuse; this fits with studies that have found that what women need and what they receive as support are two different things (Postmus et al., 2009), and also fits with the fact that service providers, such as emergency departments, have been found to be unprepared for supporting women who have experienced abuse (McClennan et al., 2008). Noteworthy, however is the fact that a number of participants in the current study found inadequate services from one provider, for example the police, but later found more helpful services from other providers, for instance the CDC.

*Healing from domestic abuse and trauma.* The experiences of the women in this study also fit with the existing literature on healing from trauma, and on healing from domestic abuse. To begin with, the complex and extensive descriptions of healing experiences given by this study’s participants corroborates Landenburger’s (1998) point that the hardest part of healing from domestic abuse is not simply leaving the relationship, but rather the process of healing afterward. Additionally, the range of themes that emerged
through the current study fit quite well with Herman’s (1997) description of the complex process of recovery from trauma. During their healing process, the participants were able to establish a sense of safety as well as a sense of power and control; this was outlined especially in the themes of “finding comfort and support,” “building self-confidence,” and “gaining a sense of empowerment.” The participants were able to mourn the lost relationship; this was indicated primarily in the theme of “letting go and moving on.” As well, the participants were able to turn towards creating their future, and this was seen especially in the themes of “reconnecting to self and outside world,” “gaining a sense of empowerment,” and “regaining hope.” Also noteworthy, and fitting with Herman’s description of a survivor mission, is the fact that a number of the participants in the current study went on to help others or the earth, and that they found that this assisted with their ability to see beyond the pain of the abuse.

The current study also found comparable results to those found in Smith’s (2003) existential-phenomenological study of fifteen women’s experiences of recovering from intimate partner violence. Some particularly parallel results appear in Smith’s study: as part of their healing and growth, Smith’s participants also had experiences of “letting go of the past,” “expressing their wants or needs,” becoming “self-reliant,” rediscovering “who they are,” forgiving “themselves, the abuser, and family members,” and finding a purpose, which was often done through helping others (p. 562-565). A notable difference between Herman’s and Smith’s descriptions of recovery and the experiences described by the participants in the current study, is that in the current study the women found spirituality aided significantly in these elements of their recovery, while in these authors’ works this was not found to be a significant factor. It is noteworthy, however, that both of these writers do mention spirituality
in minimal ways, for example Smith mentioned it as a resource for connecting with others, while Herman addressed how spirituality and one’s trust in the order of the universe, and possibly one’s trust in God, might be negatively affected by trauma.

*Spirituality and healing from domestic abuse.* One important difference between the current study, and those studies conducted on healing from trauma or domestic abuse, is that for the current study the participants self-identified as having had an experience of spirituality as a central part of their healing from domestic abuse. This is particularly important for phenomenological research; as van Manen (1990) explained:

“Phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness… And thus phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being” (p. 9). In other words, an important part of phenomenological research is the participant’s orientation towards her own “lived experience,” and her description of her own “lifeworld” (p. 4, 7). Therefore, the phenomenological researcher respects the participant’s experience, including that they describe spirituality as a significant factor in their healing.

It is also important to consider the fact that a few studies, similar to the current study, have been conducted in this area and have come up with similar results (e.g., Potter, 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). The themes that Yick (2008) found in her metasynthesis of six similar research studies are particularly noteworthy and corroborate a number of the themes found in the current study. As was found in Yick’s article, the women in the current study experienced gaining strength from their spirituality, recovery or reconnection to their spirit and self, and forgiveness and helping others/social activism as part of their healing. Current study participants also mentioned experiencing something similar to Yick’s description of a spiritual vacuum, where they lost a sense of themselves and their spirit during the abuse and
afterwards needed to reconstruct these as part of their healing journey. An interesting
difference between the results of the current study and those considered in Yick’s article, is
that participants in the current study did not report issues related to definitions of family,
gender role or submission. Noteworthy here is the fact that when considering these terms
within Yick’s article, they appear to be primarily connected to religious definitions, and more
specifically to Christian and Muslim religious definitions; since the current study participants
included only one Christian and no Muslims, this might have had some influence on the
difference in these results.

Although Senter and Caldwell’s study considered a primarily Christian sample and
was not clear about how they defined the term spirituality for the participants, it is an
important article for the purposes of this thesis due to the fact that it is the closest in its
approach and research question to the current study. Senter and Caldwell also found in their
phenomenological study of 9 women who had successfully left, healed from, and stayed
away from an abusive relationship, that the participants found spirituality helpful in their
healing and in maintaining the change in their lives. Noteworthy, is the fact that Senter and
Caldwell’s article corroborates a range of the themes found in the current study; they found
some clear connections between healing and spirituality, including in the themes: “making
adjustments to a new way of living,” which includes empowerment, “letting go / releasing
the unproductive,” “awakening / rediscovery of self,” “looking within / focusing on self,”
“reconnecting with / strengthening supportive relationships,” and “helping others / reaching
out.” In Senter and Caldwell’s article the participants’ experiences of healing from domestic
abuse also fit with what has been described in trauma literature, as well as with studies on
women recovering from domestic abuse, but as with the current study, what was unique to
their results was the inclusion of spirituality as part of the participants’ experiences of healing.

*Spirituality and mental / physical health.* Other articles that looked at spirituality and physical and mental health also corroborate some of the results found in the current study. The women in the current study described that they found that their spirituality helped increase feelings of self-esteem, quality of life, and life satisfaction much like what was found to be the result of positive religious coping in Harrison et al.’s (2001) article on this subject. Also fitting with this article, a number of the participants used elements of what Harrison et al. described as characteristic in positive religious coping, including spiritual support, benevolent reframing, using rituals, and gaining a sense of agency or control. Similarly, the women in the current study also experienced their spirituality, or a higher power, as a source of comfort or strength for them, as was found with Gillum et al.’s (2006) quantitative study. One significant difference from this literature was that most of the women involved in the current study had little connection to any religious community; the support from a religious community was found by Harrison et al. to play a part in positive religious coping. This raises the question as to whether a supportive spiritual community, for instance a counselling group addressing spirituality and healing from domestic abuse, might have been a helpful addition for the participants.

*Domestic abuse’s effect on spirituality.* A few authors have considered how the trauma of domestic abuse in turn affects women’s spirituality and connection to themselves. The experiences of the women in the current study fit well with the disconnection, such as from self and community, that Herman (1997) describes in her book, and that a number of writers have later described in their works on this subject (e.g., Taylor, 2001; Smith, 2004).
In fact, disconnection from self and the outside world in some form or another was seen quite prominently throughout the experiences of the current study participants. A large part of the participants’ healing therefore consisted of reconnecting to themselves, reconnecting to the outside world, and ultimately reconnecting to their spirituality.

Although none of the participants said so explicitly, it could be argued that the experience of the abuse ended up helping most of the participants deepen their spirituality. For instance, Tamara described increased time in nature and a connection to her First Nations spirituality that she had not had before the abuse. This would fit with a number of authors’ (e.g., Grant, 1999; Taylor, 2001) theories that spirituality can be deepened by the experience of trauma. This also suggests connections to empirical evidence that has found that use of positive religious coping can result in spiritual growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). One significant difference from studies like that of Smith (2004), who found that spiritual beliefs were put into question after trauma, is that the women in the current study did not describe experiencing that their cries were not answered by God, nor that their trust in the universe or in God was shattered. Perhaps if the current study had been with a larger sample, or if it had included more women who affiliated with specific religious institutions or who had different theological beliefs, this might have been the case.

**Negative experiences with spirituality / religion.** Unlike what has been found in many studies, including those on recovery from trauma (e.g., Smith 2004, Taylor, 2001), and those on religion and / or spirituality and healing from domestic abuse (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Potter, 2007), the participants in the current study described having overall positive experiences with their spirituality and / or religion and healing from domestic abuse. Even when one participant experienced her Christian beliefs
influencing her to stay in the relationship for longer, due to expectations of perfection for herself, the words of this participant’s pastor during a sermon ultimately helped her to leave and let go of the relationship. This confirms on the one hand the caution raised by Smith (2004) that these women might try to emulate religious figures that are considered perfect, but on the other hand it contradicts the results of studies such as that of Rhodes and McKenzie (1998) who found that clergy members have often convinced women to stay in an abusive relationship. It should be noted, however, that the participant in this instance did not speak specifically to her pastor about the abuse, or seek counsel regarding this issue.

Likewise, although some of the participants in the study used the term forgiveness to describe part of their process of letting go of the abuse, they were able to avoid falling into what Herman (1997) described as the “fantasy of forgiveness,” where the woman tries to bypass their anger and engage in a “defiant act of love” (p. 189), and which might be related to religious beliefs. These participants shared experiencing feelings of forgiveness, but most also accepted feelings of continued anger towards their ex-partner; the exception being the Christian participant Sarah who shared her continued hopes to be able to completely forgive her ex-partner so that she could let go. It appears that most of the participants engaged in a level of forgiveness without the self-expectations of a superhuman feat of unconditional love towards their ex-partner. It is important to note, however, that most of the participants included in the current study did not follow any specific religion, and for those who described any religious affiliation, theirs were quite different than those often found in studies on this topic. As well, it is important to note that a number of participants in the current study did suggest caution around religion in relation to healing from domestic abuse,
and that their caution was often based on their own witnessing of some form of oppression of women through religion.

*Cultural context of the Pacific Northwest.* Another interesting consideration is whether or not the cultural context of the Pacific Northwest had any influence on the participants’ experiences of spirituality and healing from domestic abuse. It is noteworthy that it appears the spiritual and religious diversity of the sample for the current study varied significantly from that of the samples found in relatively similar studies. For instance, in Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) study, even though the title of the article included the term spirituality, suggesting the possibility of spiritual diversity within the study, all 9 participants were in some way connected to Christianity; the authors noted in the conclusion of their article the limitation of spiritual diversity in their study. It is also important to note that their study was conducted in the Midwest of the United States. Humphrey’s (2000) study similarly was conducted outside of the Pacific Northwest, and included a largely Christian sample. Meanwhile, other studies explored the experiences of women from a specific religion, such as Islam, and their healing from domestic abuse (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003), or others explored the same for women from a specific cultural group (e.g., Watlington & Murphy, 2006; Potter, 2007). For other studies where the term spirituality was used, the depth of this term was not explored, as these were quantitative studies (e.g., Humphreys, 2000; Gillum, et al., 2006). It is important to note that although these studies were relatively similar to the one considered for this thesis, significant differences lay in the diversity of the spirituality of the sample, as well as the cultural context in which the study was conducted.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the spiritual diversity of the sample found for the current study corroborates what Killen (2004) and Todd (2009) argued were distinct
characteristics of the spiritual climate of the Pacific Northwest, or Casadia. Fitting with Killen’s description of religiousness in the Pacific Northwest, all but one of the participants described their spirituality as focused on their individual spiritual path, and a number of these participants described drawing on multiple traditions for this spiritual path. In line with Todd’s description of spirituality in the Pacific Northwest, a number of the participants’ spirituality was primarily secular but also spiritual; even for those participants who grew up practicing a religion, they had gravitated in later life away from any particular religious affiliation, but still continued to consider themselves spiritual. Additionally, the spiritualities described by the participants also corroborated Shibley’s (2009) description of the dominant spiritualities in Cascadia, including those that could be described as a “constellation of New Age spiritualities,” and “earth-based spirituality.” At least one participant could arguably fall outside of these descriptions of the dominant local spirituality, unless one considers that her approach to spirituality might also be considered “Earth-based spirituality,” which can also appear in “conventional religious institutions” (p. 35). For instance, although Sarah shared relatively traditional Christian ideals, she shared that a connection to the natural environment through nature walks at church camp had played a part in her healing process. These connections between the literature on the spirituality of the Pacific Northwest and Casadia, and the spiritualities of the women who chose to participate in this study suggest that the results of the current study may illuminate the experiences of other women in this region.

Novel Contributions

This study benefits the field of domestic abuse literature by adding to the limited research on spirituality and healing from domestic abuse. It adds to the argument that women healing from domestic abuse can benefit from spirituality being included in their healing
process. One of the greatest benefits of this study is that it was conducted with quite a different sample than has been found in similar studies. For example, if the participants in this study were to complete the scales used in these other studies, for instance Reed’s Spiritual Perspectives Scale (as cited in Humphreys, 2000) and the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood & Teresi, 2002), the results might indicate that the participants are not particularly spiritual despite the fact that they self-identified as spiritual. The current study ultimately broadens the concept of spirituality, in part by including non-theistic and more nature-based beliefs, to something more inclusive than what is commonly found in the research. This research, therefore, is beneficial to those service providers and practitioners who might work with women who describe themselves as secular but spiritual, or whose spirituality falls outside of those religions, such as Christianity and Islam, that are more commonly looked at in similar studies. In particular, the unique make-up of this sample benefits programs and individual practitioners who work with this population in the Pacific Northwest; this study provides an improved understanding of how women in this unique region might involve spirituality in their healing from domestic abuse.

The current study also suggests some new possibilities that haven’t emerged in past studies; these suggestions are explored with the understanding that due to the small sample for this study, and the nature of phenomenological research, any conclusions can only be theoretical. Although the women in the current study had quite similar experiences to those in other studies on the same subject, their spiritual approaches were quite different to reach the same ends. Noteworthy then is the fact that women from diverse experiences of spirituality, from different religious backgrounds, and from an absence of expressed spirituality or religion, all experienced a similar healing process. The unique difference
between the group of women interviewed in the current study, and those in other studies who experienced healing through spirituality, is that the group in the current study shared very few negative experiences related to their use of spirituality in their healing. For instance, they did not share experiences of men using religion to influence them to stay in the relationship, as was found in a range of studies (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Hassounah-Phillips, 2003; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Also they did not describe religion as having any influence on their gender role definition, as was found in Yick’s (2008) article. These results suggest a possible connection between the form of spirituality that women described in this study and the absence or limited amount of negative experiences. These results raise a new question: is it safer to address spirituality rather than religion in order to provide support to women healing from domestic abuse?

Implications for Service Providers / the Counselling Profession

The implications for service providers - including members of the counselling profession – that result from the explorations in the current study add to those found in the current literature, as well as providing novel contributions. As mentioned earlier, service providers often shy away from the subject of spirituality, and it has been suggested that this avoidance relates to worry of possible further oppression of women who have already experienced multiple forms of powerlessness (Boehm et al., 1999). The current study adds to the previous argument found in other studies that service providers need not shy away from spirituality, and that spirituality in fact can be a helpful piece in a woman’s healing from domestic abuse (e.g., Gillum, et al., 2006; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). It is hoped that the results from this study might encourage service providers to address spirituality when women mention it as somehow connected with their experience. This study also suggests the novel
possibility that spirituality, minus the possible dogmatic and doctrinal pitfalls of religion, might be a way for service providers to approach support of this population. For instance, the women in the current study shared the positive experiences they’d had with spirituality, but raised concerns about possible oppression found in religion. The cautions from the participants in this study, as well as those concerns raised by other studies, suggest that religion is more likely a risky area to address with women, and an area that could result in oppression. As the current study is a beginning exploration of this topic, it can only suggest areas for more research, rather than describing how service providers might engage with women with regards to spirituality.

Another noteworthy contribution from this study, however, was the ways in which participants felt connected to their spirituality, and what the participants also suggested service providers need to include in their support to women. Expected forms of spiritual connection such as ritual and prayer were included in what the women shared, but so were reading self-help books, exercise, nutrition, time in nature, and art. First, these suggestions point to the fact that some transition homes, such as the one in which I work, are already addressing spirituality unknowingly through wellness programs that address nutritional eating and include exercise, such as yoga. Secondly, these suggestions indicate possible new ways that service providers, once they have first addressed the basic human needs of safety, food, and shelter, can support women in their healing. If programs remain unwilling to address spirituality more explicitly, they can still support some spiritual practices through adding wellness programs that include these activities. As well, if programs are willing to address spirituality explicitly, and therefore help women to draw upon this resource, then it might be helpful to include these approaches.
If organizations or individual practitioners want to address spirituality with women healing from abuse, the literature has made it clear that it is important to do so with awareness of the complexities of this issue (e.g., Gillum, et al., 2006; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Despite the fact that the current study found few negative connotations with the spiritual experiences of the participants, this cannot be assumed for all women in this situation, and therefore caution and an assumption of possible danger of oppression needs to be included in any approach to healing using spirituality. As has been mentioned in a range of studies (e.g., Watlington & Murphy, 2006; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), there is need to train service providers in how to address the spirituality of women who are healing from domestic abuse. The question that many writers have raised is how to train service providers in this area. Clearly this is an area that needs more research; possible interventions have not been explored empirically for this population (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). The results of the current study also suggest that service providers need to be more cognizant of the possibility that spirituality, or religion, might have a profound influence on a woman’s life, and that failing to address this issue does not mean it goes away. The results also suggest that it would be helpful for service providers to expand their understanding of spirituality; reducing it simply to religious practices and beliefs only serves to reduce the possible benefits of this resource for healing. It has also been suggested by the results of this research that as part of educating themselves about spirituality, service providers need to become aware of the spiritual and religious resources in their region so that they can offer this as another support to women healing from domestic abuse.
Limitations and Future Directions

Although a small number of participants is appropriate for the in-depth research of a phenomenological study, it does pose a limitation on the generalizability of the results of the current study. Similarly, as this study did not completely follow the traditional form of phenomenology, where the culture and context of the participants drop away in order to reveal the core themes of the phenomenon, this also restricted the generalizability of the study. Other possible limitations to this study include the fact that it was advertised using the word spirituality; this might have created unforeseen restrictions, such as influencing women who considered themselves religious, but not spiritual, to abstain from being involved in the study. As well, it is possible that using the word healing in the recruitment poster might have resulted in participants who had had a positive experiences, rather than those who struggled with spirituality and healing. Additionally, it is important to consider that it is possible that the women who self-selected to be involved in the study felt strong enough to talk about their painful experiences, and therefore it can be assumed that the women in the study might be a more highly-functioning group than the general population of women who have experienced domestic abuse. It is also possible that the locations of the recruitment posters affected the diversity of participants involved; the intention of putting the signs in public spaces primarily rather than simply church houses was to get a broader representation of the spirituality of the Pacific Northwest, however this might have resulted in less religious women becoming involved. Finally, as with any phenomenological study, the results found here are subject to the individual ability of the researcher to delve into the participants’ experiences, and to represent their complexity; therefore, it is important always to remember with
phenomenological research that a different researcher might engage in the same research and come up with a range of different themes.

I learned a number of lessons through the completion of this thesis, including what areas need further research, and what I would do differently in a future study. I learned through my work on this study that in future research I would use some form of measure to test the level of healing that participants bring; it was my experience that at times those who were aware of having PTSD were actually more healed from the self-care they had already engaged in than some of those who stated that they did not have any serious mental illness. As well, if I were to conduct this or a similar study again I would more actively post signs at a variety of religious houses all over the Lower Mainland, and would actively recruit women from the South Asian community; this community was unfortunately unrepresented in my study despite my efforts, possibly due to this community’s secrecy with this issue (Preisser, 1999).

As this study was simply an exploratory one, there are many areas remaining for future research. For instance, more quantitative studies would be helpful in order to consider how spirituality affects women in the Pacific Northwest, or simply how spirituality, without religion, affects this population. More empirical research is needed for the purpose of convincing local service providers to engage in including spirituality in the services they offer. Especially important would be some form of research into how these service providers might use spiritual interventions with women; those suggestions made by the participants in the current study are a good step in that direction, but these results do not address specifically enough the pragmatic issues of supporting women this way. What is more likely helpful or harmful for women? How to address spirituality, and / or religion, ‘gently’? How to train
service providers to conscientiously support women in this area? This study is an addition to the beginning steps that a number of authors have already taken to explore this topic. This study is also a starting point for future research that might be done in the Pacific Northwest on this subject. It is my hope that the results of this study will inspire further research in this area, potentially leading to programs that help train service providers, and in turn resulting in service providers honouring this part of some women’s experiences of healing from domestic abuse.
References


Violence Against Women, 10(11), 1267-1282.


Landenburger, K. M. (1998). The dynamics of leaving and recovering from an abusive


Shweder, R. A. (2008). The cultural psychology of suffering: The many meanings of
health in Orissa, India (and elsewhere). *Ethos, 36*(1), 60-77.


Appendices

Appendix A: Power and Control Wheel

Note. Power and Control Wheel reprinted with permission from:

DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT
202 East Superior Street
Duluth, MN 55802
218-722-2781
www.theduluthmodel.org
Appendix B : Recruitment Poster

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED
ARE YOU A WOMAN WHO HAS EXPERIENCED HEALING FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE?

DID SPIRITUALITY PLAY SOME ROLE IN YOUR HEALING?
Researchers in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education at the University of British Columbia are interested in finding participants for a study on experiences of women who have had some healing from domestic abuse, especially as it has related to their experiences of their spirituality.

You are invited to participate in the study if you meet the following criteria:
❖ You are a female adult who has experienced domestic abuse in the past 5 years
❖ You have been out of any abusive relationship for at least 6 months
❖ You have lived in the Pacific Northwest (BC, Washington, Oregon, and/or Alaska) over the past 6 months
❖ You have some experience of spirituality related to your healing from an abusive relationship
❖ You speak English well enough to be able to communicate your experience

You will be invited to: Attend 2 in-person interviews, followed by one phone conversation (maximum 4 hours total time commitment over these interviews)

Compensation: As a token of appreciation you will receive $20 per interview completed, up to a total of 2 interviews (possible total of $40)

PLEASE NOTE: Your identity and all interview data will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information, please contact:

Adrienne Johnson, M.A. Student
Department of Counselling Psychology
Faculty of Education, UBC
Email: meaning.of.spirituality@gmail.com
Phone: 604-827-5343 (confidential voicemail)
Appendix C : Craigslist Advertisement

ARE YOU A WOMAN WHO HAS EXPERIENCED HEALING FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE?

DID SPIRITUALITY PLAY SOME ROLE IN YOUR EXPERIENCE OF HEALING?

If so, you might be interested in your experiences being included in our research.

Researchers in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education at the University of British Columbia are interested in finding participants for a study on experiences of women who have had some healing from domestic abuse, especially as it has related to their experiences of their spirituality.

Basic Eligibility Criteria:
- You are a female adult who has experienced domestic abuse in the past 5 years
- You have been out of any abusive relationship for at least 6 months
- You have lived in the Pacific Northwest (BC, Washington, Oregon, and/or Alaska) over the past 6 months
- You have some experience of spirituality related to your healing from an abusive relationship
- You speak English well enough to be able to communicate your experience

You will receive:
- financial compensation will be provided

Potential participants who contact the interviewer will be asked some questions to determine eligibility for this study.

For more information please contact via email.
Appendix D: Invitation to the Study

The Meaning of Spirituality for Women Survivors of Domestic Abuse
A Phenomenological Study

Invitation to the study

Purpose
Recently an interest in the experience of spirituality for survivors of domestic abuse has grown within the literature. Many of these studies have looked at the experiences of women as they stayed in domestic abuse shelters, while few have given women the opportunity to consider what contributed to their experience of healing, especially as it relates to spirituality. Meanwhile, numerous studies have found compelling connections between spirituality and positive mental and physical health outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to explore in-depth the experiences of women who have had some healing from domestic abuse, especially as it has related to their experiences of their spirituality. The aim is to increase knowledge in this area so that women’s experiences might be communicated to the service providers of this population, in hopes that this might affect future policy creation in this area.

Basic Eligibility Criteria
- You are an adult who has experienced domestic abuse in the past 5 years
- You have been out of any abusive relationship for at least 6 months
- You have lived in the Pacific Northwest (BC, Washington, Oregon, and/or Alaska) over the past 6 months
- You have some experience of spirituality related to your healing from an abusive relationship

Potential participants who contact the interviewer will be asked some questions to determine eligibility for this study.

Study Procedures
If you choose to participate in the study you will be asked to reflect on your experiences of healing from domestic abuse, especially as this relates to your spirituality. Total time commitment will be approximately 4 hours over the period of up to 1 month and a half.

Remuneration/Compensation
In order to offset the inconvenience and cost of transportation, you will receive an honorarium in the amount of up to $40.00 in cash. This compensation will not be dependent on the completion of the project, but will be pro-rated if you withdraw before completion. You will receive $20.00 each time you complete an in-person interview; if you complete the two in-person interviews, you will receive the full amount of $40.00.

Contact Information
If you are interested in participating in this study, have any questions, or require any more information, please contact Dr. Susan James (Principal Investigator), Department of Counselling Psychology at 604-822-6664 or sjames@interchange.ubc.ca.

You can also contact Adrienne Johnson (Co-Investigator) at 604-827-5343 or Meaning.of.Spirituality@gmail.com. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master’s degree in Counselling Psychology.

Version 2; January 9, 2011
Appendix E : Consent Form

The Meaning of Spirituality for Women Survivors of Domestic Abuse:
A Phenomenological Study

Consent Form

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

Co-Investigator: Adrienne Johnson Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, 604-827-5343. 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 in-depth the experiences of women who have experienced some healing from domestic abuse, especially as it has related to their experiences of their spirituality. The aim is to increase knowledge in this area so that women’s experiences might be communicated to service providers for this population, in hopes that this might affect future policy creation in this area.

Study Procedures: If you choose to participate in the study you will be asked to reflect on your experiences of healing from domestic abuse, especially as this relates to your spirituality. If you feel comfortable doing so, you will be asked to share some basic demographic information. You will then be asked to participate in a one-hour in-person initial interview, where you will be asked to reflect on your experiences of healing from domestic abuse, especially as this relates to your spirituality. The interview will take place in the location of your choice or at UBC, with safety and confidentiality being considered in this selection. You will be asked to journal and/or do some artwork in between the first and second interview, this is optional. For those interested in doing artwork, we would like to use the artwork in our publication without identifying information attached. During the second interview you will be given the opportunity to review a transcript of the first interview as well as a thematic analysis. While reviewing these, you will be given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of these accounts, and to clarify, add to, omit, or change what has been written about your experience. There will also be a follow-up phone conversation with the co-investigator as a final assurance that the researcher is representing your experience accurately. The interviews will be audiotaped and will be used for the interviewer’s purposes only. The total time commitment will be 4 hours over the period of up to 1 month and a half.

Potential Risks: There is minimal risk involved in this study. However, you may find that sharing your experiences, especially on such a sensitive subject, might result in strong emotions. You are free to decline answering any questions and are free to end the interview at any time without any form of penalty.

Although you might 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 for further processing with a trained mental health professional (please see Community Resources sheet).

Potential Benefits: You may find that participating in the study and sharing your experiences of healing from domestic abuse in a safe and non-judgmental environment is personally beneficial. As well, you can be aware that your contribution to this area of research might end up influencing future creation of policies by service providers for women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Version 2; January 9, 2011
Confidentiality: The interviews are confidential and steps will be taken to protect your identity. Only my supervisor and I will review any interview data, transcripts, artwork, 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, artwork, 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: In order to offset the inconvenience and cost of transportation, you will receive an honorarium in the amount of up to $40.00 in cash. This compensation will not be dependent on the completion of the project, but will be pro-rated if you withdraw before completion. You will receive $20.00 each time you complete an in-person interview; if you complete the two in-person interviews, you will receive the full amount of $40.00.

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 [phone number] or [email]. You may also contact Adrienne Johnson at [phone number] or [email].

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 [phone number], or if long distance, email: [email].

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 _______________

Printed Name __________________________________________

Version 2; January 9, 2011
Appendix F : Interview Question Guide

Interview Question Guide

Initial Contact with Participants (by phone)

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I would like to be able to gain an in-depth understanding of your experience of healing from domestic abuse. My specific questions during the interview will relate to this experience, especially about how it relates to your spirituality. At the beginning of the interview I will explain to you informed consent, which consists of an opportunity for you to understand clearly what the study involves, so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not you’d like to participate. I’d like to hold the interview in about a week, in order to give you an opportunity to think about what you’d like to share with me. At this moment I would like to check with you in regards to your safety and to make sure that you feel comfortable with the location that we choose for the interview. I can assure you that confidentiality will be honoured in all steps of this research. If there is anything you need in order to feel safer, please inform me now or when we meet. As well, I would appreciate if you could share with me whether or not you consider yourself to be a member of a specific culture and/or religion.

Orienting Interview Question

I’m interested in hearing about your experience of healing from an abusive relationship. I would like to hear about your experience of the process of healing since you left your relationship, and I understand that at times healing is more difficult than others. I would like to hear about what you have found most healing, and where you have found internal support and hope through those moments that challenged you most. I would also like to know if you ever experienced spirituality as part of your healing. I appreciate that this must be a difficult area to share about and I encourage you to take your time and to only share what is comfortable for you. I would like to hear about your story and to understand it as fully as possible. There might be times during the interview that I ask you more specific questions about your story, you have the right to choose not to answer them, or even to stop the interview if you need to. It is your choice as to what you would like to share and in what depth.

Please take as much time as you need to think about your answers to the questions. Your participation remains voluntary throughout the interview process. You do not need to answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering. You may stop the interview at any time and may turn off the audio recorder at any time.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Are you comfortable beginning the interview now?
Main Interview Question

Please tell me the story of your experience of healing from an abusive relationship.

Possible Facilitating Questions

1. What have been your sources of healing?
2. How have your experiences of healing related to your spirituality?
3. How would you describe your spirituality?
4. Have you received support from any specific services, such as staying at a transition house, seeing a counsellor, attending a Stopping the Violence program, etc.? If so, how was your healing influenced by these services?
5. Is there anything you would like these service providers, such as counsellors, transition houses, Stopping the Violence programs, etc. to know about your experience of healing? About your experience of healing in relation to your spirituality?
Appendix G : Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

I have signed the Consent Form agreeing to participate in the study “The Meaning of Spirituality for Women Survivors of Domestic Abuse: A Phenomenological Study.” I understand that my responses to this questionnaire are voluntary and that I can choose not to answer certain questions. Furthermore, I understand that I will not be identified by name in any research or publications resulting from this study.

First Name: ________________________ Last Name: ________________________

Signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Contact Information

Email: ____________________________ Phone: ____________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________

City: ____________________________ Province: ___ Postal Code: __________

Nationality: ______________________ Country of Birth: ______________________

Ethnicity: __________________________ Age: ____________________________

Marital Status: __________________________

Educational status: __________________________

Employment status: __________________________

Length of time in abusive relationship: __________________________

Length of time since leaving abusive relationship: __________________________

Religious and/or Spiritual affiliation: __________________________

Religious and/or Spiritual participation: __________________________